

Reading for Advent Sunday

3rd December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence –
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil –
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities,
like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

My brothers and sisters: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ

has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel: St Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said to his disciples: 'In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

A Reflection for Advent Sunday

In our society, the idea of a 'fresh start' is appealing. When we come to January, we will be bombarded with information about popular new, or new-ish, disciplines such as Dry January (no alcohol) or Veganuary (try a vegan lifestyle). We are constantly surrounded by information that suggests we take too little exercise, don't get enough sleep, or play with our children enough, or eat the wrong things; information that can make us feel guilty whether or not we are. So these 'new year' disciplines are intended to make us feel better about ourselves – if we can stick to them, which is often the difficulty.

In the church, we are lucky (if we are in favour of fresh starts) in that we get two shots at new beginnings: today at the start of Advent and then again, in a more secular way, at New Year. As we come to the beginning of a new church year, Advent is a season to pause, a season of waiting and preparation and an invitation to draw closer to Jesus – a little closer each year. As Christians, one of the difficulties we have with this is that the world around us moves full tilt into Christmas without that pause, and it is unrealistic to think that we can or should ignore all that is going on around us. After all, it is the only time of year when some people pay any attention to the Christian message, and we should encourage that. However, I do think that, as Christians, we shouldn't miss out on Advent either.

As with all new beginnings in life, in Advent some things change. The liturgical colour changes to purple, a visual reminder of the change to a penitential season of waiting and preparation as we anticipate the coming of our Lord. And, for the coming year, we move from Matthew to Mark as the main source for our Gospel readings on Sundays.

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four Gospels and thought to have been the earliest to be written. Who Mark was is uncertain, but the Gospel is thought to represent Peter's account of Jesus' ministry and it is likely that Mark was a follower of Peter. Some think that he was the young man who fled naked from the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, an incident recorded only in Mark's Gospel. Early historical accounts describe Mark as the interpreter or translator of Peter. The Gospel that bears his name proclaims Jesus as Christ and Son of God, and puts particular emphasis on the Cross and on God's reign.

Although, our Gospel source has changed, like other new beginnings, some things remain much the same, at least for a while. Towards the end of the church year, the Gospel readings we hear on Sundays point to the end times. They culminated in the celebration last week of Christ the King and what will happen when the Son of Man comes in glory, told as the parable of the sheep and the goats. And the previous week, on Bible Sunday we heard part of Matthew's Gospel that covers some of the same material as today's reading from Mark and the imperative to 'be alert', to 'keep awake' for we do not know when Jesus will return.

Our Gospel reading for Advent Sunday is never a cosy new beginning with a sneak preview of Christmas. Taken from Jesus teaching in the last week of his life, it is always a sharp reminder of where this story leads, of what the incarnation of Jesus is really about: God's rescue plan for a world that has gone badly astray. It continues that theme of the end times, at least this week.

Prior to today's passage, Jesus has been in the Temple where the chief priests, scribes and elders – those who will lose their privileged position if Jesus really is the Messiah – have been firing loaded questions at him, trying to catch him out. As Jesus and his disciples leave the Temple, one of his disciples' comments on the magnificence of the building: 'what large stones and what large buildings!' The Temple had been recently renovated by Herod the Great but, even so and with the advantage of hindsight, this always strikes me as slightly naïve, a bit like Little Red Riding Hood saying 'What big teeth you have Grandmama!' Jesus will have none of it; he is unimpressed by what has become a human pretension to grandeur and declares that 'Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down.' Mark's Gospel is believed to have been written around the time of the Jewish-Roman war and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, so these words would have had real resonance with the Gospel's original audience.

Jesus continues out to the Mount of Olives with his disciples to continue his teaching and Peter, James, John and Andrew ask him privately 'when will these things happen'. The first part of Jesus' response tells of earthly catastrophes that will herald the coming of the Son of Man: wars and rumours of wars, false Messiahs and false prophets, persecution and great suffering. And, as if disaster on a horrific scale on earth is insufficient, we start today's reading with the cosmic disasters that will follow: the sun and the moon will cease giving light, the stars will fall from heaven. What could be more terrifying than the end of the sun, the disappearance of the moon, the scattering of the stars like spent fireworks? Yet it is only then, with the passing of these lights that we will see the greater light ... the Son of Man coming with great power and glory.

Advent literally means 'coming' and we prepare to celebrate both the incarnation, the coming of the child in the manger of Bethlehem, and the coming of the Son of Man, events separated in time, but both fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

As people living in between those two events, we live in a period of waiting. Jesus is not absent but neither has he brought the world to its final fulfilment. And being a Eucharistic people is a way of enacting that waiting. The Eucharist holds us in the tension between remembering what has been and looking forward to the light that will come. This is reflected in the changes we make to the Eucharistic Prayer used in Advent which speaks of the universe being 'drawn to its fulfilment' and the promise of a new creation 'given yet still to come'. It also reminds us of the 'vision of a feast that heralds a kingdom yet to come'. That is indeed food for thought as we come to be fed at Christ's table.

So how should we as Christians mark Advent? If we are able to be patient, it can provide a contrast between the time of waiting and the time of fulfilment. Although we may collude with the world around us, which wants everything now and acts as if Christmas has already arrived, in our faith we need patience. Each time we come to this four-week period with its emphasis on Christ's first advent, we are reminded that we are in this lifelong period of waiting for the final fulfilment. And it is not simply a passive waiting. We continue faithfully as a eucharistic people, welcoming Christ repeatedly in word and sacrament, bringing the light closer to us. And we continue on our Christian journey, carrying out the daily tasks given to us and seeking out those signs of Christ's light coming towards us in a world in which it is only too easy to see the darkness.

That waiting is represented in our Advent Wreath which represents the wait as the light comes gradually, candle by candle each week, until the white candle is lit at Christmas, expressing Christ's coming in glory.

For some of us, marking the contrast between waiting and fulfilment is an opportunity to do something specific – an Advent course or read a book - could I suggest reading Mark's Gospel over the next few weeks, it is the shortest after all? For others, something else to do is the last thing they need. Nevertheless, it is important to take time to simply be with God, to prepare our hearts for the advent of our Lord, both as the child of Bethlehem and as the Son of Man when he comes in glory. Taking advantage of all that surrounds us, it could be as simple as allowing the Christmas lights to be a reminder of the Light coming into the world.