

## ILKLEY ADVENT SUNDAY 2025 Matthew 24:36-44

There's nothing like welcoming in a new Christian year with a gospel passage of such seeming doom and gloom as today's reading offers us! It's a severe reminder that Advent is a time of reflection, of spiritual awareness, and of discerning where our Christian faith is leading us. We anticipate the coming of our Lord at Christmas, but this reading reminds us that Advent should not be the lost season of the Christian Year, but the season to prompt us not to anticipate to the exclusion of everything else.

To understand why we have a reading like this at the beginning of Advent in our day, we have to go right back to the book Genesis and see what prompted this warning. In the sixth chapter of Genesis, we find our Lord reflecting on the created order and His quite deep disappointment at the way human beings have gone with their own will rather than with God's will. God decides, therefore, that the only way to rectify the situation is to wipe out what He has created and start again.

Not all of humanity has behaved this way, however. We read that Noah had found favour with God and God responds by telling Noah that he and his family and representatives of all living creatures will be preserved. Noah is to build an ark to save his family and all the creatures from the calamitous flood which will cover the earth. So we have the story of how God preserved a

blueprint for re-creation of His original plan. We don't have to accept the story literally if that's what we prefer, but whether it's true or simply a creation myth—and a myth illustrates an absolute truth as opposed to a fable, which has a moral—the story itself reflects that God is a God of love and desires the very best for His creation when that creation honours its creator.

Noah is blessed because of his devotion to God. He builds the ark and all are saved from the flood. As our gospel reading tells us, "... they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man." Jesus will come again and absolutely no one—not even the Son of Man—knows either the day or the hour. Only the Father knows such things. This should, of course, have put an end to theological weather-forecasting about the timing of the second Advent, but alas, pious curiosity is always given to speculation.

The commentator Benjamin Witherington helps us to understand the second coming of Christ with this description: "In the days before cell phones" (B.C. as he likes to call it), "my grandparents used to phone us and tell us they were coming for a visit. Since they sometimes stopped at various places along the way, we were not sure when they would arrive. This meant that always we had to be alert and ready. It was the certainty of their coming, not the timing, which motivated this behaviour of being

ready at any moment." So it is with the second coming of Christ.

This leads us into the second part of this passage from St Matthew's gospel, which the story of Noah has set up. We have the rather frightening one-or-other scenario of those in the field. It mentions women specifically, in grinding meal, but I have every confidence that the first two who were "in the field" were men harvesting for the women to prepare the meal for eating.

### **What are we told in one being taken and one being left?**

The one taken will *not* be the one devoted to God, but the one left will be spared because of following God's ways. As in the Genesis story of Noah, the sinful, neglectful members of society who paid no attention to God were the ones swept away in judgement, whereas Noah, his family, and all the creatures were left because Noah and his family had been devoted in their worship of God.

So it will be with current society, not with a flood, but with people going about the daily round. One will be careless about devotion to God and will be taken in judgement, whereas the godly-devoted other will be spared. It seems harsh, but the business of faith and devotion is deadly serious.

Being a Christian, therefore, is not a social, part-time exercise, when everything else has been done and the visitors have gone. It's a day-to-day constant baptismal

commitment. We are baptised into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which means that we die to sin—that which tears us apart from God—and live a godly life, 24/7. Jesus loves us beyond measure and gave himself for our sakes that we might live wonderfully fulfilled lives. St John quotes Jesus in his gospel telling us the gospel's theme: "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." We are offered abundant life in all its fullness but we're asked to give our devotion to our Lord in return and not to treat it casually.

We see the lack of true devotion where people have manipulated the grace of God to serve their own political agenda; where being nominally Christian serves a reputational purpose rather than true devotion to the ways of spirituality and obedience. It's called Christian Nationalism and there's much being said at the moment in this country about its infiltration into our society. This is the problem with societies which have moulded God to their own way of thinking and to boost their own selfish agenda. These are the ones who will be taken in judgement.

We can see where turning away from God has lead the world in societies in which Christians are persecuted for their faith. The blanket rejection of honest people simply doing their work and yet being dismissed as human beings is morally appalling. Those who dismiss humanity and who mould Christianity to their agenda are the ones who will be caught up in the flood of judgement, whilst

the righteous ones will be spared because of their honesty to each other and in devotion to our Lord.

**How, then, are we devoted in our faith?** Essentially by regular attendance at worship, by devotion to the symbolism of the Christian Year and what it teaches us, through regular personal prayer, by study of scripture and questioning for answers, and above all by being devoted regularly to the holy sacrament of Christ's body and blood. It's all done well at St Margaret's; we must all be careful not to let it slip.

There's a wonderful, split picture of the Cross on the left and a chalice and Host on the right. Under the Cross is written, "This is how Jesus loved you then." Under the chalice and Host is written, "This is how Jesus loves you now." We are never alone.

For all of us, Advent is a critical time of re-assessing our devotion to our Lord and, in spite of our good work to this point, to reflect on how it can be even better. One duty of Christian faith is to ensure that Advent doesn't become the lost season of the Christian Year because it's been overshadowed by the Christmas event. Christ-mass, the Feast of Christ—in its true observance—must be the culmination of Advent, not its overshadowing.

In the name of the + Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

