Reflection

Traditionally the first Sunday’s reflection following the departure of a parish minister is called “preaching the parish vacant”...and it falls to the interim moderator, me, to do that.

It’s a strange phrase, preaching the parish vacant, as we would certainly not like to think of ourselves as ‘vacant’...and yet, there is a loss, the familiar person we’ve come to know as our worship leader over the past four and a half years has gone.

For those who are visiting with us today, our minister Susan Jones, retired as of just last week, in fact as we gather this morning she and Roger are making their way down the South Island! Naturally it feels strange, a new phase in our community life beginning, something of an unknown as we enter a period of waiting, discernment and uncertainty until we find the right person to lead us again.

When I realised Susan would be leaving just before the season of Advent begins, I, like some of you perhaps, was wishing she’d have waited until January!

But in a way it is quite fitting that this so called vacancy begins with the first Sunday of advent – a time of waiting, the growing child in the space of the womb, a time of spiritual preparation.

As human beings we tend to dislike waiting – beginning with children waiting for Christmas or birthdays, waiting for our holidays...

Pesky waiting – waiting in line for food, or postal services, on the phone to Work and Income or Vodafone!

And much more painful waiting – for the pain relief to kick in, for the scan results, for the pain of loss to ease...

And often, because we find waiting so unbearable, we jump to fill in the space, to get it over with. We do this by keeping so busy we don’t have time to think, by jumping into a new relationship as soon as the last one ends, through addiction to substances which take away our emptiness.

Advent invites us into being with waiting, being with the space inside us, watching and listening for that still small voice.

But when I saw the lectionary reading for today from Matthew’s gospel, my heart sank. It was quite difficult to reconcile my idea of a gentle waiting with this violent passage. How could this be the first advent reading?

I wanted something far nicer and more gentle, than the apocalyptic doom and gloom – as Lynne read:

Do you remember? *Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what dayyour Lord is coming*.

It sounds like something from the superhero film Avengers: End Game, if you’ve seen it, you’ll recall where the villain Thanos, having acquired the infinity gauntlet and all the power gems, literally snapped his fingers and every second person on the planet disintegrated into thin air. It was shocking.

And of course some sections of the church have taken this passage to be describing ‘the so-called Rapture’, or one of the end times prophecies…including I suppose, vindication for the faithful who would be the ones saved.

But this is to completely misunderstand the context of this passage – which following Mark’s gospel was reflecting the despair and grief of the Jewish community followng the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans.

As John Spong says: “First the city’s walls fell, next the buildings including the Temple, were levelled. Then, after the citizens fled, the Jewish nation disappeared from the maps of human history until 1948 when the modern state of Israel was born”

In the context of such utter devastation, the gospel writers reflected a belief in an interventionist God who would restore the community once again, and as time went on, as the hope for an actual physical restoration to their homeland faded, this notion of divine intervention became shaped into a spiritual idea of restoration and vindication, on which people could pin their hopes.

The lectionary puts together this Matthew reading reflecting the destruction of Jerusalem, with the beautiful psalm of hope for the city:

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
May they prosper who love you.*

*Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.*

The first Sunday of Advent begins with these readings to link ancient hopes for the restoration of the holy city with the birth of Jesus, reimagining Jewish scripture through a Christian lens.

So it makes more sense then, as to why these readings are introduced today – ancient hopes in the midst of real life despair, linked in our tradition to the coming birth of Jesus, God with us.

We don’t need to believe in a final judgment to appreciate what is being explored here. We don’t need to feel compelled to fill our not-knowing with certainty, or jump from the places of silence and space to a God who will intervene to restore and save. No, our spirituality can sustain waiting.

As Jan Richardson says in the contemporary reading:

*(Advent) tells us that we do not know everything, cannot know everything, are not responsible for knowing everything. It tells us that, ultimately, we live in mystery*

The British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion urged an attitude to each analytic encounter as being without memory or desire. By which he meant – neither full of memory, thoughts about the past, the last encounter, what is known of the history, yesterday’s words…or, desire, plans for what we think should happen, goals for the outcome, in a sense, control…an almost impossible stance to maintain but such a good reminder of being with what is, alert to the unfolding process as it is here and now.

I think this is something of what is needed in both Advent and a vacancy…we need time to grieve, to settle and to be together as a community, to remember who we are, and then, in time, we begin the process of discernment, carefully and with regard for each other’s thoughts. Advent reminds us not to rush.

So we gather today, at the beginning of both a new phase in our life as a community, in our sadness and our impatience to know what is going to happen…and at the beginning of Advent, a season of waiting…

So may we slow down, take the time to prepare both individually and as a community, to make space for listening to the still small voice within, the whisper of the presence we name God…

So that we may come prepared into the next part of our journey together.

Amen.