

ADVENT CELEBRATION

6 DECEMBER 2016

READINGS: Isaiah 60¹⁻⁷; John 1¹⁻¹⁴

The theme for this year: “Prince of Light: Renew Love and Peace” is a continuation of the message of the 40th anniversary year of Diakonia: keeping the social justice flame alive. For during Advent we are reminded that the light has come into the world, and that the darkness will never extinguish it. And this is a reminder that we need to hold onto, for it is easy to forget, and to give in to the darkness of despair.

We enter the season of Advent against a scary backdrop of world and local affairs. Internationally, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are symptoms of a swing to the right in reaction to fear: fear of losing what is ours to those who come in from outside. This promotes national identity, clinging to what is mine, and rejecting as demonic what is not like me. The politicians to the right of the spectrum feed off this, and promote the message of fear, and present themselves as the only ones who are able to protect the populace from the threat of the outsider. The liberal politicians, they claim, will swing open the doors and welcome in all and sundry, and our country will go down the tubes. Brexit and Donald Trump are two symptoms of this worrying shift. Worrying, because of the fear that is stoked by their rhetoric. And fear brings darkness, fostering a tunnel vision down which we can only peer desperately looking for the light at the end of the tunnel. Locally, we are watching the one-time liberation movement which had the sympathy, if not direct support, of most of us slowly implode as a political party, with a serious leadership vacuum and deep divisions within, which impair its ability to govern. And a President who is like Teflon, because nothing seems to stick to him. During the 16 Days of Activism against violence against women and children we are reminded of the horrifying frequency of rape in our country, and of the abuse of women and children by men who are often victims of their circumstances. We are in the midst of a crisis in higher education, currently manifesting as the #Fees must Fall Campaign, and are conscious that a student from DUT, Bonginkosi Khanyile, has been in prison for 69 days, and is likely to remain there as bail has consistently been denied, and the case has been postponed until 19 January. I mention this detail because the continued detention of this young man provokes the fires of protest and makes it harder to find rational solutions. This is the backdrop for this season of Advent.

The President believes that the Church should stick to praying, and not criticising him and his party – which is what he believes is political interference. He chooses to forget the social justice role of the church, particularly the English speaking mainline church, during the struggle to end apartheid. Unfortunately for him, these days, we have never sought the permission of the President, or of government, to engage in action for social change, in pursuit of a new and better society. For we take our cue from the Prince of Light, the Prince of Peace, who was consistent in his support for the lowest and the least in his society. In the midst of the divisions in our society, we need to be reminded of the central message proclaimed in word and deed by Jesus, the Christ – and then be challenged to assimilate that so that we can be the Christ in the world today. Jesus did not stick to praying – he prayed, and he spoke, and he acted, and he challenged, for he sought an inclusive society.

Isaiah addresses the people of Judah during their exile, and encourages them to “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” Thick darkness will cover the world, but the glory of the Lord will arise on you, and people will be attracted to your light, and come and seek it. A word of hope, a word of encouragement, a word of reversed fortunes and restoration. In the Gospel according to John we are told of John the Baptist who testified about the Light which shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. These two passages encourage us to believe in the power of the Light – a light which shines in the darkness. And the light will shine when we promote inclusion and community and love and peace. When we retreat to our silos and shut others out, and regard them with growing suspicion and mistrust, which evolves into irrational hatred, darkness begins to envelop us. I recently came across a slogan which reads: “We were all humans until Race disconnected us, Religion separated us, Politics divided us, and Wealth classified us” We were all humans created in the image of God before religions and creeds and doctrines were invented, or felt necessary. We were all humans before we realised that not all people look the same, and some have evolved in different ways to others, and now they are different, and because they are different and not like us they must pose a threat to us. We were all humans – and Christ is calling us to become humans again, and to open our minds and spirits to see the image of God in ourselves and in others, and to embrace what we have in common rather than fear what makes us different.

Two shepherds were engaged by a rabbi, who asked them: “How are you able to tell that the night is ending and a new day is about to begin?” The first shepherd said: “When I look up at the hill, and can tell that the shape I see is a tree, and not a predator, I know that the night is ending and a new day is about to begin” The second shepherd said: “When I look across the field and can tell the difference between the sheep and the sheepdog I know that the night is ending and a new day has begun” They both looked at the rabbi, who said: “When I look into the eyes of another human being, and see there the eyes of a sister or brother, then I know that the night is ending and a new day has begun”

Our role, as followers of God in the way of Jesus, is to see the eyes of brothers and sisters in all the people we meet, so that the new day will always be dawning, and the darkness of night recedes. The Prince of Light will renew love and peace when we are able to live in love and peace with our brothers and sisters, when we are seeking always to turn neighbours into brothers and sisters, and so together seek and promote love and peace in our world.

In this Advent season, let us be the light in the midst of the darkness that threatens to cover our nation and the world in fear of the other. Be the light by actively promoting community and fellowship and family, by seeking all the ways we can to find ways of building on our common humanity, of seeking that which we have in common as humans, and actively promoting those things. Because the light has come – and we are sent to be that light, and to bear witness to the light that the darkness will never overcome. Come Prince of Light: Renew Love and Peace – beginning with us.