

Advent 1 – Sunday 29th November 2020

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9 / Mark 13: 24-37

Holy Spirit come and touch my lips, open our hearts and transform our lives. Amen

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It's a time when as a Church we look forward to the coming of Christ not just at Christmas but when Jesus comes again to establish his Kingdom in all its fullness. It's a time of reflection and even repentance, symbolised by the wearing of purple – just as at Lent – but in contrast to Lent, Advent has often become the season of frenetic activity preparing for the secular celebration of Christmas rather than taking time to be still and reflect. It's a time when we're particularly aware of what is happening around us; in spite of the darkness we're seeking to be wakeful, watching and waiting.



I wonder, with this year being so different with less time for shopping and little opportunity for social gatherings – if we will determine to use this unique opportunity to pause and take time to re-evaluate this season and re-establish its true meaning?

Our gospel reading from Mark 13 neatly splits into three, two pictures and a challenge. We commence with **“The coming of the Son of Man”**. There's much debate as to when these verses actually refer to. They were Jesus' reply to the disciples marvelling about the Temple which they no doubt considered to be a permanent, enduring structure symbolising God's eternal presence with them; unshakeable and indestructible.

But Jesus spoke of change happening on a dramatic scale. Was he speaking of what would occur in the next few days when he would be crucified but come back again in the glory and power of the Resurrection? Could they refer to the period of the destruction of Jerusalem, including the Temple, that would happen in most of their lifetimes in AD 70? Or do they refer to the end of time as we know it – and which is still to come?

Scripture often allows for more than one fulfilment; Jesus' words were probably relevant for all three – but what struck me wasn't any of these; rather how relevant it is for today. That description of unprecedented days (yes one of the 2020 words) following days of suffering sounds like where we are now! A time when even those things that we assumed were permanent and indestructible have been thrown into turmoil.



Jesus' picture even describes things from the first order of creation – light – sun – moon – falling apart.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament such prophetic language was used to indicate the end of one era, the “out with the old” prior to the beginning of a new creation – the “in with the new”. The immediate turmoil was a certain hope that God ushering in his Kingdom in a new way. It was about to happen through Jesus' death and through the destruction of the Temple and is happening now as he establishes his Kingdom in our lives.

Despite all that has been going on in this unprecedented year – are we able to look beyond it and recognise that God is still in control? Can we even look beyond the immediate to the hope that the Son of Man is still to come with great power and glory to establish his Kingdom in all its fullness,

knowing that his elect, that is all who follow after him, will be securely held, protected and gathered together with him? Are we willing at this time when our lives are being shaken to discover something new of God?



We move on to **The Lesson of the Fig Tree**. I wondered how I would cope with this second lockdown coming in the autumn season when everything was dying and the days were getting both colder and shorter with little daylight. It was so much easier in the spring when we could readily get inspiration from our gardens with new life bursting forth – but what can we see in this time of hibernation?

A couple of weeks ago in our Church News the Champions submitted was a photo of buds already beginning to appear. So I decided to take a closer look as to what was actually happening in my garden – and I was amazed. These pictures are all from this week! They may not be fig trees but they do speak similarly and so vividly of hope and anticipation!

I marvelled at why nature would bother producing buds so far in advance when they would have to survive the frosts, the bitter winter and little light. Wasn't it all too risky? Wouldn't they be damaged? Or could it be part of God's maturing process and an apt illustration of God's faithfulness when they eventually blossom? There's rarely gain without pain! The refining process is designed to produce something of even greater value; beauty can emerge from brokenness. There is even hope through and throughout the darkness – when we are aware that God is working within us.



We had hopeful signs this week as several results of trials of vaccines came back with promise. Perhaps the end is in sight of the virus and all the dysfunction and isolation it has caused. That may help us cope with winter and Christmas restrictions and not seeing those we love, but there's still a lot of questions over handling the vaccines, roll-out, long-term effectiveness to name but a few... and we've been let down before on the implementation of promises.

So what can we be confident of in the future. Can we have any more confidence in Jesus' words? ³¹**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.** Can we believe them and confidently hold on to the promise of Jesus' return - even eagerly awaiting its fulfilment?

And so we look at God's record of fulfilling promises. The prophecies of Jesus' first coming were fulfilled but not in the way that many were expecting or at a time when they expected it – but they definitely happened!

During this difficult waiting time – will we let the hope of God's kingdom sustain us and even allow God to produce something of beauty in us? A phrase that I've often thought about during these days is – I want to thrive at this time and not just survive!

And finally **The Necessity for Watchfulness**. I'm someone who likes to know exactly when things are going to happen so that I can plan and be ready. I'll only sit down and relax when I've got everything prepared – so I don't sit down very often!!

But God's way is different. He has chosen to withhold the time of Jesus'



return not just from us but from the angels too and even the Son! Have you ever wondered why?

Imagine if we knew when it was going to be! If it wasn't to be in our lifetime we'd probably ignore it altogether. Several in the early church they were so convinced it was imminent that they had given up working and so the apostle Paul wrote to them to tell them to work while they were waiting! (1 Thessalonians 4 & 5.)

Could the very uncertainty as to the date actually be a strong stimulant to ceaseless watching? But what does this sort of watchfulness really mean in practise?

I don't think it is sitting back and doing nothing – like we're in a waiting room! Nor do I think it's meant to be frantic busyness. Some of us may need this Advent time to learn to be still whereas for others it may be a challenge to get working and explore new opportunities God is giving us!



Overall I see it more as a continual awareness. Who would have thought just a few months ago that the constant reminders of three words - hands, face and space could have adjusted our lives and habits?

Perhaps the three words Advent word for us are – wakeful, watching and waiting.

Wakeful – by being aware of who God is, what he is saying through his word, creation and circumstances



 Watchful – prayer doesn't mean that we have closed eyes – but a continual communication with God – listening, sharing and letting him change us.

 Waiting – not inactivity – but daily practical reaching out to others, sharing God's love and even being amazed when we discover God in unexpected circumstances.

As we look to the Christmas story, the wise men were wakeful, and watchful and once they had observed the star they didn't just passively watch it but actively followed!

I'd like to end with a final reminder of our reading from The Message – 1 Corinthians 1: 7-9

“All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.”



And so we pray, Father God help us during this advent season to make time to hear what You are saying to us; to hold on to the hope You have given us, to trust Your promises and to reach out with Your love. Amen

Rev. E. Blackmore