

Sermon for Advent Sunday 2020

Mark 13:24-end

Rev. Jackie Bullen, Vicar

The new Church Year starts today the first Sunday of Advent. And to mark this, this evening at 6pm we will have our Advent service on Zoom. The details were on yesterday's email.

This kind of starts the run in to the fast approaching Christmas season. Yes, it will soon be here. In all honesty, it would be hard to miss it And especially with the latest announcements about how we might be able to spend time with family and friends. The adverts on the TV are in full swing. The shops have their Christmas displays out. These are the signs for most people that Christmas is coming.

From our Gospel this morning we are encouraged to look for signs. Jesus is telling His disciples to look for the signs, the hints and the less obvious indications of what is coming. The coming of the Son of man. This can be difficult.

But he gives them the examples of the everyday ways in which they already look for signs that foretell what is happening. The sprouting fig tree which sprouts leaves to let them know that summer is near. He is urging them to realise that they have the ability to see the signs of change if only they pay attention.

We have started to advertise our Christmas events at St Botolph's. Various Christmas events and carol services coming up. Crib services and Christingles. These are our obvious signs that some people look for every year to tell them that the church is preparing for something special.

Now while Christmas is of course primarily a Christian festival, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, Christmas is celebrated by many people. People of other faiths and people who have no faith. Lots of people are already preparing for Christmas and this year of course we are having to think about bubbles in our planning to visit people or maybe we're planning to stay at home. Of course here, in the church.

I have mentioned several of the things that will be happening and many of the preparations for them started a long time ago. Regarding church services, we have been asking ourselves questions such as do we use Zoom, Facebook or YouTube or will we be able to meet in the church building? These questions have been at the front of my mind for some time now. And these preparations are all very important.

In many spheres of life we know that good preparation is the key to achieving good results. But all these preparations of services and celebrations are very important, I suggest that they are not nearly as important as preparing ourselves to meet with Jesus again. Our personal preparation.

During Advent we look ahead to Christmas to the coming of Christ. To recalling His birth in human form but also looking ahead to the second coming when He will return. Today's gospel also talks of preparation for this day, but how do we do that?

Advent is a penitential season. It is easy for us to lose sight of this. The liturgical colour of Advent is purple, which is also the liturgical colour of Lent. The Eastern Church calls Advent a "Little Lent" because Advent should be a time of self-examination and repentance in preparation for two major events – the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord and the Second Coming. This is why Advent is sometimes called the "Season of the Already Not Yet". Advent, like Lent is, not simply, a good time for personal self-examination and cleansing but rather it is essential that we spend time in self-examination if we are to be ready to meet our Lord and Saviour.

If we are not personally prepared and ready to receive Jesus at Christmas, then at best we will receive him in some kind of second rate, half-hearted way.

Jesus taught that 'the Kingdom of God is within you' (Lk17.21). Jesus is teaching that the cleanliness of our souls is important. More important than any place of worship. Self-examination and preparation is a healing experience but that does not mean that it is a gentle or passive action.

If we are rigorous and thorough it may be uncomfortable or even painful, but it is a necessary discipline if we are to enter Advent fully as the time of preparation and waiting to welcome our Lord Jesus Christ, as he is born and reborn into our lives and as we prepare for His second coming.

And today we lit the first of the candles on our Advent ring. Of the five candles of the Advent ring the first is for the prophets. The prophets of old are remembered, but this is not just about history, because we are also called to be prophets in our day.

Just this week on television there have been programmes about unscrupulous trading or major retailers. Companies which mislead the consumer with their so called bargains and cut price deals, and yet the consumer ends up paying more than they anticipate, or receive second rate goods.

There has also been an outcry against one supermarket as they used a black family in their Christmas advert. Andre Gray, the Watford Football Club striker, spoke out saying:

“We are a long way from something changing. I think we have seen that a few days ago with the whole Sainsbury’s advert and the reaction that got.

But it is a battle that we have to keep fighting. We can’t sit down and just let it blow over. So yeah we are a long way away, but the more that we keep speaking up, and keep exposing what’s going on, then the more people see it and understand.

It is a thing that just needs to keep getting exposed, and keep being spoken about, because that’s the only way things are going to change.”

Sharp practice and intolerance. Prejudice and division between social groups, cultures and nationalities. Not in my name as the saying goes.

Why am I talking about this here today? Because it is the part of the prophetic role that we are all called to and that we are reminded of in the first week of Advent, to speak out against that which is damaging that which is wrong, that which is disrespectful.

If we, as Christians, believe that the only way to eternal life is through Christ, then we also believe that our future salvation is dependent on how thorough our preparation has been, how well we have looked for the signs, and how prophetic we have been, as followers of Christ.

And so, as we use this Advent to prepare ourselves to welcome anew Christ into our life, let us use this Advent as a ‘Little Lent’ as a time of self-examination and preparation, looking for the signs of God’s Kingdom and being the prophets of today.

Because like so many other things in life, the quality of what we are able to offer, and of what we will be able to receive, will be greatly enhanced by good and thorough preparation.

Amen.