

# Collect, Readings and Reflection for 30 November 2025, the First Sunday of Advent

## **Collect** *(the Church's prayer for today):*

Almighty God,  
give us grace to cast away the works of  
darkness  
and to put on the armour of light,  
now in the time of this mortal life,  
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to  
us in great humility;  
that on the last day,  
when he shall come again in his glorious  
majesty  
to judge the living and the dead,  
we may rise to the life immortal;  
through him who is alive and reigns with  
you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen.

*Or*

Almighty God,  
as your kingdom dawns,  
turn us from the darkness of sin to the  
light of holiness,  
that we may be ready to meet you  
in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

*Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.*

## **Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus.**

*Romans 13:11-end; Matthew 24:36-44*

So today the calendar turns another year as we reach the beginning of Advent. There are a few clues. The colour purple. An Advent wreath with candles that we will light each Sunday. Hymns that we only sing at this time of the year. There is a solemnity to it, but also joyful expectation of what is to come. Advent is about coming.

For most, I guess, Advent is about the coming of Christmas. The Advent season provides a religious dimension to the often-frantic preparations to be ready for December 25. In our worship we will recall the words of prophets that anticipated a Messiah in the centuries before Christ. We will recall the visits of angels, the obedience of a young couple, and the miraculous conception of a baby. As Christians, we might take time to prepare afresh for the coming of that baby in Bethlehem. Time to marvel at the incarnation, to enter the mystery of it, and the astonishing truth that God chose to be with us in the person of Jesus. When the time comes, such preparation will allow us to sing the line 'be born in us today' with a longing that Christ will make his home in us.

And yet, if we read the words of our Advent hymns carefully, Advent is not really about recalling the birth of Jesus and getting ready for Christmas. Advent is about preparing for a future coming of Christ at the end of time, to judge the world and bring all things to their appointed end. And this is where things can get a bit challenging. From our gospel reading this morning, Jesus says:

“That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

In the busyness of the season, serious reflection on this Advent theme, of Christ coming again to judge the living and the dead, is often squeezed out – I suspect we might feel glad about that. But on this first day of Advent, let’s spend a little time.

The gospel passage comes from a section in Matthew’s account that is in the style of Jewish apocalyptic, and it is worth pausing to appreciate some features that this passage shares with other writing of this genre; features that would have been familiar to Jesus, Matthew and Matthew’s first readers. The apocalyptic writing of the Old Testament gives a sense of climactic events and impending judgement; it calls adherents to faithfulness and alertness at times of great uncertainty. Of course, uncertainty was something that the Jewish nation was used to in slavery, in exile, in occupation. I guess it’s something that most generations experience, including our own. The Advent course which started here at St James’ this week, is looking at the question, Who am I? against four themes: Climate change, migration, conflict and AI. A reminder, if we needed one, that we too live in uncertain times.

So, we share uncertainty with those first readers of Matthew’s gospel account. But, do we share their expectation that Jesus will come in our lifetime? Do we expect Jesus to arrive on clouds descending? Or is that thought a bit embarrassing? Embarrassing or not, reflecting on the second coming of Christ is certainly perplexing.

Earlier in this morning’s gospel reading Jesus also says, “about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” As we read the gospel accounts, it seems clear that Jesus himself expected the end to come within the lives of the first disciples. His self-understanding seems to have included a sense that his life, death and resurrection were part of a final struggle and that time was coming to an end. Trapped in the limitations of a human existence perhaps, and influenced by the religious temperament of the day, Jesus was wrong. At least about the timing of the end.

The earliest writing in the New Testament reveals that the first disciples of Jesus did not have a long-term strategy for mission. They proclaimed the good news of Jesus with urgency; they understood that the world was passing away and expected to see the Lord return as ruler and judge. Later writing, indicates an adjustment to this position, like this snippet from Paul’s letter to the Romans:

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

Paul goes on to set out how followers of Jesus should live in the present. He and others learned to reinterpret Jesus' and the gospel in the light of their lived experience, and this set off a pattern that has been followed by subsequent generations. The end of time has always been an important strand in Christian imagination. The Medieval Church in Europe, for example, had something of an obsession with the end times. Religious art and sculpture conveyed themes of judgement, of heaven and hell, of a great separation of sheep and goats, the good and the bad. But what about today?

I suspect if you took a poll, most people today expect that the world as we know it will end because of human activity. Mutually assured destruction through terrible weapons and conflict or through the environmental degradation of the planet or because machines take over. Take your pick. And yet we still have those who walk the streets proclaiming that God will act decisively to bring down the curtain on time. Sandwich boards emblazoned with words from scripture that warn the end is nigh. These are the same scriptures that we will read in our liturgy through Advent, and yet I find these streetwalkers who appear to take the scriptures more seriously than I do embarrassing.

I live with a dilemma. I am uncomfortable with the end of time language of the New Testament, and I don't know how to make sense of it. I'm not really sure what I mean when I say, 'Christ will come again'. I can't picture it. And yet I am also uncomfortable with any attempts to explain that end of time language away. To gloss over it. I would rather cling on to this important strand of Christian imagination even in my perplexity. I will continue say 'The Lord is coming', or 'Maranatha' in Jesus' own language.

Why? Because this belief is so central to scripture. Because this belief was central to Jesus' self-understanding. Because the judgement seat acts as a helpful corrective to the all-embracing love of the cross – God loves all people but does not countenance all action. For all these reasons, yes. But these are not the only reasons. I believe that we must continue to express our faith in the second coming of Christ because it is the only language we have to protect an important gospel truth and to give urgency to our gospel proclamation.

Like the creation narratives in Genesis, the end of time images in the New Testament use poetic language to describe an ingathering of the whole of creation. These images remind us that salvation is not personal but collective. Scripture is not much interested in individual perfection, but in the perfection of the whole. God's desire is to put all the jigsaw pieces together. In one of his famous prayers the French priest Michael Quoist says, 'I cannot save myself alone'. This petition a reminder that my salvation, my endless joy and place in eternity is not found in isolation from others. Salvation has a social dimension. This is an important gospel truth which our end of time language and imagery protects.

In the early Church the gospel was proclaimed with an understanding that time was short. The Church grew. Quickly. As generations pass the gospel is proclaimed as if we have endless time. We have lost our urgency. Like the first hearers of the gospel, we live in uncertain times. Our lives are dominated by a 24-hour news cycle that is unrelenting. We need hope. And, as Christians, that hope is described in this three-fold petition: 'Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Yes, Christ will come again.

Friends, this Advent, I invite you to enter the mystery of God's incarnation and prepare once again for the birth of Christ.

I also invite you to heed the apocalyptic language of the New Testament and to hear the call to faithfulness and alertness in these uncertain times.

In these uncertain times there are many walking in darkness, waiting for the light of Christ. And so, finally, I invite you to remember that salvation has a social dimension and to put some urgency in your evangelism. We are making this easy for you by providing invitation cards to Christmas at St James'. Go on, invite your friends and neighbours and be confident about it.

Advent may present a dilemma. Advent may be perplexing, but our hope is in these words.

Maranatha. The Lord is coming.

Amen.

