

...follow don't wallow...

A four week Advent course by Hayley Matthews based on the Advent daily readings in The Bishop of Leeds', Nick Baines, book *Freedom is Coming*.

Week Two

'wallowing in their own self-pity, they are unable to hear Yahweh when S/He is more than paying attention to them. So the charge is pressed: your ears are closed to the whispered language of newness and freedom; your eyes look but do not see what is before them – the God who is present, but not in the way you thought S/He should be' (p38, *Freedom is Coming*, Baines).

How often have we had to readjust our opinion of someone we've newly met? Perhaps we listened too intently to idle talk, perhaps we made a snap judgment too soon, on some throwaway remark they made? No matter how long we have been Christians, we can be just as guilty as having an image of God that really isn't Who God really is. Perhaps we've got a 'Father Christmas' God waiting to hear our list in intercessions and answer our prayers (in the affirmative); perhaps we've got an angry Father God, waiting to punish the moment we falter or fail? Perhaps our God really, really loves us... but has become so romanticised we never hear a hard word? Might we admit that although we 'know' all the right things, in reality God seems to be so distant and so disengaged that we dare not acknowledge it?

Isaiah is talking to a people who cannot see what God is doing right before their eyes because they are so wrapped up in their own emotions, they simply want God to be responding to them through the limits of the divine relationship they have conceived as individuals. From this perspective, God is responding to their personal plight and they cannot conceive of themselves as part of a whole – a whole people of God, children of God, all working together as one for the greater or common good of all humanity. Rather than look at the plight of all humankind, they are focussed in on a single issue, in this case, *going back* to normal, but there is no going back. The freedom that God is offering comes at a price, and that price is newness.

Now there are two types of newness; the first is the one we all love. The present is unwrapped, we have a fair idea of what is within as it begins to be revealed, making us only

more delighted as we eagerly release it from its wrappings, delighting in the gift we now hold for ourselves. It's perfect, just what we wanted, proving the love the Giver has for us. The second, isn't even wrapped. It is thrust upon us and we turn it over in our hands, bemused and disappointed, wondering why we have been given it and wishing with all our hearts to give it back to the Giver. We may even store it at the back of the cupboard, wanting to pretend it isn't there, closing the door on its beckoning façade, wondering why the Giver doesn't seem to know us at all.

But it is not the Giver who has got it wrong; the Giver knows us better than we do ourselves; knows the gift that will inspire us out into our collaborative vocation to enlighten the places and people to whom we have been sent. The Giver of gifts – and vision – offers a promise of freedom from all that chains us to the past; offers newness of life to all for whom death has become the only certitude; we need only sit before God and listen, hands and hearts open to the gift that is going to be given.

Reflection and discussion

1. What has been our most enduring image of God?
2. What are our expectations of God in responding to the pandemic?
3. What would be your ideal 'gift from God' right now?
4. In what ways might God be gifting us to our communities at this time?
5. What do you think God might be calling you to in the future?

Prayer

Loving God,
Forgive us when it is hard to hear You
above the clamour of our own hearts and minds.
Teach us to wait patiently until You speak,
Willing to hear Your words, receive Your call
And follow Your vision for all creation
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.