

Luke 21:25-36

Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-end

A happy new year to you all! Well, today – Advent Sunday - *is* the beginning of the Church’s year – not 1st January. But, Advent is a rather *unusual* start of a new year.

First of all, it’s unusual in that we start *our* new year by actually turning to the *end* of the story. One of the great themes of the Advent season is the *end* of all things – the final judgement, the return of Christ in glory. Advent makes us start at the end of the story, and then in the light of *that* to look at how it begins, as we approach Christmas. As the Old Testament reading from the prophecy of Jeremiah reminds us, the “righteous Branch” of the house of David, born for us at Christmas, is also the Lord who will bring “justice and righteousness”, for he *is* Judge of all.

Then secondly, Advent is *not* simply about getting ready for Christmas. The advertisers on TV want to

make sure we’re ready for Christmas by going down to Iceland or Lidl in order to get our freezers stocked up, and to encourage us to scour the Argos catalogue for suitable presents. That’s all that these few weeks leading up to Christmas mean to many folk. But for *us*, Advent encourages us to focus on some of the most *challenging* themes of the Christian message, not least the call to repentance – to turn back to the Lord – which we touch upon on the second and third Sundays of Advent, as we look at the person and ministry of John the Baptist.

And thirdly, Advent is an unusual start to a new year, because it is essentially built on *waiting*. Waiting is something we’re probably getting more and more impatient with. A lot of what we do nowadays involves waiting. Waiting in queues at the bank or post office, waiting for buses and trains, waiting for hospital appointments... Some academics have even gone to the trouble of calculating that the amount of time the average person spends during the course of their lifetime, waiting for different things to happen, is between 2 and 3 years – well, it certainly feels like

it! Waiting can, of course, seem rather frustrating, and in many instances, we're perhaps left thinking that we could have done so many more useful things during those times when we were simply waiting around.

And today, we're reminded that we're *not* just waiting around for *Christmas* to happen – perhaps opening another door on our Advent calendar to find some more chocolate behind it and reminding us that the big day when we'll enjoy our turkey & all the trimmings is getting closer and closer. Rather, we're reminded that we're *all* waiting for something which is of universal significance and which, at the same time, has implications for each and every one of us. Because, as we prepare to celebrate once again the coming of Jesus that *first* Christmas, we're reminded that he *will*, as the Creed puts it, 'come again in *glory* to judge the living and the dead'. According to the biblical worldview, the course of history *isn't* circular, as was widely believed in the ancient world and still amongst followers of eastern religions. Nor is it aimless, as many people assume in our western

society today. Nor is the present course of history going to last for ever and ever. The *Bible* presents history as a movement towards a goal; and that goal is the *perfect kingdom of God*, established when Christ returns. So, the Lord uses vivid imagery to describe the way in which he, the Son of Man, will come "with power and great glory". The emphasis here is on Christ coming in royal power, for he is the King of kings.

So, when will all this happen? Well, there have been plenty of well-meaning, but grossly mistaken, folk down the centuries and still today, who have tried to predict when Jesus will return. In some ways, it's not surprising, because we live in a world which is used to expecting things to happen immediately. Their attempts at prediction of the Second Coming have, of course, always proved futile. To begin with, we need to realise that God's time is *not* our time – as Psalm 90:4 puts it, "For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night." And when we consider what the Lord Jesus actually says here, his intention is *not* to

give us some kind of a 'countdown' to the End – showing us how historical events can be mapped out to give us some indication as to how far off we are from judgement day. It's *not* like that. Yes, certainly the Lord talks of "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars" and the resulting "distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves". But these are, what one commentator has referred to, as 'signs of the *age*', rather than 'signs of the *end*' – these are things which have been happening, and continue to happen, during the period between Christ's first coming and his Second Advent. The only actual 'sign of the *end*' is when the Lord actually comes in glory.

And Jesus uses the image of the fig tree to illustrate this. Just as the appearance of leaves on the tree is an indication that summer is drawing near, so the various signs he has mentioned are pointing to the fact that the coming of God's Kingdom in all its fullness *is* drawing near, though the precise date & time is hidden from us. As his disciples, we are not to

become downcast by this, but on the contrary, we ought to be looking forward to that day.

So, what then are we to do in the mean time? Well, the Lord makes it clear that our anticipation of what is to come must impact upon the way we live our lives in the here and now – "Be on guard" is his charge to us. And what does this involve? Well it means we mustn't give way to the temptation to simply go along with the ways of the world – being "weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness" – words which allude to an excessive indulgence in earthly pleasures. And he says that we should not be weighed down by "the worries of this life" - an unhealthy concern for our money and material possessions, for instance, rather than focusing on that which is eternal. It's a theme picked up by Paul in our reading from his First Letter to the Thessalonians, where the Apostle instructs us that the coming of Christ must spur us on to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all" and to constantly grow in holiness. As the Collect/special prayer for today puts it, we are called, through God's

grace, “to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light...” It’s all about living faithfully as citizens and ambassadors of Christ’s *eternal* Kingdom in the midst of *this* age that is passing away. And Jesus exhorts us to *pray* for strength that we may flee worldly sins as we focus on serving God.

So, as we are reminded today that Christ will indeed come again in glory, the emphasis in our Gospel reading is not so much on the question as to *when* the Lord will return, but about the need to be ready *now; preparing* ourselves for that day, whenever that might be. Instead of encouraging speculation about dates and times the Lord’s emphasis *here* is very much upon how we are to live in the present. We need to be watchful and prayerful, so that (as, once again, today’s Collect puts it) “on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, *we* may rise to the life immortal”.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, as your kingdom dawns, turn us from the darkness of sin to the light of holiness, that we may be ready to meet you in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray. Amen.