

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Advent is a season full of traditions. Some of them have a long history. Some of them have a more recent history. As ever when it comes to Christmas, the Victorians have a lot for which to answer!

In Advent, new and old traditions combine to help us make the most of this season of preparation.

The lack of flowers in church helps us to celebrate Christmas all the more when the church is fully decorated for Christmas.

The themes of our readings focus our attention both on what it means for God to be born as a human being in Jesus Christ, and on what we are being prepared for in this life - the end of all days, when Christ will come again.

A number of Advent traditions come in fours to represent the four Sundays of advent. The four candles of our advent wreath, symbolising the light of Christ which comes in to the world through him.

The four groups of people each candle traditionally represents: the patriarchs and matriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The four last things which are often the subject of sermons across the four Sundays of the Advent season: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. You can probably see why I chose not to observe this particular tradition last Sunday on my first Sunday with you...

This morning these traditions invite us to think about what it means to be a 'prophets' and what 'judgement' for us in our Christian lives. Prophecy and judgement are both concepts which probably make us feel a little uneasy.

Outside of perhaps Strictly or a competition we've chosen to enter, no one likes to be judged. If we feel judged we resent the person doing the judging - what right do they have to think or say that about me? What qualifies them to be judge? Or we can become our own judge and jury, we can feel bad when we fall short of the standard we've been set for us by others or even ourselves.

Prophets likewise can make us feel uneasy. We think of prophets as those people who predict the future. The idea of such prophets is uncomfortable. How did they come to this predication?

If we like what such a prophet says we can rush too quickly to believe it. If we don't like what they say we can feel equally uncomfortable because we worry it might be true and that it might really happen.

Our readings this morning remind us our immediate reactions to judgement and prophecy miss the mark.

Judgement is less to do with right or wrong or who's in and who's out, but of God's ability to see us as we really are.

'Judgement' in the New Testament is related to the word 'critical', the ability to discern. God's judgement is God's ability to see us as we really are, to know us even more intimately than even we know ourselves.

Rather than be something to fear, God's judgement is something to be swept up in. Can our judgement reflect God's judgment? Can we learn to see the world as it really is and ourselves as we really are? Can 'our love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best' as St Paul put it in our second reading?

Likewise, prophecy isn't so much about predicting the future as it is about truth-telling, speaking truth to power. This is why Jesus says:

‘Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house’. No one likes being told home truths by people they know well!

Prophets are those who hold the powerful to account, who point to Christ even though it means they are rejected by those around to, to summon the people of God back to the founding call of God in their lives. Prophets refine and purify as we heard in our first reading from Malachi. Prophets point out where we are falling short of God’s call in our lives and challenge us to be shaped ever more fully into Christ in everything we think, and say, and do.

No wonder prophets are rejected! This prophetic summoning, this calling back to Christ can turn the world upside down. Some will be raised high, some will be brought down - the words we hear in our Magnificat during evening prayer each day.

'Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

Judgement: can we see the world, ourselves, those we are called to love as God sees them? Can we be discern of God's call in our lives and in our community?

Prophecy: where are we being called back to God in our lives? How are we pointing others to Christ in what we say and think and do?

The traditions of Advent and our readings this morning challenge us. What is God asking of us as a church family here at St Peter's through these days of Advent as we prepare to meet Christ when he comes again, and as we greet him now in bread and in wine?