

Christ Church, 3 December 2023

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 80)

Are we ready?

This question, put to us on this first Sunday in Advent, is a very personal one.

Christ comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, Are we ready?

Revive us, O Lord, God of heaven's countless hosts,

Let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Are we ready?

Ready for the coming of Christ Jesus with the mercy which is judgement.

and the judgement which is mercy? Are we ready?

Revive us, O Lord, God of heaven's countless hosts,

Let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Hymn O come, O come Emmanuel R&S 126 omit v3 and v7

Children's Time

Light the 1st Advent Candle for Hope

Sing – Like a candle flame Red folder 59 v1 & chorus only (add a verse each week)

Gifts for HARP & Homestart

Offering

God of justice and peace, from the heavens you rain down mercy and kindness,

that all on earth may stand in awe and wonder before your marvellous deeds.

Raise our heads in expectation, that we may yearn for the coming day of the Lord

and stand without blame before your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Out of the abundance of riches you give us, accept these gifts for the work of the church and for local charities, that those in need may have a better Christmas and that by sharing and thinking of others we may help bring about your kingdom on earth. Amen

Hymn Light of the world Red folder 60

Children leave for Sunday Club

Opening Prayer

Most Gracious God we greet you once again in this sacred space.

We have come because we need to be reminded

of your love and your expectations for our living.

We are like the vine you planted, watered and protected.

We know in our hearts that we need, want and desire your presence in our lives.

So we come in prayer and listen for your Word to speak to our hearts

and reveal again your desires for us.

Holy God, we await you eagerly and as we wait, we struggle on. We proclaim and hear your Word. We speak truth to power; overturn injustice. We shelter the homeless and provide clothes for the naked; help us to persevere. Enlighten us to cure the causes of poverty and not only its symptoms. Chasten us when we are self-righteous. Reveal how our comfort depends on the misery of others. Work in us so that you might find us blameless on that great day when you return. We are your chosen, recipients of your grace; strengthen us as we work, and as we wait, so that we can stay awake and receive you. Amen.

Hymn The voice of God R&S 131

Readings: Psalm 80:1-7
Mark 13:24-37

Mark 13:3-37, is sometimes called the “Little Apocalypse,” because it describes wars, earthquakes, famines, and nations fighting against each other. I preached on the first eight verses on Remembrance Sunday at Bridgwater Drive, although it was not the set reading. In fact, those verses are set for next Sunday – Advent in this year’s lectionary is clearly apocalyptic, until we get to John the Baptist and an angel visiting Mary! While it is hard to determine if Mark 13 anticipates the Jewish-Roman War (66-70 CE) or responds to it, these warnings on Jesus’ lips anticipate challenges faced by the Jewish community in Palestine with the war and destruction of the Temple. It is easy to imagine that those events felt like the end of the world for those who watched them. Jews still mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and pray at the Western Wall – all that remains of it. As far as we know, the gospel of Mark was written around the time of this war which ended 70 years after Jesus’ death, so Jesus himself could not have been speaking about that specific war, rather Mark uses the words of Jesus to explore the times he was living in. Much as we try to relate the Bible and the words of Jesus to the times we live in. While Jesus may not have lived through that particular conflict, he did live through an oppressive Roman occupation and was killed by it – he knew about violence, conflict and oppression.

The events Mark’s Gospel has Jesus describe are merely the “beginning of the birth pangs”. With the lack of clarity on timeline of these events, it makes sense that Jesus would warn the disciples not to be led astray by those who would claim to come in his name, as he does in the verses just before those we read today. It is tempting to cling to anything that promises a foothold at times when we feel everything is out of control. When we are surrounded by news of horrific events we can do little about, not only war but the effects of climate change, already affecting people across the world and here in the UK.

While our context is radically different from first-century Palestine, our own world has changed rapidly in recent years - increasing wealth disparity, climate change reaching a critical point, the death of the only monarch most of us have known, the COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging details of how badly the government handled that. It is increasingly hard to find any kind of foothold or comfort for how to respond to all these things - what to do, and what will save us. COVID-19 may feel like a distant memory now to some, but it is still with us, and the way humans abuse nature is likely to lead to more future pandemics and new diseases. Pandemics and wars show us the fragility of life and the world, causing anxiety that the world is ending. They cause us to think about the meaning of life. These crises inspire big questions of who we are and how we are to be in the world; and they inspire big questions about in whom we believe and the shape that belief takes in our everyday life. And, more specifically, about who we are waiting for. This long apocalyptic speech by Jesus ends at verse 37 with Jesus urging the disciples to be watchful, keep alert and stay awake, because they do not know when the Messiah will come.

Advent is a time of waiting. It is clear from the text that we are in a time of preparation. The images of the Son of Man coming on clouds are a clear indicator that an end is coming, a new breaking forth of God’s work in this world is on the way. How fitting then as we begin this Advent season that

we are reminded that this time of preparation is not just a pre-Christmas period but a time of recentring in preparation for the return of our God in the here and now. We are not merely planning for a cute little baby to be born in a manger, but also for the recreation of this world when that baby returns full-grown. That is what Advent is really about – not preparing to re-hash the story of a baby born in a manger, but to make ready for the second-coming of the Messiah. The difficulty is, that we do not know when that will come. Christians have been waiting for it for over 2,000 years, so the cynics among us, myself included, might wonder, not so much ‘when’ as ‘if’ it is coming.

