

Advent Sunday

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 29th November 2009

Luke 21.25-36

Jesus said to his disciples: ²⁵'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.' ²⁹Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, ³⁵and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

So, Advent Sunday is here – the Church's new year. And there are just four weeks to go to Christmas. The countdown has begun – not just in the shops, but also in the church's calendar, as we light the first Advent candle and this evening have our wonderful candlelit Advent Carol service. Christmas IS coming. But this morning's readings warn us to be realistic and to prepare for Christmas with our eyes wide open.

Modern Christianity, especially in the affluent and comfortable West, all too easily and too often, teeters on the edge of fantasy in many ways – and this is made strikingly clear during Christmas. The tendency is to claim that Christmas means that our hope is *already* fulfilled, that we have already received the promised gift of God in its fullness, and so now we can *begin to rest*, to find peace and safety, in the familiar Christmas story. Christ has arrived, and there is nothing left to long for, nothing else to mourn, nothing else to desire, nothing to anticipate.

But that doesn't fit at all with today's Gospel reading, where Luke gives us a very different picture – a dose of reality perhaps. He looks to the second coming – what he calls "the cataclysmic return of the Son of Man." He describes what the signs for this will be, and reminds us that when these things begin to take place, the faithful will know that redemption is near.

For Luke the certainty is that 'salvation is granted, not through the death and resurrection of Christ but through his return, when he comes again' – through the Parousia – the second coming, the arrival of the Kingdom of God. So our Gospel reminds us that while Scripture is the primary 'sign' and guide for us, other things can speak to us as well: the glory of nature in all its beauty, but also in all its power in natural disasters and 'signs and portents'.

When reading this passage we must remember that, in Luke's time soon after the Resurrection, Christians believed very strongly that the end of the world, and the second coming of Christ, was

very imminent and certainly likely to happen well within their life time; and that when it did, it would herald the coming in of the Kingdom of God in all its fullness, and for all time.

21 centuries later it clearly didn't happen that way. But we do still have our 'signs and portents' and need to note them. Wars still happen, we still have natural disasters and ghastly diseases, just as they did then. And we too still need to be reminded that in spite of all this, the Kingdom of God is at hand, that all will be fulfilled, that the Christian hope of everlasting life remains, that heaven and earth may pass away, but the Word of God in Scripture, in signs and portents and supremely in the Living Word - that is Christ himself – well NEVER pass away. *That* is our hope; that is our faith; that is what we prepare for at this season of Advent.

So Advent is a time complex and perhaps confusing emotions : excitement certainly; hope for a new beginning; a time for purposeful preparation, for repentance and putting our house in order; a time to take stock, both personally and corporately; a time of hope and expectancy.

So this first Sunday in Advent forces us into a tension and the uncomfortable stance of celebration on one hand for something that happened long ago that we shall celebrate anew and with joy. But also, and on the other hand, a desperate anticipation that recognises that the earth is still suffering in the 21st century in the same ways as Luke describes. There are still wars, conflicts, starvation and disease of all sorts.

Advent is the joyous time when we celebrate the arrival, the coming, the advent, of Jesus the saviour of the world – the redeemer – the long-awaited messiah. AND YET it is also a time of a stark reminder – that *our* ability, our power, to destroy God's good gifts has only INCREASED over the last 2000 yrs.

But Advent gives us reassurance and faith that makes us dare to hope for the coming of the Kingdom. Hope is inevitable for those who have faith. Faith in God – the author and sustainer of all things, MUST surely ensure that there is a future when all will come right, when the Kingdom WILL come. And the fact of our inability to describe *how* this might be does not mean that there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. We can have faith; we can have hope; and we can spend our lives trying to make things better in this world to bring justice and peace and comfort to all mankind.

So in advent we are invited to do two things: to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ; and to join together with one another to work towards making this world a better place.

There is helpful story from the life of St Francis. Francis grew up as fastidious and wealthy young man to whom appearance and popularity were very important. Later, after his conversion, he still found it hard to let these things go. Just outside Assisi there was a leper colony and, as you can imagine, it disgusted Francis and he avoided it whenever he could. But one day he came across a leper on the road shaking his clapper and could not avoid him. An irresistible force made Francis leap down from his horse and not only embrace the leper, but actually kiss him on his disfigured face. That changed him for ever.

Francis had identified and acknowledged his fear and repulsion. He had faced it head on and had acted on it. And he had made friends with his fear and from then on, throughout his life, he not only tolerated lepers, but welcomed them loved them and cared tirelessly for them.

This story gives us a pattern we might like to follow as we prepare for Christmas – to prepare ourselves and also to enable us to give ourselves more fully in the service of others as we work together for the coming of the Kingdom and look forward to the coming of the Incarnate Christ. Firstly it can help us to identify and acknowledge where we fall short; to face our faults honestly – and head on as Francis did – and not to make excuses; to pray for the courage to act positively to overcome them, to embrace them; and then, with God’s help, to turn ourselves around. And hopefully this will lead us not only to learn to make friends with our fears and our failures, but also to turn our attitudes and approach inside out, so that we might be freed to love and serve others more honestly, more fully and less self-consciously.

And supremely perhaps this can help us to remember that, when Christ comes, to find him in the lepers of our day – to see the whole picture of what the Incarnation means: to find Christ not just as a pretty baby in a cosy stable, but to find him too in the cardboard boxes of the homeless, in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. He will be found in Helmand province, among the dirt and sounds of war. He will be found in the pain of the grieving who stand and watch the motorcades through Wootton Bassett. He will be found in the droughts and starvation in Africa. He will be found in the debris of wasted opportunities and shattered lives. God is to be found in all these and indeed in every circumstance of human life. And he is to be found in each one of us too. And we, if we are with the suffering and oppressed of our time, shall find Him.

So Advent calls us to take stock, to look at our lives and our motives, to make friends with our fears and our failings and above all to think not just of ourselves but of others - those we love and want to help, but also those who we find hard to love or want to help. And to do this our focus and attention must be away from ourselves and fully towards the one who is to come - to turn to Christ. Paying attention to God takes time – time, which in the midst of our 21st century Christmas hype, is hard to come by.

So may I suggest that as we go about the busy-ness of our preparations for Christmas this year, we might find it helpful to carry around us in our minds and repeat throughout the day God’s words: “Be still and know that I am God”. We can repeat it on the bus, washing up, shopping – whatever. But repeating it many times a day may just help us, this Advent, to keep our focus on the reality of Christmas, on the true meaning of the Incarnation, and on the faith which gives us the hope and expectation of the coming of God’s Kingdom here on earth; and also to help us prepare to meet our incarnate Lord anew on Christmas day

He comes to us at Christmas. He comes to us in this Eucharist. And he comes to us in our daily life. So let our prayer today be to hear his words again and again and again, as he says to each and every one of us: “Be still and know that I am God”. Amen.