

## Advent I – December 2 2018

### Readings:

Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thess. 3: 9-13

Luke 21:25-36

### Reflection:

While recent weather has been somewhat variable across Aotearoa, we journey with hope and anticipation toward the heralding of summer - longer days of sunshine, barbeques and beaches; gardens abundant with produce, butterflies and humming bees. What does the heralding of summer mean for you? Perhaps a time to clean out the garage, spare room or that bulging cupboard whose door you daren't open! For me, the approach of summer means its time to clear out and rearrange my wardrobe. It also tends to mean its time to lose a few kilos and reduce the bulges so that the wardrobe contents fit! In order for *that* to happen, my week needs to include the discipline of regular walks around Halswell Quarry Park.

I particularly enjoy puffing my way around the Crater Rim track, the circular route that takes one up and around the volcanic stone-quarry face, capturing almost 360-degree views from the top. (It's a good prayer walk, which on downhill sections tends to be filled with thanksgiving and intercessions but on steeper uphill sections is reduced to '*Oh God, why does this never get any easier!*') This circular route, though the *same* each time it is travelled – is also different with each journey. The weather, time of day, flora & fauna, my own mood, the prayers in my heart and the people I meet on the path, all contribute to the experience.

This circular route (a pilgrimage of sorts) is repeated in many areas of our lives – the lunar month, the cycle of the seasons, our calendar year, the Church *lectionary* (our three-year cycle through scripture) and our liturgical Church year – Advent to Christmas and Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Ordinary Time and back to Advent. As one commentator states: *It is a circular route to Bethlehem – a constant pilgrimage*

*to the manger of the heart.* In our Church lectionary, Year B with its focus on Mark's gospel has now ended and Year C (and the gospel of Luke) is heralded. Our Advent journey has begun (Advent meaning 'coming to' – a time of anticipation and preparation, a time to be pregnant with God. Like the title of one of Marcus Borg's books, we await '*Meeting Jesus again for the first time.*'

And like a walk around the Halswell Quarry Park Crater Rim track – as we walk through Advent and into the Christmas season, some things will appear just the same, but there may also emerge different spiritual understandings and viewpoints, new perspectives to receive and ponder. There will be uphill climbs that leave us breathless; slippery slopes, rubble and perhaps even major rock falls that leave gaping holes, seeming to completely undermine our sense of equilibrium, security and well-being ...yet out of all these, may well come a new spiritual fitness for the days ahead, perhaps a sounder footing and surprising new understandings and insights. And along the way, we will need nourishment and encouragement for the journey. This was certainly the case for all those whom we meet in today's Advent scripture readings.

Take the first reading from Jeremiah - another commentator states: "the new lectionary year starts in misery. Desolation and terror are well known in *our* time. Sadly, it seems to have been this way in *every* time.' And yet, Jeremiah discerns a bright light of hope for the people, beyond the fall of Jerusalem to the Chaldeans back in the sixth century BC. Forgiveness and cleansing, security and prosperity are anticipated – Jerusalem *will* be re-established as a place of life, laughter, song and worship. And the foundation of this hope is the anticipation of a new leader – an heir of David, a royal and priestly One who will establish justice and right relationship with God.

Fast-forwarding 600 years to about 49AD, in Paul's letter to the early Church in Thessalonica, he reflects on his past experience of preaching the gospel to them, even amidst suffering and persecution. He writes to encourage, to hearten them and to prepare

them for his hoped-for return: “*May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.*”

Then, in Luke’s gospel, written after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, the writer seeks to bring assurance and hope to the Christian community, as *they* look forward to the anticipated imminent second coming of Christ – the Son of Man. Although there will be signs in both the heavens and the earth – signs that will fill the human community with confusion and distress, fear and apprehension – Luke is confident. He offers a message of *hope*, just as Jesus assures *his* disciples before his death. The ‘summer’ of the kingdom of God is drawing near.

Like the first disciples and the early Christians in Thessalonica, we too are encouraged to stand confidently through all the tumults that assail us in *our* day, prepared to meet Jesus again for the first time, both in the surprise encounters of our daily lives and within ourselves. We are called to be a pilgrim people of hope, even in times of chaos: *It is a circular route to Bethlehem – a constant pilgrimage to the manger of the heart.*

But how do we hold onto hope in times of chaos? What sustains us on our personal and collective pilgrimage?

Thinking back to 2001, perhaps you still remember exactly where you were and how you responded to the news of September 11 – an event that rocked the nations. *I* vividly recall the dawning of September 12 in Sydney, where and when I first heard of, and saw televised, the Twin Towers attack. Stunned to the very core of my being, struggling to comprehend the enormity of the situation, it was only when I ventured into the tiny city-garden of my host, heard birds singing and felt the warmth of the sun, that I gained *some* sense that there *was* still life, hope and stability in our world. The enduring sun – the simple cycle of day and night - became for me a sign of hope. In today’s world of political, environmental- and climate-instability, how and where do you experience hope? I encounter it in a warm smile, a kindly gaze, a held hand, a friend’s phone call or hug, a child’s laughter, a hymn of praise, a peaceful protest, and in bread and wine.....

We are a pilgrim people, returning again to begin our Advent journey – we are called to be hope-filled – encouraged to stand tall even in the midst of the world’s and our own turmoil and tumults - to be prepared to meet the Son – the eternal Holy One, yet again.

*(It is a circular route to Bethlehem – a constant pilgrimage to the manger of the heart.)*

I conclude with an adapted meditation from the Iona community:

Pilgrimage is a circular route, following the scuffmarks of history.

Beware the onslaught of nostalgia, look out for sickly sentimentality:

sweet-smelling stables and sugar-coated angels,

the saintly monk who never broke a fingernail or into sweat.

Remember rather, and walk in the footsteps of countless refugees,

tramping forests of fear, camping out in fields of hopelessness;

remember the scent, not of crushed myrtle but panic,

the sound, not of the lark, but of a sniper’s bullet

or of shattering glass.

Seek then to remember the brave steps of Mandela,

the unfinished work of Luther King,

the courage and compassion of Bishop Oscar Romero.

Carry with you also Herstory:

Margaret of Scotland and Hilda of Whitby,

Kate Sheppard and Nurse Sybilla Maude;

Elizabeth Fry and Emily Pankhurst,

who broke open prisons and set prisoners free.

Remember all the invisible ones,

walk in the footsteps of the forgotten ones.

And when your place of departure becomes also your place of arrival,

and you know the place for the first time:

What will have changed? What will you find?

God – bless our Advent journey, our pregnant pilgrimage of the heart. Amen.