

Sunday 1 December 2024
The First Sunday of Advent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jeremiah 33:14-16
NT: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-end
Gp: Luke 21:25-36

When our two boys were small, whenever we set out on a journey whether a long holiday or a day trip, as soon as we set off, after a few miles from the back the small voice would come "are we there yet?" I remember on one occasion as we were a few miles into a holiday drive to Dorset, with David just four and Jonathan 18 months "are we there yet?" necessitated a stop at Knutsford services and thankfully, their hunger sated back in the car they fell asleep and we were able to drive the full distance without stopping again.

"Are we there yet?" It feels a little like that this morning as Advent begins, and we enter a new year in the Church calendar, there is a great sense of anticipation. Of course, if we are honest, for most in society, even for many of us in the Church, a great deal of the excitement in the air has more to do with preparations for the annual frenzy of celebration and consumption that overwhelms this time of year, rather than the true meaning behind the festivities.

The term Advent derives from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming" or "arrival". It is a translation of the Greek word *Parousia*, which originally referred to the Second Coming, and of course as the words of the beautiful hymn by Charles Wesley which we began our service this morning reminds us, in the Church we await the arrival of the "thou long expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free".

We have the privilege of living in a world which has experienced the first Advent – and for this reason we celebrate and rejoice. However, we are conscious that we live in a world that has been damaged by human activities and greed. We must remember that much of our overconsumption at this time of year is not only misguided but is often so excessive as to be harmful. Thus, while we rejoice in the coming of the Word made flesh, we are mindful that we must do so in a way which is responsible and sustainable.

Our readings this morning bring sharply into focus the eschatological nature of Advent, the theology of the end times. preparing Christians not to celebrate the birth of Jesus but to prepare each of us for his return. As in a lot of the prophet Jeremiah's writings, there is a great deal of doom and gloom in much of the chapter this morning's old testament reading comes from.

However, earlier in the same chapter, we read about restoration following desolation – for example, the prophecy refers to recovery and healing (v6), the restoration of fortunes (vs7, 11), and the cleansing of guilt and rebellion (v8). As we consider the theme of Advent, and the coming of the Christ-child, we remember that He is the one who will ultimately bring about the full redemption and restoration of a right relationship with God. We remember that Advent brings in the new covenant. Advent isn't just about the coming of a baby, but all that has been brought about by Jesus – what He has done in His life, death and resurrection. At the heart of this passage, and of all things, is the righteousness of our God: "the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness'" (v16).

Again, there is a need to read more than the prescribed few verses in our epistle, in order to get a bit more context for this passage. A lot of the emphasis in this chapter is about interpersonal relationships. We read in verse two that Paul had sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Christians in the church in Thessalonica. These were Christians whom Paul had previously met and taught, and about whom he is now concerned. Paul's overriding concern is that he might find that they are no longer continuing in their faith in Jesus. In fact, what he finds is not only that they are firm in their faith, but that this is being expressed as it should be in love. This illustrates that their faith isn't just an intellectual assent – simply saying that they believe in Jesus – theirs is a faith that is being practically worked out in love.

Paul talks about restoration in verse 10, although it is not a strong theme. It is talking about the restoration of what is lacking: in the Advent, Jesus came to restore what we have lost through the interruption of our relationship with God.

Much of what Luke attributes to Jesus in our Gospel has a distinctly apocalyptic sense to it, but it also sometimes feels like Jesus could be reading headlines from today's newspapers! Jesus talks, for example, of the distress that will be caused to many people by the "roaring and tossing of sea". Our world is experiencing more and more extreme weather events each year with the impact of climate change causing storm surges and flooding. Indeed, much of England is also currently experiencing flooding. And even as I speak the aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales is docking early, a few hundred meters away from us because of predicted bad weather.

We know that climate anxiety is a significant issue, especially among younger people, so we shouldn't be surprised to read in verse 26 that "Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming in the world". The urgency of the climate crisis – and the need to respond – is writ large.

However, we are reassured through our faith that this isn't the end of the story, that it's not all bad news, and that God ultimately knows the end from the beginning. Jesus says: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away", and so we are able to give thanks to God that the baby whose Advent we anticipate will be the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14). The first century Jews would have understood that Luke was making a direct reference to the prophet Daniel in his reference to "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory.

Daniel, writing at a time of suffering under oppression of the Jewish people some 200 years before the gospel was written, speaks of hope and restoration, an echo that Luke reflects.

The fig tree is the key to all three of today's passages. Just as we know how to watch for the signs that mark the changing of the seasons, so we have to train to be people who can recognize the signs of the coming redemption. Luke also has the wonderfully vivid picture of the Christian standing up like a dog sniffing the air for the familiar smell of the master, even in the middle of distress and confusion. The irony of this is, of course, that Jesus is talking to his disciples just a short time before his arrest and death, an event that they were wholly unprepared for, so the Gospel writers tell us. Interpreting the signs of the times is not an easy task.

Jeremiah and Luke are both talking about seeing the signs in times of turmoil, but Paul is talking into a situation of growth and joy and trying to keep the note of urgency. So how do we wait intelligently, noting the signs, sniffing the air, yet also preparing ourselves to wait it out? Well, the three passages suggest that the key is to know what you are preparing for. In Advent, we are waiting for God's arrival, so our task is to make sure we will recognize him when he comes.

“Are we there yet?” Not quite but keep waiting and watching looking for the signs.

O come quickly. Come, Lord, come!

Fr Bill Addy