Sermon: Advent Sunday

Isaiah 11: 1-9

Mark 13: 24-37

I don’t know whether I am or not, but I would like to be the first person to wish you a Happy New Year today so Happy New Year!

Firstly, many thanks to our everyone who shared their advent stories. I now want to tell you another one. Imagine that it is September, and the new school year has started for a small boy. As the Summer has finished this lad knows that Christmas is coming. TV adverts are touting their wares and shops are starting to sell cards and other festive items. The trouble is that there is some other “stuff” that he needs to “tick off” first, so he does that in this order.

October - Half term comes and the clocks go back

End of October – Halloween

November - Bonfire Night

December - End of school, hooray!!

So, now all the counting down is done, school is finished, it is December, and he is at home, but CHRISTMAS ISN’T HERE YET! And to make matters worse, it seems to take forever to arrive. Now I am sure you have guessed that the boy in question is me, many many years ago. But that was my impression of advent. It got in the way. Sure, there was putting up decorations, visiting Father Christmas and all manner of fine things to do but they weren’t Christmas Day and surely that was the only day that mattered, right? Wrong.

The eagle eyed among you will have spotted that I have changed the Old Testament reading from the lectionary. The reason for this is that I wanted to talk to you about two aspects of Advent. The Isaiah reading and the gradual hymn today remind us that this is a time of preparation and prayer, when we wait for the coming Messiah, They both tell of one who is to come, born of the house of David. As Christians we believe that Jesus is that Messiah, and that He is Emmanuel, God with us and therefore we use advent to countdown to our celebration of His birth. We don’t have time for a big doctrinal debate but we have to be careful that we don’t think of the Isaiah passage in purely mortal terms, Jesus himself tests the Jewish leaders, asking why they preach that the Messiah is the son of David in Luke 20:41-44 and Mark 12:35-37. I take this as a reminder that Jesus is wholly mortal and wholly divine. So, we can understand a mortal genealogy to the house of David, but He is not actually biologically of that line but born into it; as a divine incarnation of the father. As the opening of John’s gospel reminds us the Word of God, who became flesh, has been here since the beginning.

This leads us to our Gospel reading and reminds us what we are also waiting for – the return of Christ the Son of Man. The Jews believe that the Messiah has not yet arrived and mark this wait every year as part of their eight-day celebration of Hanukah, which begins this year of the 10th of December. Hanukah and Advent are therefore important and special times for the Jewish and Christian communities, Today is, as I said at the start of the service, New Year’s Day, and a chance for us to start that new year with a time of internal reflection.

I sometimes wonder though whether we take enough time to really **live** Advent. We face other pressures in life these days that can get in the way us having an “Advent Attitude”. January Sales are now pre-Christmas, with Black Friday deals and gifts available too early. Some stores start building Santa’s grotto in the school Summer Holidays. There are times when perhaps we should be more still and do little other than pray. Maybe it’s the one positive we should take from our COVID experiences, that we have at times been forced to stay home and take more time to be still in God’s presence and look for His love while we endure.

We need to balance our Advent prayers and think not just about waiting to celebrate Jesus’ birthday but also His coming again. Today’s gospel reading reminds us “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come” So starting today let’s adopt our Advent values of peace, praise and thanksgiving all year round; longing for our Lord to return. Our hymn “Sleepers Wake” tells us how prepared we should be.

To close I would like to show you a 2-minute video about the meaning of advent, which reminds us of the things we should reflect on; but before I do I would like you to think of this. If we are always eagerly anticipating something to come, are we actually in danger of failing to enjoy the blessings that surround us today? This is what advent can become if we are not careful, something we fail to enjoy. Instead of being a time of prayer, reflection, resolution and sharing with those around us; it can become a time of Christmas impatience. It is a little fast-moving, but I hope you enjoy the video. Amen