

Advent 1 (Year C)

Jeremiah 33:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

A Sermon by the Rev. Jackie Bullen

You've probably heard it: "Jesus is Coming – look busy!"

Today is the beginning of Advent, the season when the church finally officially admits that Christmas is on its way. Jesus is coming, and we certainly do look busy.

There are cards to write, presents to buy, the tree to collect and decorate, the turkey to order, and all the rest.

We don't need to look busy – we are busy.

We're busy getting ready to celebrate the arrival of God as a baby, and all those familiar and wonderful stories of angels and shepherds, magi, tinsel and tea-towels. But you could be forgiven for not realizing it.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've looked at the 'Christmas' goods section of Sainsbury's, Tesco, and Morrison's. I saw shelf after shelf of baubles, calendars, elves, glitter, mistletoe, penguins, polar bears, reindeer, Santas, snow, stars, stockings, trees, twinkly lights, and wreaths.

And not one solitary baby Jesus.

Jesus is coming, and everyone's looking busy, but are they looking in the right direction?

Or are they looking the wrong way?

Christmas day has become an end in itself, wrenched out of the story, and turned, for many, into simply an excuse to eat, drink and be merry.

But the truth is, Jesus' did come, and as all our readings today point out, Jesus is coming again.

Jeremiah was speaking to a people whose world was collapsing around them. The kingdom of Judah was under Babylonian control, but was being rebellious, and about to feel the weight of Nebuchadnezzar's anger. Jerusalem would soon be destroyed and the remaining people exiled to Babylon, and most people simply didn't want to listen to Jeremiah telling them this.

But in the middle of all this, the Lord gives Jeremiah a word of hope: everything might be going wrong now, but that's not the end of the story. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when my servant will arrive to put things right. The descendant of David, the Messiah, is coming.

Paul was writing to the Thessalonians having just received news of them from Timothy. He'd had to leave Thessalonica abruptly – you can read about it in Acts chapter 17 – and he was worried about the gaps in their teaching. Now he's heard they're doing well, but worrying needlessly about what happens when Jesus returns, so he's writing to reassure them.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is speaking to his disciples in the final days before he was killed. He's trying to make sure they realise he will be coming back, even before they've realized he's going away. He's quoting from Daniel's prophecy to clue them in to the fact that he's the one the people of Israel have been waiting for all this time.

I'm coming back, says Jesus. Look sharp! "Be alert at all times."

Continual alertness, though, is tiring.

Besides, it's nearly Christmas: Jesus is coming, and look how busy we are.

But does God want us to be "busy"?

Is “busy” a good thing?

Our society rather likes “busy” – I’m sure you’ve heard it said “If you want something done, ask a busy person”.

We think of “busy” as the opposite of “idle” – and we know who makes work for idle hands.

If we’re busy, we’re not wasting God’s precious gift of time – surely that’s what God would want? But I’m not convinced.

I suspect that often, busyness is an excuse to avoid other things – like engaging properly with the problems in our life. Or an excuse to avoid other people.

If someone asks “are you busy?”, often what they mean is “do you have time for me?” And if someone says “I’m really busy”, often it means “you’re not important enough for me to interrupt what I’m doing”.

I’m not at all sure that “busy” is what God wants us to be.

So if Jesus doesn’t want us to “look busy” how does he want us to look?

There are clues in the Thessalonians passage if we read what Paul prays for the Christians there. He wants them to be growing in faith, “increasing and abounding in love for one another and for all”, and being strengthened in holiness.

Growing in faith means reading and reflecting on the Bible, praying, testing our understanding about one another, working out what difference our faith makes in our everyday lives and for our attitude to the issues we face.

Increasing and abounding in love means never thinking we’ve arrived when it comes to loving our neighbours as ourselves – it’s not enough to stand still. We need to stop being busy, and make time for others, including, or perhaps especially, those we disagree with, or have fallen

out with. “This is how people will know you’re my disciples” said Jesus “If you have love for one another”.

And in case that sounds like just another kind of busyness, or like a recipe for wearing ourselves out looking after others, remember that Paul is writing to a whole church. If we do this for everyone else, then everyone else is doing it for us, making the yoke easy and the burden light.

Being strengthened in holiness means looking for God’s help with the things we know we’re bad at, and in the situations where we know we’re more likely to sin. We’re never going to be perfect, but we can always look to be just a little bit better.

Then if we as a church are doing all this, we won’t need to look busy because we will look like Jesus. And if Jesus turns up unexpectedly, because we will be ready for him.

There’s a story I once heard, probably apocryphal, that someone had painted “Jesus is coming” on a railway bridge. Some wag had added underneath “Not if he forgets to change at Crewe”.

But really it’s us who need to change – to grow in faith, to increase in love, and to be strengthened in holiness, so that we become more and more like the Jesus who came and who is coming again.

Jesus is coming, whatever the commercial world may think – so let’s tell that world how much God loves them: enough to be born as one of us with all the frailty that entails.

Jesus is coming – so let’s tell the world that Jesus died so our sins can be forgiven, and rose from the dead to open the way for us into God’s presence for ever.

Jesus is coming – so let’s get busy.