

Running: Advent 4

Date: 22 December 2024

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Advent Prayers

Texts: Isaiah 30.1-26; John 1.19-28; Hebrews 12.1-4

Christmas is almost here. You can feel the excitement and anticipation building, especially if you have kids. The season of Advent in the Church's calendar is the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas, but it is more about helping us remember Christ's second coming again in glory, rather than his first coming. In the Anglican tradition there is a different prayer for each Sunday in advent, and these prayers help us prepare for Jesus coming again. This morning I wanted to spend a few moments reflecting on the prayer for this 4th Sunday in advent.

Collect

O Lord, raise up your power and come among us,
and with great might succour us,
that, whereas through our sins and wickedness
we are sore let and hindered
in running the race that is set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us;
through your Son our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit
be honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

There's lots of different pictures for the Christian life in Scripture. Sheep, a city on a hill, a new creation, a temple, servant, soldier. The prayer for this 4th Sunday in advent picks up the picture of a marathon runner.

I remember watching the news in 2015 about the Point to Pinnacle winner Kate Pedley. She smashed the race record, but what was more impressive was that she stopped to help Lewis Granham, a senior walker who had fallen heavily and had blood gushing from a wound in his head. Not only did Pedley break the record, but Granham too was able to cross the finish line.¹

Hebrews 12.1 says

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

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<http://www.themercury.com.au/sport/local-sport/point-to-pinnacle-2015-launceston-dylan-evans-takes-out-race/news-story/7199118e21c3cf0277cd3e939512d798>

The Christian life is pictured here as a marathon, and sometimes it certainly feels like that. It's only in glory that we receive the prize, and until we die or Jesus returns, we have to keep running to win that prize. It's not a sprint, it's a marathon, and it's jolly tiring. It's not about winning - Christ has already won the victory, it's about finishing.

How can we do it? How can we keep going to the end? I'm sure many of you could give me some advice on this because you've been running longer. But this morning let's look at the wisdom of God's word to Isaiah as we run the race between Christ's first coming in humility and his second coming in glory.

So what makes it difficult to run the race? The prayer for this Sunday names it: *through our sins and wickedness we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us* "Sore let and hindered" - "let" is a synonym for hindered, it is from the old English for tardy or slow. "Sore" has the old meaning here of severely, or extremely. So the phrase "sore let and hindered", evokes the image of something slowing us down, pulling us back. It's like a fantasy novel where creepers from trees are snaking around our legs trying to hold us back and pull us down. The picture is taken directly from Hebrews, which puts it like this: *let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.*

What makes running the race so difficult? What creeps around our legs to slows us down and pull us back? Sin. Our sins. It's at once simple and fiendishly complex. Isaiah's sermon to Israel, like so many places in the OT, gives a snapshot of the anatomy of sin, and it's much deeper than being naughty or nice or indulging in some forbidden chocolate.

HAve a look with me, Isaiah 30, p 687.

It's some 700 odd years before the birth of Christ, and the kingdoms of Judah was up against it. Her sister Israel to the north had been swallowed up by the might of Assyria, and now she with a coalition of neighbouring states was angling for an alliance with Egypt to throw off the yoke of Assyria.

It's into this context that Isaiah preached.

"Woe to the obstinate children,"

declares the LORD,

"to those who carry out plans that are not mine,
forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit,
heaping sin upon sin;

2 who go down to Egypt
without consulting me;

who look for help to Pharaoh's protection,
to Egypt's shade for refuge.

3 But Pharaoh's protection will be to your shame,
Egypt's shade will bring you disgrace.

The problem for Judah was no so much political - although Egypt's help would be "utterly useless" (7), as it was spiritual - verse 9

For these are rebellious people, deceitful children,
 children unwilling to listen to the LORD's instruction.
 They say to the seers, "See no more visions!"
 and to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right!
 Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions.
 ¶ Leave this way, get off this path,
 and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!"

They were unwilling to hear the Word of God. They did not want to be confronted with the Holy One of Israel. Instead, they wanted to hear easy words, pleasant things, not the truth, but comforting lies.

Isn't this a temptation for us too? We want to hear that God loves us just as we are, but heaven forbid that he might love us too much to leave us as we are. We might get caught up in all the sentimentality of Christmas - gentle Jesus, meek and mild, and forget that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. We like Jesus words, "judge not, lest ye be judged", but conveniently have selective hearing when it comes to his claims on how we use our money, how we treat our neighbours and enemies, what we do in our bedrooms. What would our lives look like if we really were confronted with the Holy One of Israel?

So far Isaiah has given us two aspects of sin: deafness - refusing to listen to God; and blindness an unwillingness to be confronted by God, and now he adds two more - relying oppression and deceit, verse 12:

Therefore this is what the Holy One of Israel says:

Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended upon deceit, this sin will become for you like a high wall cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant.

On first blush oppression appears to far fetched as a problem for us in quiet, decent Battery Point. But just think about it for a moment. We press up against others all the time - none of us live alone on a desert island. As often as not when we encounter others they do and say things we wish they wouldn't. The temptation is that we would bend them to our will, to make them do what we want. Whether it's through naked force or more subtle manipulation, we're all prone to what Nietzsche called 'the will to power'.

Tolkien saw this in his LOTR Trilogy, where each of the characters of the story is tempted to take the Ring of power and use it for good purposes - to defeat the Dark Lord. But only the wise and good realise that in taking it they would become the Dark Lord themselves - such is the weakness of the human heart.

Deafness, Blindness, the will to power, and finally deceit.

Instead of relying on God, we push ourselves ahead and others down, and we rely on deceit. We need to dissemble to protect ourselves from being exposed, from people finding out what's really going on behind closed doors, and inside our heads. We need to deceive to get ahead. Lies have been Satan's stock in trade since the Garden, and we're suckers for believing his propaganda and using his tactics ourselves.

But, Isaiah says, sooner or later the cracks will start to show, verses 13-14. Put your ultimate trust and hope in something other than God and it will let you down, collapse and be useless.

If that is our problem, how then can we run the race? Isaiah urges, lift your eyes from your navel to the Lord. Verse 18.

the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice.

Blessed are all who wait for him!

O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when he hears your cry for help! As soon as he hears he will answer you.

In step with Isaiah, the writer of Hebrews invites us to cast our gaze upon the one in whom God's grace and compassion is most clearly seen.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

It's hard to walk in a straight line if you're looking at your feet. If you keep your eyes on where you're going, you'll walk straight. It's the same in running the race of the Christian life - look down and you'll stray. Look to the one who is the beginning and the end, who for the joy set before him - the joy of having you as his sisters and brothers for eternity, endured the cross for you. He scorned its shame, that you might be honoured. Look to him and you will not lose heart.

And as you do, you'll find his mighty power at work in you, to help you and keep you. "in repentance and rest is your salvation", says Isaiah "in quietness and trust is your strength". This is why the prayer begins with a cry for help. That's what the word succour means. We pray that God would by his great might help us and break the chains of sin which reach out to ensnare us, because we cannot do that in our own strength. He alone is our salvation.

This Christmas, let the words we read and the carols we sing be a means of grace for you to lift your eyes to Immanuel God with us and God for us.

O Lord, raise up your power and come among us,
and with great might succour us,
that, whereas through our sins and wickedness

we are sore let and hindered
in running the race that is set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy
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to whom with you and the Holy Spirit
be honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.