

## Advent 1. Be ready.

Our year of worship begins today with a call to be ready “for the Son of Man will come at an unexpected hour”.

Everyone who opened the first window on their advent calendar is counting down to Christmas. I happen to know one person whose advent calendar is a mini bottle of wine each day but it wouldn't be fair to mention who it is. (Note – I did though!!)

Today is December the 1<sup>st</sup>, we cannot deny Christmas any longer, John Lewis (and partners) have had their advert running for a while now, so why does the church begin with an apocalyptic theme?

In contrast to some Eastern religions that view time as an endless cycle of birth, death and re-birth, Christianity, with its deeply Jewish roots, see things differently. History begins with God's creation and is moving towards God's judgment and re-creation. We look back and see God's mighty acts and we look forward with hope towards all things being restored...every wrong made right. It says in one of our morning prayer liturgies, “coming with judgment to save you”.

The theologian Karl Barth said that we Christians live “between the times”. It begins with God, it ends with God.

We are convinced God keeps his promises and at Christmas we celebrate the fulfilment of the promise to send the Messiah. Advent encourages us to reflect that Christ will come again and to live in response to that promise. We should be ready. But what does that mean?

It doesn't mean living anxiously, worrying that we might not be ready enough for something we can't truly grasp anyway.

And it doesn't mean being apathetic as though these things didn't apply to us. We have to adopt into ordinary daily living a way of being that is ready, but the answer is not trying to be ready for this unknown date for Christ's return, it's being ready for what Jesus is up to today.

Earlier this week a friend came and stopped over on Wednesday night. He had to collect his in-laws from Heathrow quite early on Thursday, so he asked for a bed overnight. No problem.

We got the room ready. It's the room we tend to put the washing to dry out, so that all had to be taken out. There was a box full of stuff we intend to sort. That had to come out. Then a dust, Hoover, make the bed...job done.

He was to arrive quite late so he didn't need a meal but I thought he might like a snack so I made sure we had some biscuits. That's it, that's what you get staying with us overnight. Tidy room, clean sheets, McVitie's Digestives. Chocolate obviously.

Imagine though he had phoned up and said he's got it wrong and it was Friday at Heathrow, he would be coming Thursday night.

Well that would have been okay and chances are some of the biscuits would still be available.

Imagine he'd phoned on Thursday and said – sorry about this, it's NEXT week. Well that would have been alright, the room could stay ready and I can buy more biscuits because a packet is not going to last a week in the house.

Imagine he phones again and says his in-laws have an open-return ticket and are staying a few weeks more...can he stop over and can he come at short notice.

That starts to get more tricky. In principle yes – come whenever you like, but in practice what if the whole family are staying and the room is being used? What if we are away?

Most sensible people would say – yes you can come but you will have to take your chances...if you can't be specific we can't promise the room will be available.

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If it went on for years we would probably forget all about it.

That's the issue with the second coming, because it really has gone on for years and years and years. But Jesus said these things for a reason and we should be able to tease it out and understand because we can't live on a knife edge thinking it might be today, in the same way we can't keep an empty room on the off-chance it might be needed.

In this passage Jesus reminds us of the story of Noah. Life was going on around Noah as it normally did, only Noah had prepared for the flood. So we are to ignore the passage of time, long though it has been, and be prepared.

In practice, this means we are living out our faith. We come to worship, we engage with the Word of God, we spend time in prayer, we look for what God is doing around us. We are open to the prompting and guiding of the Holy Spirit, because Christ may not return in glory today, but there may be someone in need, or someone bereaved, or someone needing a lift, or someone with whom we can pray.

In Matthew's gospel chapter 25 we read

for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

The people Jesus is speaking too say "when did this happen? When did we do this for you?"

And Jesus replies

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

In that sense, Jesus comes to us every single day. We remain alert and are ready, because we are responding to the needs of others for Jesus sake.

We have just finished the prayer course on Sunday nights. Prayer is the essential ingredient in the relationship with God. The simple pattern encouraged when you pray is

Pause – recognising just who God is.

Rejoice – for all that God has done.

Ask – bringing one's own needs and the needs of others

Yield – wait on God and listen to God.

Prayer brings about the most amazing transformations.

Prayer changes things.

Prayer changes us.

Prayer is an incredible gift.

If we are praying...we are being ready, because we are coming close to God, being renewed in Him and being prompted in how we might be about the work of the kingdom.

I want to close with an old African Spiritual from the cotton fields where the slaves were taken. It captures the theme for today...it's being ready and mindful of Christ's return and longing for that day, but in the meantime...getting on with the task in hand.

There's a King and a Captain high,

And he's coming by and by,

And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

You can hear his legions charging in the regions of the sky,

And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

There's a man they thrust aside,

Who was tortured til he died,

And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

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He was hated and rejected,

And was scorned and crucified,

And he'll find me hoeing cotton when he comes.

When he comes! When he comes!

He'll be crowned with saints and angels when he comes.

They'll be shouting out Hosanna! To the man that men denied,

And I'll kneel among my cotton when he comes.

Let us pray.

Lord there is the ordinary things of each day, the days when sorrow overwhelms us and days when we are filled with joy and laughter. We lead ordinary lives.

Grant us your Spirit that we might remain ever watchful for where you are and what you are doing and the opportunities you want us to take.

Grant us faith to keep on, hope for the future you promise, and love for one another as the best sign of your kingdom.

We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.