

Advent Sunday

So we made it! Despite the shops being ready for Christmas since September, we have finally come to Advent Sunday, the Sunday which begins the final countdown to the big day. It's that time when shops get busier and busier, children (and adults) get more and more excited and stressed (You can tell I love it!)



But what is Advent really all about? Well, when I was at vicar school, they always told us that a good sermon should make 3 points. So, after 6 years, I'm finally going with their advice. Looking at today's readings, it seems to me that Advent can be summed up in 3 W's. Advent is about – Welcoming - Watching - and waiting.

So first, welcoming. Advent is a time in which we anticipate Jesus' coming at Christmas. In fact, Advent literally means 'coming' in Latin. That coming 2000 years ago, involves a whole lot of welcoming. Firstly, in Jesus birth, we literally welcome God into the world. God enters human history. God enters a human body. That's a massive welcoming and it gives us as human beings a whole new dignity and value.

Secondly, we welcome God's amazing rescue plan. Jesus becomes one of us, so that we can be saved and returned to God. Through Jesus we are welcomed back to where we truly belong. We become what God always intended children of God, enjoying an amazing relationship with him.

Finally, we welcome in God's new kingdom. In today's reading from Isaiah, our translation, opens with 'in days to come.' But this can also be translated 'in the last days.' The prophets usually use that phrase to speak about the time of the Messiah. This is the time when God's kingdom will be set up. So it's Jesus who ushers in this new kingdom and 'the Lord's house' which Isaiah mentions, is in fact his Church. Beginning at Jerusalem, Jesus' Church has become the highest mountain, seen throughout the world, attracting people of all nations to it. About 2.2 billion people today believe in Jesus, that's a third of the world's population.

Now clearly some of what Isaiah prophesied is not yet fulfilled. If only we would pound our swords and spears into rakes and shovels! But God's kingdom is here, the Spirit is moving and we are part of it!

So Advent is a time of welcoming. Welcoming God into humanity, welcoming God's salvation plan and welcoming God's new kingdom. But it's also a time of waiting. A piece of Trivia for you. Did you know that originally Advent was completely about waiting for Jesus' second coming? In fact only in the Middle Ages was Advent linked with Christmas at all.

Our Gospel reading this morning is all about Jesus' second coming. In fact the whole of Matthew chapter 24 speaks of Jesus' return. Jesus will come and so will begin an age of transformation of the whole world, an age in which Jesus' followers will be gathered, in which Jesus' kingdom will come in all its fullness, when God will wipe every tear from our eyes. What a picture. As Christians we await that time with joy and expectation.



So when will this be? Well, despite attempts by various religious groups to predict Jesus' return, Jesus clearly says in today's reading that not even he knows, but only the Father. And that brings me onto my third W – Watching. We don't know when Jesus will return, so, Jesus says, we must 'keep awake.' The king is coming, so we must be ready, we must be prepared.

But what does this look like? Well in the passage just before today's reading, Jesus offers his disciples four pieces of advice as they await his return :

Firstly, keep alert. As we wait we can't afford to be complacent or take our eye off the ball. We must constantly try to live as if Jesus is arriving this afternoon.

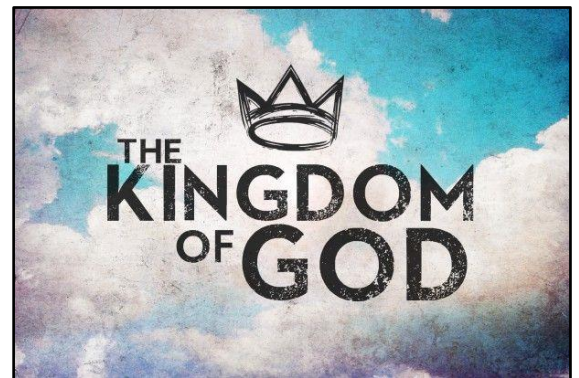
Secondly, don't be alarmed. When we see the world's brokenness, the war, the violence, the suffering it's easy to be alarmed, to lose hope. Yet Jesus offers us reassurance.

Thirdly, be prepared for persecution. Standing up for Christ today isn't easy, being countercultural is unpopular, but Jesus tells us to remain faithful as we wait.

Finally, beware that no-one leads you astray. Jesus warns his disciples that false prophets will lead some from the truth. How many false prophets do we hear? Prophets of doom, of hopelessness. These voices can lead us from the truth of God's love and care for us and for God's world. Jesus warns us not to be swayed by such 'false prophets'.

So as we wait we must keep watch, we must stay awake, remain faithful, and above all things we must trust God. But that's not the only watching I believe we're called to this Advent. I think we're called to keep watch in another sense. God's kingdom is here, is active now and yet it can be so hard to see that kingdom. God's kingdom can be so hidden by the darkness of this world, but if we look, signs of God's kingdom are all around us. As Christians we're called to watch. To watch for signs of God's kingdom breaking in today, to watch for what God is doing – in our own lives, in our communities, in our world, to watch for what God is saying, to watch for where the Spirit is moving.

But we're not just called to watch and notice – we're called to join in. Being prepared for Jesus' return isn't a passive sitting at the bus stop checking our watch. Immediately after today's passage from Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples three hard-hitting parables – the parable of the unfaithful slave who fails to look after the master's household while he is away, the parable of the talents which stresses our responsibility to use our gifts in God's service and the parable of the sheep and goats in which people are judged on their behaviour towards the poor and needy. Jesus is not subtle. He directs us to use our time of waiting in working for God's kingdom. As Rowan Williams put it 'to see what God is doing and join in.'



As the Church we are Christ's body, a community empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit, a community in whom Christ is present and working. We're called to be Jesus' hands, his feet in the world, to use our time, our talents, our treasures to further God's kingdom. We're called to pray hard, that our lives, our community, our world will more and more reflect God's Kingdom values, that those in positions of power will more and more reflect God's kingdom values. And of course we're called to share the Good news, calling attention to God's work in our world, telling others about what God is doing. Right now, people are searching, they're longing for hope, for change. What better time to be workers in God's harvest field.

So Advent – not just a countdown to Christmas, but a time of welcoming, of waiting and of watching, a time when we remember Christ's coming, when we look to his coming again and when we recognise his presence with us here today. As we prepare to celebrate Christ's coming this Christmas, let's keep watch that we might be ready when he comes again, let's persevere in faith, refusing to give in to today's prophecies of doom, let's watch for signs of God's kingdom in our Church, our community, our world today, let's see what God is doing and let's join in, that God's kingdom might come, his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

Revd Ros Wilshire