The easy option is to ignore all that and focus on Advent being preparation for Christmas – a way of extending the holiday with Advent calendars and candles, and now increasingly all kinds of luxury and novelty advent calendars that have nothing to do with the countdown to Christmas and are just an excuse to buy yourself or a loved one 24 days of mini gifts. It is easier to think of Advent as a time to get ready to replay the birth of Jesus than to think of the sky opening and a decidedly older Jesus returning. We have routines for Christmas, traditions, carols, nativity plays, and the like, but preparing for Christ’s return is a bit less obvious and much more ominous. A lapsed Catholic friend of mine used to have a T-shirt that said, ‘Jesus is coming, hide the porn’ – I think we’d need to do a bit more than that!

From verse 32 onwards, we are told that no one knows the day or the hour of the coming of the Messiah, not even Jesus himself. We are to keep awake. Stay awake and alert so that we can be on guard for Christ’s return. In other words, we are to stay ready so that we don’t have to get ready. This is a call to a certain way of life, a call to a deepening of discipleship forged in the urgency of Christ’s imminent return. People living through war live in this state of readiness – you don’t know if today might literally be your last day, and so you live it to the full as though it were your last. People with a terminal illness, while they are well enough, or those watching on, often live in this ‘seize the day’ kind of way. But it is not sustainable. Living in a constant state of readiness is not desirable or healthy. It can’t be good to live in a constant state of tension. Our fight-or-flight reflex is intended to be utilized in limited, emergency, situations. Our bodies and our minds aren’t intended to remain in that state of intense readiness all the time. Yet here in the text we are instructed to stay awake, to stay alert. We don’t, as the passage suggests, want to be caught sleeping when Jesus returns. But how can we stay awake all the time?

Jesus’ final story may shine some light on how we can manage to remain alert. He gives the example of servants working together to take care of someone’s household while they go on a journey. Everyone has their job, including the doorkeeper whose job is to watch the door. The reason the household can be ready for the master’s return is because everyone is working together, each doing their own jobs. Together they can stay alert. The answer is in community. We can remain alert and awake when we are in community – when we work together. When we live in community and work together, and discern together, rather than everyone wanting what is best for themselves, we can figure out how to live in that tension and make our way together through the

confusion of how we prepare for the coming of the Messiah, when we don't know when, or how, it will be.

In Mark 13, Jesus tells the disciples that wars, earthquakes, famines, and struggles are not the culmination of the things to come. The coming of the Son of Man is the culmination. In the midst of uncertainty, threat, and disaster, the end is the coming Messiah – Jesus himself. In challenging and confusing times, when we are unsure how to be prepared, the constant, is God and God's love for us. A love expressed by God becoming mortal and living among us.

Hymn Make way, make way R&S 141

Prayers of Intercession

Advent is our season of waiting for the coming of Jesus, our Lord.
But long ago he came already. So, what are we waiting for, then?
For his real coming to you, to me, to our world.
Where is his kingdom among us? How can people see whether he is here?
Can they see him in us, in our communities?
This is what we are waiting for, or rather, what God is waiting for.
God is waiting for our active preparing of God's love and justice among all people.
God will do it with us. The Holy One who came to be one of us, will walk alongside us.
Let the God come and activate us, and make us ready.

Gracious God, we pray today with all those living in poverty. We pray especially for all those who are worried as we approach Christmas about how they might provide food and gifts for their families. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them, through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising awareness of issues. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for peace in all places, especially we pray for the people of Israel and Gaza and give thanks for the hostages and prisoners released. We pray that a ceasefire may continue and lead to a lasting peace. And we pray for the forgotten places of war – Ukraine, Yemen and Sudan. We pray for all those affected by climate change and for successful talks at the COP28 Climate Conference taking place in Dubai. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice of all kind. We pray for those who have experienced discrimination because of their mental health, or abuse and stigma because they live with dementia; for those who experience prejudice because of their sexuality or the colour of their skin, or because they are poor, or uneducated. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one, created in God's image. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those in hospital, those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

Especially today God, we give thanks for the gifts given and for the Christmas lunch we will soon enjoy together. We give thanks for the cooks and all those who have made it possible. We also pray for the children and leaders of Sunday Club as they prepare for next week's nativity service.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Joy to the world R&S 135 (2nd tune *Antioch*)

Blessing

Watch out! Be alert! Christ comes when you least expect it.

In the beggar on the street,
In the loved one at our table,
In the stranger in our church,
In the refugee on our shores,
In the hour of birth.
In the hour of death.

With judgement and mercy, Christ comes. Watch out! Be alert!

And now go out into the world in peace.

Beware, keep awake: be faithful in service and persistent in prayer;
be Advent people, loving and serving the Lord. Amen.

Hymns used under the Christ Church CCLI licence 63352
One License A-738739