

Watchful and prepared

A sermon preached by Lay Minister Tony Lemon at St Peter's Wolvercote on Advent Sunday 1 Dec 2019

Refs: Isaiah 2, 1-5; Romans 13. 11-14

"Therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" Matthew 24, v. 44

As the Christian church grew, it developed what we now know as the church calendar – an annual cycle of Christian memory which allows us to remember Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection, to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit and to recall the ministry of holy people who have spread the Christian faith over the centuries. Through this structuring of our Christian memory, the past can come into the present. Today brings us back to the beginning of the Christian year, to the beginning of Advent: a time of waiting and preparation, a season of expectation as we prepare anew for the wonder of the Saviour's birth; a powerful reminder of the real meaning of the coming Christmas season. The wonderful Advent hymns help us to experience again the thrill of this season of eager expectation.

In England this is the darkest time of year when symbols of darkness and light are powerfully at work, as in the lighting of our Advent candles each week. During this season we focus on the patriarchs and prophets who predict the salvation of humanity, then on John the Baptist and finally on Mary as she prepares to give birth to the Saviour. The theme of expectation runs through all our readings albeit in different ways capable of alternative interpretations. Each has a well-known verse. In our Isaiah reading I'm sure most of us would go for verse 4: *"He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."*

Sadly the opposite is too often closer to the truth. Photographs of the main quadrangle at my college, Mansfield, show four very attractive Victorian lamp standards. Where are they now? The iron was taken for use in the war effort, as it was from so many places all over Britain. Such actions have their biblical equivalent. In Joel chapter 3, as God promises to restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem in the face of the depredations inflicted by Tyre and Sidon, he stirs to action by saying: *"Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the mighty men, Let all the mighty men draw near, let them come up. Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, 'I am a warrior.'"*

It is, alas, Joel's version of these words which human history records. Even when the time seems ripe for turning swords into ploughshares, when there seem to be favourable opportunities for a 'peace dividend', new threats seem to arise, as in both East and West since the end of the Cold War. If humanity has made progress it's not in ending war but in recognising the frailty of human nature and establishing international institutions intended to limit the damage which human actions bring through warfare and oppression: the League of Nations, United Nations and also the European Union, which used economic integration as a means to bring old European enemies together in the hope that co-operation would become so accepted that war between them would become inconceivable.

Our reading from Romans also focuses on expectation, but in a more personal sense. The famous passage *"Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

It was through these verses that St Augustine was converted. He records in his *Confessions* how he was walking in the garden, his heart in distress, because of failure to live a good life. He kept exclaiming miserably, *"How long? How long? Tomorrow and tomorrow - why not now? Why not this hour an end to my depravity?"* Suddenly he heard a voice saying, *'Take and read'*. He hurried back to the seat where he had left a volume of

Paul's writings. As he read the first passage his eyes fell on the last verses of our reading from Romans. He declared, *"I neither wished nor needed to read further."* It made him realise the importance of being prepared today for whatever unexpected events life might bring, not leaving change for a tomorrow that might never come.

In our Gospel reading the sentence that stands out is in the final verse: *"Therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour"*.

This sounds like a notice to be ready for the second coming of Christ. We are promised in many New Testament passages that one day Jesus will return and take centre stage. The early church expected this coming at any moment, and therefore felt a sense of urgency and an awareness of the need to be ready. The illustration Matthew uses is of people carrying on their normal lives – eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage – unaware of the flood that was to engulf all except Noah and those whom he had taken into the ark. It's a picture of preoccupation and self-absorption instead of preparation – a warning to never to be so immersed in time – in our day-to-day concerns – that we forget eternity. So we should be watchful – not in fear, but rather with eager expectation for the coming of something glorious and joyful. That is what we do in this Advent season, but what we eagerly anticipate, as our expectation of a literal second coming has dimmed over the centuries, is the renewed joy of celebrating the birth of Christ.

Many of us may interpret this Gospel reading as a warning to be ready for the time that comes to each of us when we leave this earthly life. Perhaps we think of the parable of the man who built more barns to store the abundance of his crops, little realising that his very life was about to end. None of us knows when our time will come. Whatever we think may happen in the aftermath of death, it's clearly important that we should be as ready as we can for that great step into the unknown with its parting from all those we have known and all that we have held dear. If there are things we intend to do, preparations which we have thought of making, changes in our life that we have intended to make, then St. Augustine's words are an ever-present reminder: *'Tomorrow and tomorrow – why not now?'*

Both these ways of responding to our Gospel passage – being ready for Son of Man's return and preparing for our own death – are valuable lessons. They illustrate how we may find God's word in the scriptures in ways that the original writers hadn't imagined. But it's always important to look carefully at what was intended. In today's Gospel, this is almost certainly related to the great crisis that was going to sweep over Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside at a date which was unknown to Jesus' listeners or Matthew's readers, but which we know happened in AD70, at the climax of the war between Rome and Judaea. This brought events which would devastate lives, families and communities, but was also seen as 'the coming of the Son of Man' or the *parousia*, ending with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem.

The words of this warning, directed primarily to the situation two thousand years ago, ring through subsequent centuries and into our own day. We continue to live in turbulent and dangerous times. The most serious conflicts may be relatively far from home, but they impact on us in terms of the migration of refugees and asylum seekers and the sheer human misery which demands a co-ordinated response from European nations. Yet in Europe itself we are experiencing a renewed growth of populist nationalism reminiscent of the 1930s which threatens the structures of unity that have been so carefully nurtured since 1945. The dangers posed by climate change are becoming very real, demanding globally co-ordinated action if we are to be prepared. Internationally, we don't know what will happen next week or next year. In our own lives and churches, we all have to answer the central questions posed by the Advent Gospel: are we awake and watchful? are we ready and prepared?