

Sunday 29 November (Advent 1), a Reflection

At last we have something to look forward to. Never mind for a moment what we may manage at Christmas, the good news about effective vaccines suggests that Easter next year might just turn out to be truly special. In the meantime, of course, winter has only just begun and a lot of folk are worried what it might bring.

The promise of a bright future, but the need to deal first with bleaker matters at hand, was also the situation faced by those to whom Isaiah was writing. The context, of course, was very different, but the emotions are the same.

While they waited, like many people of faith today, the people of Israel were puzzled by God's behaviour – or more precisely by God's apparent absence and inactivity. They treasured their traditions of times past when things were different and God did 'awesome deeds' and had shaken the earth to its foundations, but that was then and now God seemed to have 'hidden his face' from them. They were desperate for help, but found only silence.

But this passage, late in Isaiah's prophesy is not wholly given up to despair. Hope remains. It's most clearly seen in the faith expressed in verse 8:

'Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand.'

This little verse, I think, helps us to understand how God really does work in our lives and in our world. It also tells us some important truths both about what it means to be created, to be a 'creature' and also to live with vivid a sense of place. The hope that is implicit in all this is profound.

The first truth that it draws our attention to is in the nature of the relationship we have with God. It's one of those rare moments in the Old Testament when God is described as our 'father', and the image of being lovingly formed by God, as if out of clay, into something both useful and beautiful tells us that God's nature and character is to revealed in and through this act of creation.

We reflect God and reveal God to one another. It means that if we want to find evidence of God's presence and activity, we need look no further than to one another. Forget the quaking mountains, rather look to your neighbour with delight, awe and gratitude; and if we live with that attitude to one another we will find that God walks to meets us. And sometimes, God even runs towards us, to embrace us.

But as creatures, formed out of the clay of the earth our roots and well-being lie utterly connected to this earth and its well-being. Remember the old words said at a

burial: 'dust you are and to dust you shall return,' words that God first says to Adam in the Genesis story?

Isaiah goes on to prophesy a new heaven and new earth, but this vision, this bright future that awaits us, is one of a creation healed in which everything that spoils life is removed. It's an image of people living in community and enjoying one another, not of competing with one another or of trying to gain an advantage over someone or something else. And it, the new creation, always remains our familiar place.

It is no accident that in both the Old and New Testaments the image of this 'new' creation is not located in some place we can't yet imagine, but in the familiar streets and byways of the place we know best. It is, the Bible insists, a new 'Jerusalem' and as Isaiah will say, Jerusalem created 'as a joy.' So then, not only do we find God in one another, but we find God here in the connections that we all share with this place.

Clearly this has massive implications for how we address the huge issues that we face as we try to work out how best to care for our planet. The message of Isaiah's prophesy and of the Bible as a whole is clearly that you can't separate a desire to seek human flourishing from one that also seeks the well-being of the very earth that sustains our life. We are formed out of the very clay of this world, we are utterly part of it and it is when we accept this and one another with humility and gratitude that God comes to us and in Jesus Christ continually offers us new hope. God appears absent and silent only if we look for awesome deeds, heavens torn open and those quaking mountains. If that's how we think God will be seen and heard, we need to think again.

In the hard winter that lies ahead of us now we will continue to face many challenges and we'll need to sustain our communities in whatever way we can. And when spring comes and life, God-willing, begins to offer possibilities that we have been denied for so long, we must take care not to forget these more profound truths about God and how God comes to us in one another and in our care for the place from whose clay we are formed.

Our greatest delight will lie not in being able to spend all the money we've saved, if we've been in that happy position, or in any newly restored freedom to travel and explore this wonderful world, but right here in one another and in solidarity with those who've lost businesses and loved ones. And if we remember that we may well find that we hear God's still, small voice more clearly too. We really can have much to look forward to.