



Advent 2, Year A – December 5, 2010

**A Homily preached by the
Right Rev'd Derek Hoskin**

What is the common thread in the readings for today? I will give you a clue: it has to do with tomorrow.

The first reading is from the Book of Isaiah and might have been written about 700 BC. Isaiah was a prophet--a person whose role it was to speak God's word to the nation. Isaiah began as a popular figure in the nation but as the years went by he became hated because he called people to turn from their sins and warned them that God's Judgement was coming. The people of Jerusalem and the leaders of Judah watched as Isaiah's words came true about Israel, the northern part of David's Kingdom, which fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. However nothing really changed in Judah, the southern part of the kingdom, except that they executed God's mouth piece in 681. Within 100 years Judah was over-run and Jerusalem destroyed by the Babylonians. The Words of Isaiah had come true.

Why do I remind you of all that? If you had the opportunity to listen to Phyllis Tickle a few weeks ago you will remember that her thesis was that every 500 years, give or take a few decades, the Judeo-Christian faiths experience an earth-quake, a major change. The work of Isaiah was to prepare God's People for one of those times of change.

400 years before Isaiah the Children of Israel had gone through a major change in their religious life and in the structure of their society. They had moved from being a loose confederation of clans under the guidance of spirit-filled Judges and clan chiefs, to being a people united under the rule of a King with a central permanent place of worship. Within 200 years that system had begun to implode until shortly after Isaiah's time the climax was reached and the nation had ceased to occupy the land that they had been given.

Following Phyllis Tickle's thesis then, and looking at the 500 years following the levelling of Jerusalem, what do we discover? There is a major shift occurring in the life of the People of God as they seek to shake off the oppressive rule of Rome and the suffocating constraints of the Temple bureaucracy. Into this environment comes a new prophet who proclaims the Word of the Lord.

Turn from your sins—the kingdom of heaven is near.

Yes, the message proclaimed by John the Baptist is the message that Isaiah proclaimed. Both announced the coming of God's *Messiah—a shoot from the stump of the house of David; one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

As happened with Isaiah so with John; at first people went out of their way to hear what John had to say; but those who were in positions of power found his message disturbing, too hard to hear, and so John was executed. What was it that Isaiah and John said that people in power found so offensive, challenging, threatening? Psalm 72 gives us a clue.

Psalm 72 was likely written by the son of King David, Solomon, during whose reign the kingdom of Israel reached its zenith. Psalm 72 spells out what God expects of those who are in positions of power and leadership:

–justice will be given to all regardless of wealth or status,

- the poor will be treated fairly,
- the weak and needy will be protected, and
- children will be rescued from oppression and violence.

In other words leaders are answerable to God for how they treat the people God gives into their care. They may not do just as they please, neither may they act like their private agenda is God's Agenda. Isaiah and John touched a sore spot in the lives of the powerful and they died as a result.

It is interesting that if you apply Phyllis Tickle's thesis to the years following the life of John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus the Christ, you will see an upheaval happening every 500 years, or so, which seeks to redress the systemic injustices that had become ingrained in the governing institutions of society and in the religious system.

For example, during the 50 years leading up to the year 2000 (four 500 year blocks since John's time) there was a determined effort to enshrine basic human rights in national and international law: in 1960 the Canadian Bill of Rights was enacted by government of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, and in 1966 the United Nations completed the International Bill of Human Rights. There was a realization that when the leaders of a country mistreated their citizens it was a concern for all people. There was a realization and a desire to help the needy when calamity struck anywhere in the world regardless of race, nationality, gender, or belief system. This desire to protect the dignity of every human being was not always well received by those in charge and so civil wars, dictatorships, and oppressive democracies sprang up. This is the Time you and I are living in today but we need to be vigilant and aware of the fears which permeate society.

For example, tomorrow we remember how a man who felt threatened by changes in society that encouraged equality, regardless of gender, responded by murdering 14 women and injuring 14 other people at Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal on December 6, 1989. Tomorrow is the National Day of Action on Violence Against Women.

Another example is from an article in the Saturday Globe and Mail about the use which our technologically enchanted society makes of a scarce mineral called coltan. Coltan is found in the soil of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This mineral is one of the key ingredients in making the electronic circuitry that enables computers, cell phones, ipods, and a host of other electronic gadgets work. The deposits in the Congo have become the source of conflict which especially brings suffering on women and children and finances a civil war that has killed 7 million people in the last dozen years. Unintentionally, you and I through the purchase of the technological tools of our society might be participating in doing what Isaiah and John said we should not do.

And yes, the resources with which this planet is blessed are meant to be used, to be used for the good of all, for relieving poverty and oppression, for providing a fuller life for all people; not just for a self-selected elite.

Hmm, maybe when Isaiah and John call people to repent and to turn from their sins, they are not wagging their finger at what we immediately think of as sinful. Maybe they are pointing their finger at something much deeper, something that infects all of us regardless of how clean and shiny our outer garments are.

Maybe they are challenging us to examine our relationship with God, the One who made us and who sustains us. The One in whom we exist and at whose pleasure we exist. The One who sets the rules and applies them. The One whose Coming shakes the earth and sends societies into a dizzying spin. The One who draws especially near to creation about every 500 years, just as we inhale and exhale about every 5

seconds.

If what Isaiah and John the Baptist say is true;
if what Phyllis Tickle perceives is correct;
then my brothers and sisters in Christ, we are living in a critical moment in God's Story, in history.

All that may sound like doom and gloom, like the message of the old time hell-fire evangelist; but it is not intended to be. The Epistle to the Romans tells us that *the promises of Scripture were written long ago to give us hope and encouragement as we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled*. We know that God does fulfill promises. Israel and Judah were carried into exile as God foretold through Isaiah. In Jesus, the shoot arose from the stump of David, even as God had revealed to Isaiah. The Resurrected and Ascended Lord Jesus baptized his followers with the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire on the Day of Pentecost even as God had foretold through John the Baptist. We await the fulfillment of Jesus' promise, *I will come again and take you to myself that where I am you may also be*. The fact the God's promises are kept is the reason we have hope and encouragement as we look to the future. In anticipation of this great and glorious day we must use the present time wisely so that when the Lord of heaven and earth does return, when time and creation stand still, we will be found acceptable in his holy, life giving, sight.

What does this look like? What sort of life does God expect to find us to be living? The answer is really quite simple.

God expects us to be living each day in love to one another, in love to ourselves, in love to God. The relationships we are building, the attitudes which we are nurturing, the priorities which control us; all are shaping us moment by moment, decision by decision, thought by thought. We are becoming the person we will be for eternity. Is this the sort of person you would want to spend eternity with? The sort of person God wants to spend eternity with?

The voices of Isaiah and John echo down the halls of time:

*turn from your sins, turn to God—the kingdom of heaven is near at hand...
out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.*

The readings for this Second Sunday of Advent call us to prepare for tomorrow, for the fulfillment of God's Word.

O God, bring each of us, and our nation and all nations, to a sense of justice and equity, that poverty, oppression, and violence may vanish and all may know peace and plenty. We ask this in the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord