

Advent 1, Year A. Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:37-44
St. Augustine's, Freeland. December 1, 2013 Nigel J. Taber-Hamilton

In the Church of England of my youth the second, third and fourth Sundays of Advent always had a second collect during all the Sunday services. Or, rather, we repeated the collect for the first Sunday of Advent - the one that we have today - before the collect of the day on those next three Sundays, as a kind of theme for the season that somehow had to be held in tension with each following Sundays' theme. So every time I hear today's collect - inviting us to **"cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light,"** I'm drawn back to the cold December Sunday mornings at St. Saviours, Alexandra Park, North London, where Fr. Macrow's high-pitched voice pierced the chilly air inside the church as he proclaimed the alternative vision of God for us.

But I remember the Advent Sunday Evensongs more - services held in an equally cold church where the same collect was intoned; the evensongs that, even at 4:30 p.m., were sung in pools of candlelight surrounded by the greater darkness of the early evening.

In my memory the rest of the huge church was veiled in shadow, and we who had ventured out when others stayed in front of cozy fires were drawn to that light, that symbol and reality of warmth and brightness, where it seemed physically possible to cast off the darkness and put on the glorious light.

Then as now we were looking forward to a vision beyond the present realities, a vision beyond even the coming birth, beyond the agendas of any church faction or political party, beyond national inspiration or international manipulation: a final vision of God's grandeur that held and holds out the promise of joy.

Isaiah's dream of a world transformed shapes that vision of joy, of course. Having spent chapter one describing a scene of devastation, of violence, injustice and oppression, his vision we hear today is like a sudden burst of bright lightening on a starless night. People from all over our fragile earth are streaming up the holy mountain - flowing uphill like a river, Isaiah says, clueing us in to an amazing thought - that in God's reality all things are possible. As they journey they carry the tools of war and as they climb the mountain they cast these violent tools into the furnace. And a blacksmith stands by with a hammer, patiently pounding these tools, transforming them from implements of war into instruments for cultivation, changing their symbolic meaning:

"We ain't gonna study war no more,
ain't gonna study war no more,
we ain't gonna study war no more!"

And as more and more people arrive, weary of war, drawn by the light, ready for a new day of peace, the blacksmith continues his pounding - making that peace, transforming the present reality.

"Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

This is the vision of Advent, the vision of the End Time. Advent invites us to hope for a

different world, calls us to take up the light of Christ, the paschal light (of the candle) and be the people of light for our world, to proclaim the coming of light into a world of darkness.

For Isaiah's vision hardly describes the world today, just as it hardly described his world either. The light must be proclaimed, must be shared, for violence is never very far off - for some of us its in our homes, or the homes of our children, or siblings; its in our communities, and its certainly in the nations of the world. Not much has changed since Isaiah's time - are our hopes to be continually dashed? Is there any possibility of the fulfilment of Isaiah's vision of peace in our day and in our time?

The final coming of God's peace is a vision that's proved to be elusive in human history. Yet we humans continue to make progress toward it - sometimes haltingly, sometimes boldly; sometimes in full retreat, sometimes charging fearlessly into God's future.

Advent invites us to live in the hope and vision of that future and not despair - that, certainly is the cross's message: that out of the anguish of the present time - of all our present times - through the anguish of the cross - through the anguish of all our crosses - comes not the possibility but the certainty of resurrection's transformation.

We are, says Paul, in today's Epistle, to live in the interim between that transformative experience of resurrection as we have seen it in Jesus and the time when Isaiah's vision is inaugurated. That's the "now" where the real struggles of daily life are lived out. "Walk in the light," they both say. In the face of the violence and destruction of our contemporary world, "walk in the light." In the face of our deepest, abiding fears, "walk in the light." In the face of all that rises to trouble us, "walk in the light."

We have this vision to support us: *that violence will not have the last word*. We look to the holy mountain, we join the river of people who journey toward its refining forges, knowing that God's blacksmiths await, prepared to take and transform all our weapons - physical, emotional, psychological, individual, communal, national - to transform our weapons into tools that can nurture and cultivate our world and our human hearts; the tools, St. Paul says, of love. Dawn is coming over the horizon, he says. If we turn toward it, it lights our faces with its brightness. God is putting the finishing touches to his salvation work. So we should "put on the Lord Jesus Christ". We should remember our baptisms, where we all have "put on Christ," and live out baptism's implications: to be people of reconciliation, carriers of the vision, reflectors of the light of God, people of love, and joy, and peace.

For the Spirit of God continues to seek ways of peace in the face of violence, continues to call us into that fuller humanity that we have dimly perceived in Jesus.

"Cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

Arm yourselves with the light of Christ. Cast away anything that encourages the darknesses of our world. Rely on the grace of God, however it's embodied. Live in hope and not despair. Keep your eyes on the prize. Keep the faith. Amen.