



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

First Sunday of Advent

readings: [Isaiah 2.1-5](#), [Romans 13.11-end](#), [Matthew 24.36-44](#)

27 November 2022

Well, happy new year! Here we go again - Advent - the Church's calendar starts again. As a preacher, would I have chosen to start the lectionary with an apocalyptic text? Of course, not. However, I admit, it is a genius move. After all, nothing like a bit of apocalyptic language to fire up the blood, eh?!

Let me start with a little back filling of the Gospel story. Jesus is talking to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. He predicts the destruction of the Temple and the coming persecutions and then the coming of the Son of Man. "When will this happen?", ask the disciples...? The answer is remarkably straight forward: "God only knows". Jesus, is absolutely clear: don't fret about the when, but be alert, be awake, be prepared!

I'm sure many of you are perhaps thinking: how can we prepare if we are given no parameters, no timescales? The temple's destruction happened. The persecutions happened and are still happening, but the coming of the Son of Man...? What if it never happens?

Let me stop you at this point and ask you to ponder something. What if, we are approaching this the wrong way? I wonder if, as Christians, we should be placing so much emphasis and energy on the end of history, in the form of Jesus' triumphal advent, whenever that might be, when we already have two major events that have changed our lives and the world: **the incarnation** – God so loved the world that he came to live among us...; and **the cross** - the revelation of God's true power and love – God so loved the world that he die for us, professing his forgiveness and love as he did so.

Am I saying, and on the 1st Sunday of Advent at that (!), that we shouldn't be expectantly waiting for Jesus' return? No, it's far too early to be preaching heresy!

What I'm saying is that, our lives of expectation, as Christians, are based on the fact that we worship a God who has already proved he isn't a far off God but one that gets very involved. He will come again but in the meantime, he hasn't deserted us. He is a surprising God, so during Advent we must become particularly aware of where he is already at work. What I'm hoping is that during Advent our expectation is given a new emphasis. If you work better in images, I'd like to leave you with the idea that during Advent we should all be walking around on tiptoes, really looking and paying attention to what God is doing and also to what maybe is not right with the world yet.

Which brings me back to Matthew... how do we interpret this passage, full of apocalyptic language, in a way that let's us live in the light of the reality of a highly involved God?

Let me take it back to basics:

The reading from Matthew is a warning. Which may sound scary but a warning is not a threat. A warning is designed to bring change that will avert disaster and promote life and wellbeing. The danger is real and hope is real.

Let me give you an example: when a child chases a ball into the street and a car is coming, what do we shout out? "Look out!" The danger is real and the warning hopes to bring change that preserves life.

When interpreting apocalyptic passages always try to ask:

1. Where is the danger?
2. Where is the hope?
3. What response gives life?

In this Matthew passage, the danger is not simply judgment but complacency. People were complacent in the time of Noah, in the time of Jesus and now.

Where have we become complacent with the way things are? Here, within this cathedral walls? Outside, in the lives we lead? And broader still, in the problems we hear about on the media that fail to touch us, even though they may be killing the poor, the displaced, the lonely, the hungry, the isolated?

Where is the hope? How does God bring hope to this narrative? In the flood hope came in the shape of Noah and the Ark, Jesus spread hope to and through his disciples and now?

Are you the hope? In someone's life, in a particular local, national or international story? What response can you give that will bring life to this person or that situation? How can you join in with what God may already be doing?

What has all this to do with Advent? Why this passage at the beginning of Advent? In Advent we are waiting for the fulfilment of God's promises. And if we are waiting it is because we are not satisfied with the way things are. We should be dissatisfied – there's war in Europe; there's famine in Somalia; in Afghanistan, people are selling kidneys and daughters to stave off hunger. People will die of cold in England this winter and others will do so waiting to be admitted to hospital. The poor, and it will be mainly the poor, will suffer drought and flood, fire and hunger while the rich decide how long they can get away with pumping a bit more carbon into the air to keep things going as they are...

Indignation is a right response, but it is tiring, and to be honest it's easier to go through life in a kind of passive denial, treading water. Particularly, when we are the rich...

And then Advent comes and we are hit with this passage from Matthew, in all its apocalyptic brashness, with Jesus begging his friends to stay ready for the tides to turn. Jesus highlights the dangers of choosing resignation and self-confidence in this world.

What if, this Advent, we were all to engage in some active anticipation? What that means in your life, only you know. But if you are unhappy with your life, or the life of the world and you long for change:

- call out to God,
- join others,
- ask God to guide you

because that uneasiness you feel is what J. Christiaan Beker describes as *"the discrepancy between what is and what should be."*

That uneasiness, is God, to whom we have anchored our hope, calling us to action – and if we are itching for change, then we won't be falling asleep – we will be alert, ready and waiting.

Amen

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