

ISAIAH 64:1-9
REND THE HEAVENS!

"If only!" We had been so full of hope. Everything would be fine and all our troubles would soon be over. We've prayed long and hard; we know what God is like; He can tear open the sky and come down in a power that's big enough to shake world; He is our God and we are His people, after all. So why hasn't He done something? Why hasn't He come to help us? We are His people, after all, a people who's settled way is to wait upon Him in prayer, a people who rejoice to do what is right. That's who we are! Well, yes! Well, maybe! Well, actually, do you know what? Not really! Do you know what we're really like? We are "filthy, unclean"; we're determined to go our own way; to be masters of the universe in our own minds; we can sort it! Except we can't! It feels as if we're getting the cold shoulder treatment; God's face is turned away, hidden; He's not looking any more and there's none of us now waiting, hoping, or praying; we've all neglected God; fewer and fewer of us pay Him any attention. How can we salvation come to people like us? Our only hope is that God will change His mind, that He will do something!

"If only!" There is something of that heartache and wistfulness in Isaiah 64. This a prayer of someone who remembers what God is like and prays for God to help His people again, for God to intervene in the world. God is living and active: this is the Bible's view of God and the world; it is entirely right for Isaiah to pray that God would help His people all over again, especially when in the time of their most pressing need. There is something timeless about the picture Isaiah paints here; the words don't sound too out of place when we pray for our world; we long for God to be living and active in our world to change things, to sort things out! We read these words on the first Sunday in Advent because these prayers are answered, but not as we might expect and certainly not as Isaiah asked them. God is at work, but in a different way; we'll see how in a moment, but first let's look more closely at the way in which Isaiah prays and what he might be expecting.

"Oh, that..." (Isaiah 64:1f) There are three pictures of God going to work in the world. He is God who will rip open the skies and come down to the world; God who is like the bush fire that is so strong that the dry wood just gets set on fire; God who has power like the fire to make water boil and bubble. It is a picture of the mighty and powerful God who will go to work in mighty ways in the world. Isaiah expects God to intervene and to intervene powerfully so that all the nations of the world, "especially the ones who are our enemies", tremble. History has not revealed another God like this; we haven't seen or heard of another God who can do these things. The prophet expresses the hope of the people of God that He will come to help those who wait upon Him, to help those who rejoice in doing what is right. The prayer is full of hope and expectation; God is great and God will come to help us and His power and strength will transform the world.

But then he realises that there is a problem. The settled state the of people should be *"You come..." (Isaiah 64:5a)* but the reality is very different: *"But when..." (Isaiah 64:5b)* "When this is what we are like, how can we expect salvation?" The settled state of the people is quite different; they are no longer waiting upon the Lord and doing what is right; now they sin against God and are a people who can be described as "unclean; filthy rags, and dead leaves". *"And like..." (Isaiah 64:6b)* It is hopeless! How can people like this expect God to save? Worst of all, is this sentence: *"You have..." (Isaiah 64:7b)* God has stopped looking! This is a sign of divine disapproval, divine displeasure! But God is the Father, God is the potter, God is the craftsman – three more pictures used to describe the way in which He loves His people, He cares

for His people and that none of that ultimately changes. Isaiah's prayer is simple: "*Lord, look, we pray!*"

There is something about this whole prayer that just chimes with human nature! "*Oh that...*" (*Isaiah 64:1*) "If only God would just tear open the sky and come down in all His power and glory, things would be so much better! God can zap all these evil people in the world and leave the good people to get on with a much better life than we have otherwise." You might never have prayed in exactly these words, but there is something of a sentiment that rings a bell, no? We are baffled at times by the way God runs the world; why has He not done something to check evil, to change things, to change people, to rescue us, rather than, it seems, doing nothing. (par Motyer) Here's a quote from George Philip, once minister of Sandyford Henderson Church, in Glasgow, on the story of Moses: "Why should we be so foolish to assume that it is only when things are exciting that God is at work?"

It is the season of Advent, so we read the stories about the coming of Jesus. We read the story of Mary and the angel coming to her to tell her about the birth of her son. "*You will...*" (*Luke 1:31f*) For Mary, there must have been all kinds of emotions rushing around in her head and heart. 'What is this all about?' might well have been her first question. Then "Why me?" But finally, her faith and her courage win through and she says to angel "*I am...*" (*Luke 1:38*) We see her "quiet heroism" in accepting this promise and this responsibility. Here is God at work to change the world; this is God "rending the heavens to come down", but not in some great display of power. God came down to save the world in the shape and form of a baby, in the son that Mary bore. Oh yes, He did lots of miracles and wonders, but salvation was not achieved by these miracles and wonders; salvation was achieved when Jesus humbled Himself to die on the cross and was raised from the dead. This mix of humble sacrifice and hidden power is the answer to Isaiah's prayer for the world and for His people. God rips open the sky and comes down and is to be found lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

Lisa Sullivan worked in Washington DC as an organiser of youth projects up and down the East Coast of America. Countless young people are glad to have known her, one of the most promising leaders of her generation. She died at the age of 40 of a rare heart ailment. She would get angry when people complained that there were no leaders for a new generation; "where are leaders now?" She would say "We are the ones we have been waiting for!" We are the people who, because of our faith and hope, believe that the world can be changed; that kind of faith changes the world. God is still at work in the world, not by ripping open the skies, but in people of faith telling the stories of Jesus and reflecting Jesus to the world by way we live. "We are the ones we've been waiting (and hoping and praying) for!"

Here are three qualities, three ways by which we live and change the world. They are all to be found in Isaiah 64. These are not sporadic ways, but are to be settled ways, the habits of our lives:

First of all, we are to be "*those who...*" (*Isaiah 64:4b*) Waiting on the Lord is about 'a patient, confident, expectant faith' (Motyer), looking to God for strength and help, hoping, trusting that He will listen to our prayers. Waiting is a feature of Advent, 'waiting for something to happen', and that should be about being still, listening for God, looking for grace; "hush the noise and still the strife to hear the angels sing."

Secondly, we are to be "*those who...*" (*Isaiah 64:5a*) people whose way of life is all about doing what is right and rejoicing to do what is right, walking in God's ways; our settled habit is to be happy with what Jesus would do, what Jesus wants us to be; and to choose what is right.

Thirdly, we are to be people *"Who remember..." (Isaiah 64:5b)* Our life conforms to the pattern that God has set, we love God with a deeper and deeper love; we want to become more and more like Jesus and we do that by remembering what God has done for us and what He has said we should do.

Wait, do what is right, remember – these are simple things, simple qualities, but key qualities for the Christian and so the world will be a better place. Advent is about people preparing themselves for Christmas and that means lists: cards, presents, food. Here is the real preparation of Advent in three qualities and sometimes we say "I haven't got time..." We need to make time for this list of three, to make space to turn our eyes upon Jesus.

God is at work! He is not yet ripping open the sky to come down in power, though one day He will! Till then God has changed the world by the promise of a baby to a young woman in Galilee 2000 years ago. God is still at work in people who love Jesus; God is still at work in the world through people who love Jesus. Wait on God, with patient, confident, expectant faith. Rejoice in doing what is right. Remember the Lord and His ways. There is no better way to begin Advent than to acknowledge what God has done and to be the kind of that people God wants us to be.