

Alleluia, he is coming; Alleluia, he is here

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Tim Bravington* on Advent Sunday, 1st December, at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 10.00am.

Isaiah, ch. 2, vv. 1-5; Romans, Ch. 13, vv. 11-end; Matthew, ch. 24, vv. 36-44;

‘Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.’

Imagine you are so desperately unhappy about living in Somalia that you decide to sell all that you have and begin the journey to Europe. It is a long way. You cross the Sahara and board a boat which you hope will bring you to Lampadusa. You feel safe. Then the wind rises. The boat begins to sink. Your hopes fade. A better boat comes and you are taken safely to the shore.

I suppose that is a bit like the way the disciples felt when the storm rose and Jesus calmed the storm. They were safe.

How do you feel in the nave of this church? Or even on the new shiny, slidy, stacking seats in the aisle? (*This was the first time the new pews in the north isle were used.*) Safe? This is our ship of salvation. It's nice to be safe. That is part of the message today as we enter a New Year, preparing for the Lord to come. However there is a snag. Our Lord and saviour, Jesus Christ, died on the cross for our salvation. He suffered. We can hardly expect to sail through our Christian life without ever suffering ourselves. However, when a Christian is called upon to suffer for Jesus Christ's sake, one may be quaking at the knees but at the same time one is safe.

Talking about reading the Bible recently, someone told me how difficult they found all the battles in the Old Testament. My immediate reaction was to say, ‘nothing changes’, thinking of Afghanistan for example. Then I thought again. In the Old Testament battles, the Israelites, if they were being obedient to God, would win and, after the battle, they would be safe. However, if they were disobedient, they would be taken into an unsafe place. This may be a bit of a generalisation but I think there is something in it.

First Isaiah, in his prophecy, looks forward to a time when all will be obedient, wars will cease and ‘they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall there be war any more’. All will be safe.

For us Christians, it is Jesus, the Son of God, who saves us. He did this for the people he healed. He did this for the disciples in the boat in the storm. He did this for those he raised from the dead. He does this for us ‘for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed’.

It is always God who saves, not the church, not the Bible, not the clergy, not even the vicar. It is always God who saves.

St Paul and first century Christians seem to have expected Jesus to return in glory any minute now. 2,000 years later that hasn't happened so we are still waiting. We don't know when.

At the end of the fourth century, Jesus came to St Augustine of Hippo when he was walking in a garden. His heart was full of distress, because of his failure to live the good life. He kept exclaiming miserably, 'How long? How long? Tomorrow and tomorrow. Why not now? Why not an end to my depravity at this hour?' Suddenly he heard a voice saying, 'Take and read; take and read.' It sounded like a child's voice; and he racked his brain to try to remember any child's game in which these words occurred, but couldn't think of one. He hurried back to the seat where his friend Alypus was sitting. He had left there a volume of Paul's writings. "I snatched it up and read silently the first passage my eyes fell upon: (you will recognise it from the second lesson we read this morning) 'Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelry 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.' I neither wished nor needed to read further. With the end of that sentence, as though the light of assurance had poured into my heart, all the shades of doubt were scattered. I put my finger in the page and closed the book: I turned to Alypus with a calm countenance and told him."

Jesus comes to us now, as we are hearing the word of God read and expounded. We are safe here.

Jesus will come to us just now, as John Betjeman puts it in his poem 'Christmas'. 'Is it true?', he asks, and goes on to say that not all our preparations for Christmas

'can with this single truth compare
that God was Man in Palestine
and lives to-day in bread and wine'.

We are safe in Holy Communion.

Jesus will come a bit later, over coffee, when we meet with fellow human beings, listening, sharing their concerns and showing through some little thing, a biscuit perhaps, our love for them. We are safe with one another.

Later still, Jesus will come when we meet or hear of someone in need and do something about it. We and they will be safe.

When we die, there will be that meeting, both wonderful and scary, as we meet our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ face to face. We will be safe then.

At the end of the age, at the last judgement, when, before we can reel off all the wonderful things we have done, Jesus, our advocate and mediator, will simply say, 'I love him. I died for her'. No one knows when this will happen, only the Father, so keep awake. Be ready. This is a rather anthropomorphic time line.

In his sermon two weeks ago, Rob made a most interesting and helpful suggestion. He reminded us how friends of Jesus did not immediately recognise him when he appeared to them after his resurrection from the dead. Rob said, 'I think that the reason why they didn't recognise Jesus at first is that from the point of view of eternity, in eternal life, all the things about life *before* death are present at the same time, they are all jumbled together, on top of one another, interweaving one another. The risen Jesus is at the same time the baby in the manger and the boy of 12 in the temple, the 30-year-old who was baptised by John and the man on a cross.' He went on to say, 'from God's point of view that's how it is. Everything good about our whole lives is present now to God.' I think this will be true at the last judgement. 'Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.'

To the only one God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all time and now and for ever.

Amen.