



**He will come – like child**  
**Advent Sunday**  
**26 November 2017**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**



*Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37*  
[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

At yesterday's Quiet Day we spent a little time looking at the Advent Antiphons, age-old cries of yearning, addressing Christ in rich imagery – O Wisdom, O Dayspring, O Key of David, O Desire of the Nations, O Emmanuel. Each cry pleads for Christ to come and act again in the world to bring salvation, justice and peace.

Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah propels us into Advent with just such a heart-felt cry to God: O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble in your presence.

I sometimes want to pray that prayer of Isaiah when I hear on the news of yet another tragedy, another bombing or conflict or tragic disaster. God, that you would rend the heavens and come down, to bring justice and healing to so many innocent ones suffering at the hands of a few.

Isaiah's trumpeting cry starts off with a hiss and a roar, come down as you did on Mt Sinai making it shake with your power and glory. We might be a little less enthusiastic about more earth shaking, thank you. Reveal yourself, God, and conquer our enemies.

But then the prophecy takes an interesting twist. Perhaps all this power and glory and awesome display of holiness makes the people of Israel squirm a little, they realise the gap between their frail fallible humanity and the majesty of God. But how they express this seems to us back to front, they turn on God, it's all God's fault! 'God, **you** were angry and **we** sinned.

Because **you** hid yourself, **we** transgressed...no one calls on your name...for **you** have hidden your face from us and delivered us into the hand of our iniquity." It's like in a fit of petulance, rather than acknowledging their own failings, they project these back onto God. God, it's not fair, look at the state the world's in, if only you would do something obvious, and knock out our enemies, then of course we'll worship you. Can you blame us for getting distracted by other things, we've been busy, things to do?

It's a perennial problem for both theologians and atheists alike, just where is God in the face of all the innocent suffering of the world, where evil seems to triumph and human lives are but collateral damage, unavoidable fallout.

Where is God in all this, is God silent? Is God hidden?

One of the books I've lent out most during my ministry is Philip Yancey's little book called Disappointment with God: three questions no one asks aloud<sup>1</sup> – is God unfair? Is God silent? Is God hidden?

One response to God's seeming hiddenness or absence from a suffering creation is expressed in a rather beautiful little story<sup>2</sup>.

One day God was talking with the angels about where to hide within creation, so that humankind might not find God too easily but might grow through their searching.

The first angel suggested the depths of the earth as a hiding place. No, said God, they will soon learn to dig mines and they will find me too soon.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> angel suggested, what about hiding on their moon? No, said God, it won't be long before they reach the moon with their technology, they will find me too soon.

It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> angel who hit on the great idea. Why don't you hide yourself in their own hearts? They'll never think to look for you there. So God did just that, and this is why it takes us so long to find God, step by step as we live our lives. And that in turn is what makes us grow.

And that is the point that Isaiah finally comes back to, grounded in his soul: 'Yet o Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand...now consider, we are all your people'.

Five hundred years later, Mark portrays in our Gospel reading, Jesus sitting teaching his disciples, his farewell discourse to them before his Passion. They are sitting on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple. Jesus has predicted the destruction not only of the Temple but indeed of the whole city of Jerusalem, all expressed in apocalyptic images of immense suffering and total cosmic collapse, the universe itself is unravelling. But at that point when the people cry again, O that you would rend the heavens and come down, the Son of Man will come on the clouds with great power and glory, just as the prophet Daniel predicted, and God's angels will gather the elect and rescue them from out of this world gone mad and bring them to safety. As Mark weaves his gospel together, the earliest gospel written perhaps in the 70s, Jesus' followers in Jerusalem have indeed been caught up in the Jewish War against the Roman occupiers of the years 66-70, culminating in the total destruction of the Temple and city of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70CE. This is a gospel written in wartime, perhaps.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*. New York: Harper Collins, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Silf, *Lighted Windows: an advent calendar for a world in waiting*. Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2016, p.34-35.

So is Mark reassuring his anxious Christian community that Jesus had foreseen their recent trials, had prophesied that this would befall their generation, and had urged them to keep alert, keep awake and look for the signs of God at work, to look up with hope even in the midst of suffering.

Yet where is that Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory, we may say. Centuries have passed and there is still the cry of our hearts for God to tear open the heavens and come down, to act in our world, to vindicate all those who cry out for justice and long for peace.

It's not surprising, we say, that most of the people we spend our lives among have long since given up on a God who seems silent or hidden or unmoved by a suffering world.

And yet God *has* come, not in apocalyptic acts of judgement and destruction, not inflicting terror on all sides, but silently, hidden away in a small backwater of the Middle East, crisscrossed by empires and armies even then.

Rowan Williams in his poem *Advent Calendar* puts it like this:

'He will come, will come, will come like crying in the night,  
Like blood, like breaking, as the earth writhes to toss him free,  
He will come like child'.

He will come like child, human like us, made of potter's clay, breakable, sharing our joys and sorrows, vulnerable, willing to share this world's suffering, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, taking on the sting of sin and death from the inside, through experiencing it, drinking that cup to its dregs, and then bursting out the other side into new life that we *in Christ* can share.

And that is what Paul in his letter to the Corinthians probably written about twenty years before Mark's Gospel is so keen to drum into the Corinthians who were somewhat too self-assured, that they were self-made Christians, that they had it all and had arrived. Paul gently but firmly reminds them that all they have is *in Christ*. That is repeated time and time again – the grace of God has been given you *in Christ Jesus*, you have been enriched *in him*, the testimony *of Christ* has been strengthened among you, you wait for the *revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ*, he will strengthen you to the end so you may be blameless on *the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*, you were called into *the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*.

O God, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

God *has* come down in Christ, *he will come like child*.

May we find our hope this Advent in Christ who comes among us, hidden and silent, and comes into our hearts to reveal to us the God who loves us.