Advent Sermon for Childhood Behind Bars

Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-end and Matthew 24:36-44

In our reading from the prophet Isaiah, the writer paints a vision of hope: nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord, swords beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. It's a picture of justice and peace so compelling that it has the power to light up our imaginations to envision what could be possible, even in times of darkness. Isaiah spoke to a people who knew conflict and fear, yet he dares to proclaim that God's future is different from the present. "…come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Paul echoes Isaiah's hope in Romans, "you know what time it is… the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light". The coming of God's kingdom is not a distant dream but a present call to action. It demands that we wake up and cast off the works of darkness; violence, injustice, indifference, and clothe ourselves with Christ.

Our gospel reading from Matthew reminds us that the timing of this kingdom is hidden, "But about that day and hour no one knows." The Son of Man will come like a thief in the night. The point is not to speculate but to stay alert and to live every moment as if God's reign of justice and peace might break in today.

What does that mean for us, here and now? It means refusing to accept systems that crush the vulnerable. It means seeing the image of God in every child, even those behind bars. In the lands Isaiah knew, and in the land where Jesus walked, children are imprisoned, sometimes without charge, sometimes without trial. Their childhood is stolen by fear and confinement. If the kingdom of God is justice and peace, then these realities cry out for our attention. They demand that we wake up!

Through Embrace the Middle East's Childhood Behind Bars campaign, we hear stories that pierce the heart. A boy of 14 taken from his home in the middle of the night, blindfolded, hands tied, held without access to family or a lawyer. A girl who has never known a day without fear because her brothers were arrested for throwing stones. These are not isolated cases; they are part of a pattern that robs children of safety, dignity, and hope.

To stay alert is not simply to watch the sky for signs. It is to watch the world for places where God's justice is absent and to respond with action. It is to beat swords into ploughshares in practical ways. It means speaking out and advocating for those whose voices have been silenced. It means advocating for the children who are detained without trial in prisons inaccessible to their families. It means praying into situations we might rather ignore and wrestling with God for justice. It means telling the truth and refusing to let uncomfortable reality remain hidden. It means giving our hearts, time and money to a cause that reflects the priorities of God's Kingdom. It means living as if the light has already dawned, even when it still feels like the dead of night.

This is what Paul calls "putting on the armour of light." It's a striking image. Light as protection, light as strength. In a world where children are blindfolded and darkness often feels overwhelming, we are called to be people of light. People whose lives point to God's coming reign.

Isaiah's vision of swords beaten into ploughshares feels far away when we see hand ties on a child's wrists. Yet this is precisely why we need that vision. Without it, we settle for what is. We shrug and say, 'That's just how the world works.' But we must not forget that Isaiah's vision challenges us with the invitation to "walk in the light of the Lord". That is our calling. To walk in the light is to refuse despair, to resist apathy, and to believe that God's future is breaking in. The kingdom is coming and every one of us is invited to play our part by working and praying for the day when God "will arbitrate for many peoples", nations will no longer learn war, children will sleep without fear, and "nation shall not lift up sword against nation".

Amen.

Practical Action Points to displayed on screen at the end of the sermon

Pray intentionally

Pray for children in detention and their families. Pray for those working for justice and for those in positions of power to act with compassion.

Learn and share

Visit Embrace the Middle East's Childhood Behind Bars campaign page https://embraceme.org/take-action Read the stories. Share them with friends, on social media, and in your networks.

Advocate

Write to your MP urging them to speak out against the detention of children without due process. Use Embrace's resources to guide your message https://embraceme.org/childhood-behind-bars

Give generously

Support Embrace's work with childhood detainees and other marginalised people in the Middle East https://embraceme.org/give-general

Walk in the light daily

Make choices that reflect the kingdom in your conversations, your spending, your priorities. Let your life be a sign of hope.

