

Sermon: 1st Sunday in Advent at Great St Mary's , 1 December 2024.

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Jer. 33.14-16

1 Thess. 3.9-end

Luke 21.25-36

Jeremiah 33.14–16

14 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

1 Thessalonians 3.9–13

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Luke 21.25–36

25 'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

29 Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

Luke 21. 36 *Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'*

Advent – time of repentance – turn to God; be attentive, watchful, in touch with our longing ...

I begin this morning's sermon where I left off last Sunday, in my Evensong sermon on the Feast of Christ the King. I quoted words from Desmond Tutu, from a speech he gave in 1978 to a white audience in South Africa. This is what he said

'I stand before as one who professes to be a Christian. That is the starting point for everything that I am: it is the inspiration for all that I say and do. As a Christian therefore I place, as that which has my absolute loyalty and as having a first position in my life, the worship and services of God. I must have an authentic relationship first with God through prayer, through bible reading, through meditation and using the sacraments of the church. I therefore place the spiritual as having an overriding importance in my life. This is the so-called vertical dimension of human life, this relationship with God.

But this is not the end - it could not be the end. The authenticity of this vertical relationship, the spiritual relationship with God is expressed for me and tested out by my relationship with my neighbour. This is the so-called horizontal dimension. The vertical and the horizontal must be held together. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it - thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22: 36-40, KJV). For Jesus, love of God was inconceivable and could not exist without its corollary love of neighbour. One of the evangelists sums up [this] teaching of the Bible ... by asking, "How can you say you love God whom you have not seen if you hate the brother who you have seen?" (1 John 4:20). (*From: God is not a Christian Desmond Tutu, 2011*):

I have started with this quote from the late Archbishop Tutu as it provides a powerful & helpful framework for Christian living in a time when there is much darkness and challenge all around us. Today, we are at the beginning of a new church year, and the season of Advent – a season which urges us to be attentive to God, to be expectant, waiting, praying.

In fact, the readings on the first Sunday of Advent always have a sense of urgency and drama. They are drawn from the latter chapters of the Synoptic gospels – Mark, Matthew or Luke, and as we heard in our gospel from Luke this morning, they include what we may call a 'little apocalypse' – little, as opposed to the book of Revelation, which is also known as 'the book of the Apocalypse.

These types of writings deal with ‘end times’ or last things, and they are difficult for us to relate to. To hear them correctly requires an understanding of their original settings and intentions. They are actually intended as a message of hope, rather than predictions of the future. They are written to give encouragement and inspire faithfulness in the early Christian communities. Luke was most likely writing for early Christians in Rome, who were experiencing hostility and persecution.

As we start this season of Advent this year, we are only too aware that much of our world is riddled with conflict, injustice, uncertainty, indifference, pain, judgement, and condemnation of anyone who thinks differently. And therefore, it seems to me this message of hope is very important for us too, as it was for the early Christians. Jesus was saying then and now: however chaotic and uncertain the world is, he promises a day when his return will bring about lasting salvation, justice, redemption, and healing. And in the meantime, he offers the hope of his presence – in the way he is with us already; in the way he comes to us time and time again; in the way he encourages us to pray for and long for his kingdom.

Let us take a closer look at this morning’s gospel passage. It concludes a longer discourse centered on things to come (Lk.21.5-36). While earlier sections focus on persecution, witness, and Jerusalem’s destruction (verses 12–24), our section features the coming of the Son of Man followed by appeals to readiness.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus identifies himself with **the Son of Man**, a title with various associations (a human being, a prophetic figure, a divine figure).

Verses 27, 28 say ‘Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (21:27-28)

These verses are a direct reference to the Book of Daniel, ch.7:

As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven (7:13)

The scene in the book of Daniel involved the heavenly “human being” (=“Son of Man”), a divinely-appointed figure who heralds God’s victory over the forces of evil.

Luke’s Jesus now also presents the appearance of the heavenly deliverer, but not just as an amazing story, and not as a disaster, but as a message of hope: “redemption”—freedom from captivity or slavery—is at hand. Just as we heard in our reading from Jeremiah, God’s promise will be fulfilled with the appearance of a “righteous branch,” a deliverer who saves us from evil.

So this is not a scene of coming disaster, but of a glory that will triumph over evil. Apocalyptic scenes in scripture are consistently messages of hope for those in need of deliverance, not timetables or forecasts. The Son of Man must come because the world waits and wonders, burdened by the forces of death.

In the next portion (Luke 21:29–36) Jesus' speech shifts to pastoral encouragement. He uses a parable about trees 'the fig tree and all the trees', something very familiar to his hearers at the time and to us. Just as the trees new growth signifies summer's arrival, so do "these things" signify the arrival of God's kingdom. Everyone can read the signs of tree coming into sap and growth -likewise, one does not need secret biblical knowledge or complicated calculations to discern the arrival of God's kingdom.

And then, in verses 34-36, Jesus urges his followers to be alert and to pray. The language is rather fierce, intended to make us listen, take note: that our hearts may not be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness or the worries of this life – something that is relevant today as much as it was for Jesus' followers and for the early Christians.

Desmond Tutu's powerful words, as a Christian who is very clear about giving the spiritual an overriding importance in his life, may inspire us, too, as we hear this morning's gospel.

The season of Advent invites us to pay attention to that spiritual dimension of our lives, to pray, read and meditate, and reflect on the Scriptures with others. We draw hope and courage from the fact that we have a God, who deeply loves us and the whole of creation; who is among us and who will bring all to fulfilment.

The way the kingdom is to be in our midst is the daily realization of our need for God's redemption, God's future – and our yearning for it. 'Then many small things as well as large ones, a fig tree as much as the world scene, can be signs both of our need and of God's promise. To "be alert" and "be on guard" (vv. 34, 36) are how Jesus characterizes the work of expectant discipleship, not because these things will happen in our time, but because when we live with that expectation, the kingdom is among us. (Andrew McGowan).

This Advent, let us live from that place of deep hope, that God is at work in us, among us and most importantly, beyond us. – And let be attentive to the vertical dimension of our live as we prepare to welcome with renewed openness and longing the birth of God as a vulnerable baby – the light that cannot be overcome by the darkness, the love that is at the heart of everything. And let that love grow in our hearts and actions, as we heed the urgent invitation to be alert and put God at the centre. Amen.