

## ADVENT SUNDAY – 2<sup>nd</sup> DECEMBER 2018

Jeremiah 33:14-16

I Thessalonians 3:9-end

Luke 21:25-36

Well, here we are at Advent Sunday – the start of the season of preparation before we celebrate the birth of the Christ-child at Christmas. And, of course, it's the first day of the new Church year.

Today is also the beginning of a new year for the lectionary – the system of Bible readings we use, which cycles round every three years. So this morning we start Year C and the Gospel readings from St. Luke.

A new year and a new beginning, then?

But to look at today's Gospel reading, it would be hard to tell.

The previous four Sundays have made up what is known as the 'Kingdom season', which is heavily focussed on the judgement of the world at the end of time – and you wouldn't be alone if you thought it seemed to be a season full of foreboding.

Those of you who heard Bishop Humphrey Southern preach a couple of weeks ago will remember he said that in virtually every age of the Christian era, people have believed that we really must be in the end times now. The wars and natural disasters Jesus foretells seem to be an accurate description of our own age – and yet, human beings have always been at war with each other, and there have always been natural disasters.

The signs of the approaching Judgement seem to have been perpetually upon us – so if it still hasn't arrived, how much worse is yet to come?

This morning's Gospel reading might mark the start of Advent and the new year in the lectionary but, to be honest, it feels as though we still have our feet stuck firmly in the Kingdom season. Actually it's even the same passage that was set for yesterday's communion service. It just doesn't feel as though we've turned the page. The mood of doom and gloom still seems to prevail. So how do we even begin to prepare ourselves for what is to come?

If only we knew the answer. All we know is that one day the Son of Man is coming back and we are – at all times – to be ready in case that moment is now. We are to be on our guard, so that day does not catch us unexpectedly, like a trap. Somehow Jesus doesn't make it sound like a welcome surprise. It sounds more like an imminent threat.

Humankind has been waiting a long time for the Second Coming – well, at least, from our limited perspective. And that presents us with a bit of a problem.

When St. Paul was writing his first letter to the people of Thessaloniki, less than twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, he was trying to get across to them the urgency of being prepared for Jesus' return at any moment. As with all Paul's early letters, it captures his urgent expectation that Jesus is coming and that could well be sometime next week, if not earlier. What would any of us do if we really believed that was a possibility? It would be an extreme way of resolving Brexit, that's for certain!

The trouble is, we have the benefit of hindsight and we are two thousand years further on from Paul. We know the history of the earth is measured in millions of years, way before human existence, and for all we know the Second Coming could be millions of years away, quite possibly after we become extinct. For us, therefore, Judgement Day has no urgency about it, so we tend to regard it as an abstract concept.

An imminent threat or an abstract concept – neither version seems too appealing. And yet there's another more subtle thread running through our readings this morning. And that's the idea that, despite the warnings and the signs, there is promise.

Back in the 500s BC, Jeremiah had every reason to be filled with dread for what the future might bring. He was prophesying in Jerusalem, just before it was finally ransacked by the Babylonians. Some of the great and the good had already been taken into exile: still more were to follow. It looked as though God was abandoning his chosen people. Yet God used Jeremiah's voice to articulate his promise that the royal line of David would be re-established and the city and its people restored to safety. The coming of the Messiah would make things right. Christians believe that promise came to fruition in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus himself tells his disciples that when the Son of Man returns at the end of time, their 'redemption is drawing near'.

His analogy of the fig tree coming back into leaf stands in sharp contrast to the predictions of signs of distress in the cosmos. The approach of summer is a hopeful, joyous time when the best is yet to come. The disciples are to 'stand up and raise your heads'. That is not the posture of people in danger – it is an attitude of confidence and assurance. They will be able to greet the returning Messiah face to face, not with their heads and their bodies bowed, precisely because there will be nothing for them to fear.

And for Paul, writing to his new churches of believers in Gentile territory in the mid-50s AD, the language is about building them up for a future full of promise. Their holiness will render them blameless in the sight of God, so their place with him for eternity is assured.

So how do we change our perspective, from viewing the Second Coming of Christ as an imminent threat or an abstract concept to something we can regard with hope – even perhaps with longing?

Maybe the answer lies in looking at Advent as one season in three timeframes.

The first timeframe is our immediate here-and-now. Here we are at the beginning of December, and Christmas Day, when we celebrate Christ's birth, is just over three weeks away. Over the course of the next twenty-three days we will inevitably get swept up by the frenzy of pre-Christmas preparations and celebrations, at home and at church. Much as we might like to be purist about it, it's nigh-on impossible to stick to pursuing an Advent of penitence and fasting – which is what we're supposed to do - when all around Christmas seems to be in full spate.

Here at the Cathedral, the sheer logistics of fitting in all the carol services and concerts mean we end up engaging with both seasons simultaneously. But it's important that we do so. After all, we have the extraordinary privilege of welcoming thousands of people into this building in

the next few weeks, many of whom haven't been here before. Our prayer for them should surely be that, whatever event they have come to enjoy, they also encounter God here and experience something of his presence with them as they go back out into their daily lives.

Whilst that busy three-week period is going on, though, we also inhabit the second timeframe, which is the story of Jesus' coming into the world – not only the immediate, familiar tale of the nativity, but the whole Biblical narrative from Adam and Eve's original sin through the patriarchs and the prophets to Jesus' birth at Bethlehem. Year after year we retrace those well-loved steps through the story again – yet always we find that there are surprises, new things to notice and learn and absorb. And that annual practising of the account of God's promise and grace helps strengthen our discipleship.

So we keep Advent and celebrate Christmas in this particular year, 2018, by stepping our way through the bigger historical and spiritual narrative of Jesus' coming into the world, a story which is several thousand years long.

But that second timeframe sits within an even larger one – the timeframe between Creation and the Second Coming.

For mere human beings it's virtually beyond our comprehension. We are creatures of limited understanding when it comes to time – we can only think in terms of a linear timeline made up of years, and who knows whether God's time works like that?

But Christian faith teaches us that, within that largest narrative of all, as yet unfinished, God sends his Son Jesus into the world at a specific place and time in human history. Through his life, death and resurrection he is able to set us right with God so that God's promise of eternal life can be fulfilled for each one of us. And through the Holy Spirit, Jesus' presence is always with us, especially as we break bread and share wine together, as we will later in this service. Death is no longer the end – that is some promise indeed.

So we enter this Advent period conscious that we are engaging with three timeframes simultaneously – the immediate, the longer Biblical narrative and the timeframe which only God can comprehend. We prepare for this particular Christmas, here and now in 2018, whilst treasuring the story of the coming of the Messiah thousands of years ago. And as we endeavour to walk in his footsteps, we hold onto God's promise: through faith in Jesus we can be confident and hold our heads high, ready to meet him face to face whenever it is that he comes again in glory.