



Sermon: - 3rd December 2017

The signs of the times

Isaiah 64: 1 – 9; Mark 13: 24 – 37

Only 22 sleeps till Christmas! As Christmas fast approaches, and all around us Christmas decorations are going up, how soon is too soon? According to yesterday's Daily Mail, some Christmas enthusiasts put their trees up with more than six weeks still to go before the big day. In fact, some people apparently bought their trees as early as August. All around us we see signs of the approach of the big day. When did you start preparing? Are you one of those folk who begin in September? Or do you leave it all till Christmas Eve? Or do you take a middle line? Whatever approach you take, you will all have one thing in common – you will have been aware, through the passing of the days, through the accumulation of decorations in the shops, through the lengthening nights and the growing darkness, that Christmas was approaching. No-one can fail to notice this fact. We have all, in this sense at least, read the signs of the times.

The prophet Isaiah also read the signs of the times, and encouraged his listeners to do the same. St Matthew reports that Jesus too, told us to read the signs of the times. However, the signs that these passages tell us to be alert to are signs of something much more significant than the annual celebration of a festival, no matter how significant and important that festival might be. They are signs of the coming of the kingdom of God!

Isaiah tells us that, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." We are to watch for these signs as portents of the return of Jesus as King. At this time in the history of the world we may not observe the signs that Isaiah tells us to look out for, but that does not mean that there are no signs to read. So, what are the signs of the times in this era, how do we read them, what do they mean for us?

A few years ago I attended a conference where the keynote speaker was Philip Hanlon, Professor of Public Health at Glasgow University. Professor Hanlon, who is a professing Christian, has a very interesting theory about the signs of our times. He suggests that such diverse problems as the increase in obesity, the significant growth of various 'addictions', an increasing loss of a sense of wellbeing, stress related illness and disease, and the growth of inequality in society are signs of the times. He points out that all the advances in

medical science have not cured any of these ills. He argues that these problems will not improve until there is a radical transformation of our whole society and the culture that has created it. He suggests that what we are living through is not, as we might think, an age of change, but rather a Change of Age! The difference is significant. It has been an age of change. My mother was born only a few years after the Wright brothers made their first flight yet for many years now we have been sending rockets into space. When I was a child there were no video recorders. Today we no longer use video recorders because they have been superseded by DVDs. As a child I could not have imagined computers, mobile phones, driverless cars. The last hundred years have indeed been an age of change, in fact the rate of change has been unprecedented in the history of the world. But a “Change of Age” is different.

There have been “Changes of Age” in the past. Galileo’s suggestion that the earth revolves around the sun, and not the other way around, prompted one such change. It rocked the then world. Was thought to be blasphemous. People could not get their head round it. It took a great many years for humanity to accommodate this astonishing discovery into its philosophy of life and when it did, it radically changed the way we thought about ourselves and the world.

A “Change of Age”, rather than an age of change, requires a radical new mindset – a completely different way of thinking about the world, and life, and our role in society. Like a cultural tsunami, a Change of Age will leave nothing the same in its wake. The old will have gone and we will have no option but to try to make sense of the new.

Is Professor Hanlon right? Are we living through a Change of Age? Are we seeing the end of society as we know it? If we read the signs of the times what do they tell us?

Post World War 2 we entered an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity. On the 20th of July 1957 Harold Macmillan made his famous statement that most Britons “have never had it so good”. There was a mood of optimism and a sense that the only way was up; we were going to be healthier, more prosperous, have more and better opportunities and a better standard of living.

Sixty years on, what has happened to that dream? Economically speaking, things are no better and in many ways worse. There is a great deal of poverty, although a few people have become outrageously, I think sinfully, wealthy. In general terms our health is poorer, although we live longer; we are an addictive society, tolerance for the stranger is

decreasing rather than increasing and the brave new world has failed to appear. Life as we know it has failed to live up to the dream. Our economic and political systems are failing, so what do these signs mean?

Isaiah 64 has been called the most powerful psalm of community lament in the Bible. The passage we read this morning is part of a longer prayer lamenting the state of the people of Israel, who are in mourning for their nation, now scattered far from their homeland and living under an oppressive regime. It is a heartfelt cry rising to God asking for his help and seems to go from one extreme to another—from questioning to acceptance, from despair to hope. The people of Israel were desperately in need of God's intervention to restore them to their former glory. Israel needed to hear again the promise of something better to get them through this dark time as they hoped for better days and the promise of light for them and light for the whole world.

In many ways, I think, the people of the exile are very like us. We look around us and we can see that our communities need healing, but how do we bring this healing? Where is God in all this? We too send a heartfelt cry rising to God asking for his help in our church and in our nation. Our prayers too, I believe, seem to go from one extreme to another—from questioning to acceptance, from despair to hope. In Isaiah's prayer there were many searching questions about where God was and why he seemed to have abandoned his people. Yet Isaiah keeps coming back to the reality of what God has done in the past, recognising both the shortcomings of the people of Israel as well as the unchangeable nature of God.

So where is the hope? Our God is not a God who abandons his people. He did not abandon the Israelites and he will not abandon us. In this Age of Change, will God be with us?

Yes, of course he will be, but he will not simply wave a magic wand and make it all better. He requires us to act! Albert Einstein said: "The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it." God is asking us to read the signs of the times. He is asking us to recognise the ways in which society is going wrong, deserting God and his ways. He is asking us to allow him to work in us to shape us and remake us in his image for the good of the world and the building of his kingdom.

We are clay, God is the potter. It's not a flattering metaphor as it represents us as an inanimate lump of matter with no particular purpose. Or at least we have no purpose without God. God not only has the power to mould us, but he actually wants to. Isn't that an amazing thought? The creator of the world wants to mould us in his divine image. We know this because on Christmas day 2000 years ago, God himself became clay for our sakes. He took on the form of this base material and became a human infant, impoverished, a refugee, and in danger. 2000 years ago, God becomes the clay which God then moulds into his own image – the forerunner of a new race, a new community.

In this Change of Age, when everything around us is changing and we do not know what or when the outcome will be, we need, and society needs, something to hold on to. More than ever we need faith in God. And our society, who has moved away from faith in God, needs us to be faithful. Society needs us to allow God to lead us into the future. To shape us in his image so that in the tsunami that is the Change of Age there will still be a rock to hold on to. The rock that is the Church, that is you and me, moulded by God, made in the image of God, for the good of all creation.