

Advent 1 Parish Eucharist

Grandchild number 4, little Sam, came rather quicker than his mother had expected. His eldest sister has gone down in family history for saying to her father: Daddy we need another adult, send for granny- and so Sam was born in the front room- and yes, granny came to help for we respond to the needs of birth pangs.

Go back a few verses in today's Gospel and Jesus says : "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Jesus uses the image of giving birth, to help us be awake to our world, to ourselves and to God. Wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecutions of the Church, moral collapse and greed, these, he says are the birth pangs; God bringing about a new heaven and a new earth; God's kingdom community of love, forgiveness, truth, righteousness, purity and peace gently breaking through the darkens of war, hatred, disaster and sin. The very fact that we notice the agony and consider it evil is proof of God at work, bringing about a new creation of love.

Don't be alarmed, Jesus says, don't abandon faith, don't listen to the old Genesis lie that there is no God; don't listen to the not so subtle whispering of the world that what matters is what you want because you owe it to yourself and are worth it; don't listen to a secularising culture that puts money and self in the place of truth, love and God. Don't be alarmed - despite all God is in control, God is coming, the Advent Kingdom is on the way, all this is but the birth pangs.

Five hundred or so years before Jesus the faithful little Isaiah community found itself in exile in Babylon. Many of God's people abandoned their faith. God's promises had first been made to Abraham right there in Babylon. A millennia on and what had happened? God's people were back where it all started; nothing appeared to have been achieved. The Temple *God's holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, had been burned by fire.* God's people was reduced to a tiny band of exiles. The dark had not only risen; the dark had prevailed; the Genesis lie seemed the only truth. All around were wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecutions, moral collapse and greed. Like exiles in our own city today the Isaiah community had to cope with degradation and fear while pregnant, while nursing infants, while caring for the vulnerable elderly, while relying on the equivalent of food Banks.

The Isaiah community pleads: O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. Come Lord God, come to your people, release us, rescue us, bring justice, truth, peace, hope, true righteousness. Make your name known, make the nations see and understand. The prayer shows this small worshipping community to be all but at the end of its tether - yet it is also a prayer of trust and hope: God will come, the Kingdom will break in. The birth pangs are truly signs of hope, promise and fulfilment. Despite everything the Isaiah community remains faithful, trusting in God's promises, confident that Advent will come.

Pray that it may not be in winter. Advent comes in winter dark and cold. Christ comes in the cold and dark. Christ comes as we faithfully gather to worship, witness, pray and serve. Christ comes as we read together the Word of God in Holy Scripture; Christ comes as we share our concerns and hopes, our anxieties and joys in corporate prayer; Christ comes as morning and evening we pray in obedience to Him: our father- thy Kingdom come. Christ comes as we serve in apparently insignificant ways to feed the hungry, to stand up for those unnoticed by our political and economic systems. Christ comes as we reach out in care to the lonely, the vulnerable, the anxious, the sick. Christ comes in bread and wine and feeds us with himself.

It is simply not true that God is not acting. That is the old genesis lie. God is always acting, always creating, always renewing. God through Christ is at work now through us his church. Our little offerings of prayer and worship, of care, concern and practical service are in deeper reality Christ at work bringing in the Kingdom. St Paul writes: you have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind. We are enriched through worship and prayer, word and sacrament; enriched by the Advent Christ who came once and who comes now and who will come at the end of all time; enriched by Jesus who draws us to himself, feeds us, and so restores in us the image of God, a true humanity that worships, praises and loves. Christ makes us his Church a sign of the Advent Kingdom, a sign of God's new heaven and earth.

Wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecutions, moral collapse and greed are the birth pangs, signs of a coming new heaven and new earth being brought into being through Christ and his Church. "Daddy we need proper help now" is not just the prayer of an anxious 8 year old but the prayer of Christ's Church to a loving God who comes

again and again - even when we are too blind , too sleepy, too dispirited to notice. Do not be alarmed, says the Advent Christ. As you experience the birth pangs, as you seek to respond to their needs, be full of Advent hope and faith for Christ who came to us once in great humility comes to us now in Word, prayer and Sacrament and will come on the last day, in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, and to bring a new heaven and new earth when God himself will wipe every tear from our eyes.