

Matthew 24: 36-44

### Advent Hope

Happy New Year everyone!

Happy New Year! Are you thinking what's this wishing us happy New Year 35 days early? Is she crazy? Has the stress of being on the vacancy team become too much and she's finally lost it!!!

It's OK. I will explain. Today is Advent Sunday and is the first day of the church new year. The church calendar begins its new year today. A new beginning. The opportunity of a new start with God. Traditionally advent is a time of preparation and penitence. Like lent. As Lent is a period of preparation for Easter, advent is a time of preparing for Christmas. Not just shopping, ordering things online, baking and partying (I list those things because they are traditionally what I like to do during Advent! ). No, this is a serious time to prepare ourselves spiritually.

The Church of England prescribes our bible readings for each Sunday of the year. Usually the sermon is prepared based on these readings. Today's gospel reading is very serious. Not the sort of reading I would expect if Advent is solely to prepare us for Christmas. Although Christmas isn't necessarily a jolly period for us individually it's normally one where we can find hope. Hope that the future will be different because of a baby born in Bethlehem. A time to celebrate because God loves us so much that He sent His son to live a human life so that we could be rescued. By becoming what we are Jesus enables us to become what He is. If you find all this quite mysterious, don't worry. Accepting and living with mystery is part of the Christian Faith.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew, in itself quite mysterious, seems to be a warning, stay awake, keep alert, unexpected things are going to happen. Perhaps this means that Advent is about more than spiritual preparation for the future more than preparation for Christmas alone, important as that is.

From the study I've done I'll share my thoughts with you.

Firstly Let's build some context. Wherever Jesus went crowds came to hear him speak but on this occasion Jesus draws his disciples aside to a private place. Passover is a few days away so this means, his death on the cross is near. It's urgent, no time to waste. Jesus wants to share as much as he can with his disciples to prepare them for when he is no longer with them.

We know they were on The Mount Of Olives. Perhaps sitting on a bank overlooking Jerusalem. Little more than a mile away across the Kidron valley. They could have seen the west side of the temple above the city walls.

Matthew Chapters 24 and 25 are all part of the same discourse. Jesus is warning the disciples. There is a clear theme of "be ready" "keep alert" "be prepared". I imagine the disciples looked very puzzled as Jesus spoke. He followed on with parables, one being "the wise and foolish bridesmaids", those who took spare oil for their lamps and those who didn't. Like many of Jesus teachings these 2 chapters are rich and multilayered. It might help us if we think of it like music played by an orchestra. There is so much more to the music than if you just heard the notes of the main tune picked out on the piano.

Back to our gospel reading here are 3 of the layers. There maybe many more.

Firstly it may be a warning to be ready for the second coming of Jesus. The Bible promises that Jesus will return but nobody knows when. This could be a vital message for Christians reminding them that they need to be ready all the time.

Secondly We could read this as the need to be ready for our own death. Verse 43 says "but understand this if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming he would have stayed awake and not let his house been broken into". The word "house" can be a metaphor for our bodies. We are often advised to keep short accounts with God. Which really means if your conscience is troubling you that you have done something wrong deal with it quickly. This may be why worship, prayer, reading the bible and having the confession at every service, matters as much as it does.

Thirdly Jesus could be warning them of an actual historical event that was to come. Matthew wrote his gospel about 30 years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Matthew was Jewish and longed for his fellow Jews, to open their hearts and minds to Jesus, and to believe God's promises. Matthews Gospel makes the most links between the old and the new Testament's. I think this is to provide the Jews with evidence from the prophets, whose writings they would have been familiar with, that Jesus is the Messiah, the saviour, rescuer of the world.

Matthew would have remembered that Jesus said verse 34 "truly I tell you this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place". The historical event that fits is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Remember the Old Testament story of Noah. Everyone laughed at him building a huge vessel on dry land. The floods came Noah was prepared, nobody else was!

In AD 66 No one was prepared for the invading forces. Roman troops stormed Jerusalem, 3600 citizens were slaughtered. Life had gone on as normal until the last minute. Then war comes and devastates communities, families, tearing them apart. In AD 70 the Romans destroyed the temple - their message to the Jews was "our power is so great that it can destroy you and your God"- Romans in the 1st century believed that Caesar was god.

Thinking of our own lives are there Powerful forces trying to convince us that we are powerless against them? Do we have the metaphorical equivalent of Rome today, trying to impose its power, distracting us, drawing us away from Jesus who shows us what the one true God is like. Not threatening but always loving, moving us from darkness to light, from death to life. Recent events in the news certainly remind us that we too live in turbulent dangerous times. Who knows what will happen tomorrow. Are we aware? Are we awake? Are we ready?

Some concluding thoughts. We know Jesus was born around Christmas time about 2010 years ago and since then we will have had about 40 generations and we are still waiting for the 2nd coming of Jesus. So the period of time we live in is between the first and second coming of Christ. Our life is lived in the tension of waiting. You could say that The Christian life is lived between the fulfilled promise of Christ's first coming and the yet to be fulfilled promise of his second coming.

Karl Barth the theologian , writing of God's promises said "Unfulfilled and fulfilled promise are related to each other as are dawn and sunrise. Both are promise and in fact the same promise."

Dawn and sunrise, they promise a new day. An hour or so between them. The dawn and the sunrise, one is part of the other, we need both.

There is nothing Terry and I like more, when on holiday, than to watch the dawn over the sea, the colours of the sky, as the light increases and the sun starts to rise and gets higher and higher until it is so bright we can't look at it.

Now you might have heard it said that God lives outside of time as we know it.

The bible tells us Jesus is that same yesterday, today and forever, so maybe we can see that the received promises of God and the promises we are still waiting for are the same, in the same way as dawn and sunrise are one. If this applies to God's promise of sending Jesus, to live with us and

die for us, then it will apply to all His other promises too. What promises has God whispered to you as you are praying? What personal promises He has put on our hearts? What are you longing for, what are you waiting to see born. It could be small or big, to have a sense of peace, to know more love, for your healing, for friends and family to know Jesus? God is faithful to us. Let's keep awake, hanging on to his promises, and trust Him this Advent. He is our hope.

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, As a church we long to be a voice of hope to our community. To achieve this we need your hope as individuals, please come by your Holy Spirit, and fill our hearts with your advent hope. Father we thank you that Jesus is the sun who never sets, but enables us to shine brighter and brighter for your glory.

Amen