

# *when all shall be revealed*

a sermon preached on the

*second sunday of advent*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by the revd helen creed*

the lections: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85: 1-2 & 8-13; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a; Mark 1: 1-8

One of the themes we find in our worship today is disclosure. In our confession today we asked God to “shine on those places we have hidden from [God]”. And Peter’s letter includes a vision of the day of the Lord which involves “the earth and everything that is done on it” being disclosed. This added to our usual prayer of preparation which invites us to address God as the one “from whom no secrets are hidden”. So I’d like us to pause for a moment and register our reactions to this idea of things that are hidden being revealed, of secrets not being secrets anymore, of light being shone into the dark corners of our lives.

Is this a happy idea for us, A relief? . . . Or is it a bit un-nerving? And I mean un-nerving not because I suspect we have lots of skeletons in our closets that we don’t want to bring before God, but because I think most of us, when pushed, would be worried that there are skeletons, drives, desires, murky depths that we don’t even know about! As human beings we are vulnerable to believing the worst about ourselves: we’re not really sure that we are made “in the image of God.” In my experience, one of the key reasons people seek out pastoral conversations is because something has happened that has shaken a person’s confidence in themselves, raised doubts about the core self . . . and they are trying to work out if they are actually worthwhile. They come saying, “I’m so hurt that he/she sees me this way” but actually they are worried that the negative judgement, whatever it may be, is true.

It is clear from Peter’s letter that the early church expected that this day of the Lord, this day of upheaval and disclosure, would take place within their life-time. They see themselves as living in a time of delay, a delay decided upon by God, as God waits patiently for all people to come to repentance. But there is also a sense of “it’s almost upon us” and a pressing question about how to be ready for it.

Peter's answer to this question of readiness is pretty clear in these verses: he urges this community to live in such a way that when the cosmic melt-down happens they will be found "without spot or blemish. They should strive to live 'lives of holiness and godliness", so that when that day dawns they "be found by [Jesus] at peace". I think there is a lovely sense in this passage of the joy of living in the light of God's tenderness for us, but I think it could also be heard differently - as being about the importance of being-on-our-best-behavior at all times. And that might also mean that we also hear Peter telling us to repress those part of ourselves that don't cover us in glory. That follows doesn't it? But reading it this way is a serious betrayal of the gospel and so what I'd like to explore with you this morning is the question that Peter is on to here: what would it mean for us to be ready for what Peter describes as "the day of the Lord"? a day we probably both long for and fear, and a day, just to complicate things, that has already happened and is still to come.

In our glorious passage from Isaiah this morning, Isaiah, filled with a vision of the arrival of the Lord, calls his people to do everything they can to ensure that God's arrival doesn't hit any road-blocks. A voice cries out that this is a time of awesome release (Jerusalem has served her term) – so let's lift up the valleys, level out the mountains and the hills, smooth over the rough ground so that nothing will impede the Lord's progress.

John the Baptist is not crying out about lifting up valleys, but, like Isaiah he has a keen awareness of the significance of the time. This is a man totally dedicated to calling others to be ready for this irruption into the history of humankind in the person of Jesus. But notice . . . John does not call the people to their best behavior – like a principal who urges his or her students to bring their best self to school.

John the Baptist only has one trick up his sleeve: it is, as Mark describes it, a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". To be ready for John, is: to repent. And that involves allowing oneself to be taken under the waters of the Jordan and then to be brought up, out. Let's remember at this point that, for the ancient Jews, water symbolized chaos and threat; the waters were a place of sea-monsters and murky depths. And John was urging the people to go down into those watery depths in order to be ready to meet Jesus.

When I try to explain John the Baptist to the girls at school I say that maybe he's an ancient version of Bear Grylls – our there in the wilderness: wild hair, feeding on the fruits of the desert – locusts and wild honey, speaking his mind, ruffling the feathers of the powerful, and ending up with his head on a plate (not that that's happened to Bear Grylls). We tend to think of him as hard, harsh, awkward – but let's also notice that the crowds come to him in their droves: "and people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him . . ." This baptism seems to be something people are craving (even tho John himself tells them that his baptism is nothing compared to the baptism with the HS that Christ will offer). Anyway, my point is that his words, his being, however crude and socially awkward have worked some magic – he has enabled the crowds to see life's potential, to taste the sweetness of forgiveness, and they come in their droves in order to be baptized and confess their sins.

So here is an alternative to the exhausting and I would say futile and un-christian activity of being on our best behavior: the old and often misunderstood activity of repentance – an action which leads us not to brow-beating and self-castigation (that's the misunderstanding), but to

renewed energy, new-found purpose as people who keep on discovering, every time we repent, that we live in the wonderful light of God's forgiveness in Christ.

Here's a definition of repenting to try out this morning: it's what we do when we stop trying to be God for ourselves. We are most of us, I think, much of the time, and often subconsciously, involved in justifying our actions – justifying ourselves: trying to convince ourselves (and maybe God?) that we are being good human beings: that we are worthy, deserving individuals.

“I always try to do the right thing.”

“I keep the rules.”

“I respect the rights of others.”

“I don't give in to temptation.”

“I don't hold a grudge.” – whatever our particular version of worthy is.

And when we're not justifying ourselves, we're busy condemning ourselves – reminding ourselves endlessly of all the ways we fail, all the times we do not live up to the expectations that we have set ourselves somehow.

“I am so ungrateful.”

“I am so mean-spirited.” “

I always spoil things.” - whatever our particular version of unworthy is.

These are all the thoughts and judgements that make the very hearts that God created so resistant to God's coming. To take up repentance, means to put aside the strong urge we have, to be our own judges and saviours. To repent means to stop justifying ourselves and to stop condemning ourselves – to let God be God for us, to face the chaos within and to face our inability to bring ourselves out of the chaos - and thus, in this way, to ready ourselves for the arrival of the God who actually does love us. For it can only be in the moments when we put aside our own judgements, that we can truly become aware of how God actually sees us, and how God actually feels about us. . . Let's return to Isaiah for a moment to see how this ancient prophet understood God's perspective on humanity. The image Isaiah chooses for God is that of an infinitely tender shepherd, one whose love for us is as ordinary and as practical as the love of the shepherd who wants to “gather the lambs in his arms” and “carry them in his bosom”.

I'm sure you have heard many times before that the word repent, when stripped back to its original meaning just means “to turn” and I'm sure many of you know the shaker song, “simple gifts” which use the image of turning – in fact there is a dance that goes with it, where the turning actually is physically turning:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free

'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,

And when we find ourselves in the place just right,

'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

\*When true simplicity is gain'd,

To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,

To turn, turn will be our delight,

Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

May this advent be time when we wait, when we wake and when we turn and find ourselves in “the valley of love and delight”, that place where Christ reigns forever, to whom be all glory and praise, amen.