The Promise of Advent
Isaiah 9:1-7

This evening I'd like us to consider *The Promise of Advent.*

You see, the prophets who lived and wrote in ancient Israel hundreds of years before the birth of Christ realised that at some point in their distant future God would do something amazing - that through the coming of a King in the line of David, God would break into history, rescue his people from their enemies and begin to put everything right.

But of all those prophecies, maybe none is so beautiful as the one from the Prophet Isaiah, writing 700 years before Christ: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulders and his name shall be called, wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, prince of peace.' Words that have found their way into songs and oratorios.

But if those words are the most beautiful of the promises, arguably they're also the most relevant for our day. You see, the situation Isaiah faced was surprisingly similar to our own. Look how he begins: by talking about people who dwell in 'gloom… darkness… and deep darkness.'

It's the opposite of everything we tend to associate with Christmas. You see, one of the ways you know Christmas is coming are the lights, isn't it. Or at least it was until we had to switch them off. But normally, everyone's at it: our communes hang them from lamp-posts, shops light up their windows, and your neighbour inflates an enormous blow up Santa, and you wish they didn't. But each of those lights is pointing to something deeper.

You see, you could define *darkness* as simply the *absence* of light. But that's not how Isaiah thought of it. For him, darkness wasn't just the *absence* of some thing, it was the *presence* of other, unwanted things. And he lived and wrote during the reign of King Ahaz. A reign marked by conflict and self-serving leadership. In other words, times not so different from our own. And so, if in the last year you've looked out at the world and felt gloomy about the future, or seen the dark clouds of war descend over Europe, Isaiah would know what you feel.

Except, in his day, he says that darkness had settled over 'the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali' (v1), tribal areas in the north east of Israel. And he picks them for a reason. Whenever an enemy army invaded from the north, those regions were the first to be hit. But it wasn't just that they were the most vulnerable militarily and so suffered the most. Look how he describes the whole region: 'Galilee *of the nations*', because this was also the area most influenced by the pagan cultures of its neighbours.

And that had also had a negative, corrosive impact on the people. You see, right before he gives us the great promises of chapter 9, in chapter 8 he describes how the people have turned away from the smile of God's face and the light of walking in his ways, and turned instead to idols, to worship and be shaped by the gods of war or sex or success, and as a result they've plunged themselves into a moral darkness.

And it's into this time of geopolitical instability and darkness that Isaiah says God is going to do something incredible: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.'

It's as if God is saying, 'it may be like night now - politically or for you personally, but dawn is coming.' And in place of darkness there's going be light, in place of shame, God's going to bring

joy. And listen how he describes that joy: v3, ‘They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.’

Imagine your boss tells you he’s giving you a bumper Christmas bonus and he tells you the figure and you can’t believe it. Or imagine your team has just won the world cup - like England’s about to do. Well, God says, it’s that kind of overflowing, unbelievable joy I’m going to bring.

And the reason, Isaiah says, is that God’s going to break every oppressive power over the people. Verse 4, ‘For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.’ It’s like a slave being beaten by a cruel master, but someone stronger rushes to their rescue, pushes the slave driver away, and breaks his rod.

Except, rather than do it by overwhelming force, God’s going to do it ‘as on the day of Midian.’

Now, what does that mean?

Well, centuries before, when Israel was being oppressed by the armies of Midian, God raised up Gideon to free them. Except, before God would let Gideon go into battle, he first whittled his army right down. Facing an army of 10s of 1000s, God reduces Gideon’s army down to only 300. The odds are impossible, defeat is certain, against such an enemy an army so small stands no chance. And yet, God uses those few men to win a stunning victory.

‘Fascinating’ you might say, ‘but what’s that got to do with Christmas?’

Well, Isaiah’s saying, ‘God’s going to do it again. He’s going to shine in the darkness, he’s going to bring the joy of harvest and victory, he’s going to break the power of oppression, but he’s going to do it through something impossibly weak and hopelessly outnumbered.’

So, how does he do it? By sending the King in David’s line! Except not a king in full battle armour with sword drawn, but a king come as a baby. As Isaiah says, ‘For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder’ (v6). A baby born 2000 years ago in Bethlehem.

Now, just a few days back was Thanksgiving, a feast when, among other things, Americans give thanks for not being British - I try not to be hurt - or being ruled by a king. And for some, the idea that a King might be the answer to all your problems probably seems crazy. After all, aren’t so many of our problems because of kings or presidents? But if you’ve ever found yourself criticising your, or another nation’s leaders you’re acknowledging that what we really need are good leaders; leaders who serve, leaders who are wise, leaders who always do what’s right *and* have the power to do it. And Isaiah is saying, this baby to be born is that leader. And the burden of darkness and weight of gloom will be lifted from our shoulders, when he takes the burden of leadership on his.

And while Isaiah looked forward to that king’s birth, at Christmas we get to look back, at a promise fulfilled. Because when he says, ‘And his name shall be called…’ he doesn’t say ‘Jesus’, but he still tells us his name. Because in his culture, a person’s Name was a way of talking about their character of who he is and what he’s like.

So, who is this new born King whose coming was promised? Well firstly, Isaiah says, ‘His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor.’ Now, a friend of mine recently tried to get an appointment with a psychologist. But there were no appointments to be had, the waiting list was too long. And the growth in people seeking counselling or therapy tells you, all is not well with our culture. But of course, just as in Isaiah’s day, if we turn away from the smile of God’s face and instead pursue all these other things, power, success, wealth, thinking they’ll make us happy, it’s no wonder life gets dark. But Isaiah says, this King is the Wonderful Counsellor, the One who’s able to diagnose your heart’s problems and heal them.

Secondly, ‘His name shall be called… Mighty God’. The One you know is there, the One with the power to do the impossible, and defeat the darkness. But of course, that’s the greatest paradox of Christmas, isn’t it? That the baby being held by Mary, is the God who holds everything, including your life, together. But it’s not just the greatest paradox of Christmas, it’s the greatest challenge. Because when you see a baby, what do you instinctively do? Go all gooey? But if this baby born in Bethlehem is the Mighty God, it’s not our goos he’s after, but our worship.

Thirdly, ‘His name shall be called… Everlasting Father.’ Now, I don’t know what your relationship with your father was, or is, like. Maybe you wish it had been better, or maybe you’re incredibly grateful for his love and presence in your life. Whichever it is, all of us know - or wish we knew - the power of a father. But what if the greatest of all fathers, a Father whose love for you is everlasting, and never runs out, drew near to you? What power for good might that release in your life?

Well, Isaiah says, it’s that Father’s love that this Son to be born is going to bring.

But fourthly, ‘His name shall be called… Prince of Peace.’ So it’s not just light and joy Christ brings, it’s peace. Peace with yourself and peace with others - because when you know the Father’s love for you, a love that’s not based on your performance, you can stop the endless striving to prove yourself, to yourself and others.

But above all, peace with God. You see, while all of us will one day die, elsewhere Isaiah tells us this baby was born to die. And at the cross, Jesus took upon himself all the darkness, so that we might know light; he took all the discord, so that we might know peace. And as he did, God the Father turned his face away from him, that he might turn his smile upon us for everlasting.

That’s what God’s promising to do, Isaiah says. And Christmas tells us, he’s done it. The child has been born, the son has been given - the King has come, and the light and joy and healing of hearts, and the love and the peace of the Father are ours to receive.