

DECEMBER 2 ~ ADVENT SUNDAY

READINGS: Matthew 24:36-44; Romans 13:11-14; Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122

SERMON A

We're now at the start of the Christian Year, in the Season of Advent – the season to get ready for the real celebration of Christ coming among us as a helpless child; the season to realise that today Christ comes alongside us; the season to anticipate the coming again of Jesus in unimaginable splendour as the King of glory

Isaiah paints a picture of Zion as a place of pilgrimage and peace, a hope that is not pie in the sky in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, a dream that will be fulfilled when Jesus returns to reign – then tanks and missiles will be beaten into tractors and combine harvesters to feed the hungry, then the warmongers will be toppled and the callous rich left out in the cold.

In this Pilgrim Psalm, the psalmist also paints a picture of Jerusalem as a place of peace and safety – a picture that is difficult to take in when we know the current political situation and the past. This psalm does two things: it calls us to pray earnestly and fervently that the Jerusalem of today's world will find peace and safety and that a just settlement to the current political situation will be found; and it calls us to anticipate the coming of Christ's kingdom, his universal reign of peace when we will walk hand and hand with our brothers and sisters the world over.

These verses give an indication of the expectant feeling in the early Church that the end days were here and a challenge to live appropriately in the light of the time. And these verses call us to reflect on what we are doing with our time and how his coming in glory affects what we do now.

Matthew points up the unexpectedness of the Son of Man's return, but however unexpected that return will be, we're talking about a certainty. If Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas, it is also a reminder of always being ready for the sudden, unexpected, unmistakable return of Jesus the Messiah.

SERMON B

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus predicted both the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the age. But he made it absolutely clear that he himself didn't know the date of either, and specifically when the end will be: that secret the Father has locked in his own heart.

Although Jesus claimed not to know the date of his return, there has never been a lack of those who think they do. Scores have made confident prophecies and given detailed calculations...and have got it wrong. As a Jewish rabbi said, 'He who announces the messianic times based on calculations, forfeits his share in the future.' It was a wise word. And remember, if Jesus said he didn't know, we can be sure nobody else does.

So let's not get sidetracked. Let's remain totally focussed – Jesus will return in unimaginable splendour as the King of glory, return for his coronation, and his coming will be sudden, unexpected and unmistakable. We do not know when it will be. The timing of Jesus' final triumph, guaranteed by his death and resurrection, lies with God. We must be ready. 'So keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.' In the meantime we have some indicators which should help to keep us alert..

So let's turn to the first of five parables about Jesus' return, the parable of the nocturnal thief: After all, if the owner of the house had known at what time...the thief was coming, he would have waited up and not let his house be ransacked.

So this small parable is a call for Christians to be watchful, a call for expectancy: 'Watch!' – not like astronomers through a telescope, or guards watching a CCTV screen, but like lovers who can't wait for another glimpse of the one they love, or captives longing for the day that will allow them to come home. God can guide expectant Christians. So let's be counted among them, open to his direction and guidance, ready for the unexpected.

Like Paul's first readers in Rome, we are waiting expectantly for the coming again of Jesus – then the old age will finally disappear and the new age of God's kingdom will be realised. Against this background, Paul makes three time references, which assume this background understanding.

The time is already here for us to wake up and get up; now our future salvation is nearer than it was; and the night – the old age of darkness – has nearly given place to the day – the new age when Christ returns. It is the familiar tension between the 'now already' of Christ's first coming and the 'not yet' of his second.

But it's not enough to understand the time; we must behave accordingly. Paul makes three appeals.

- To put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. The picture is that, because of the hour, we must not only wake up and get up, but get dressed as well. We must take off our night clothes, the deeds of darkness, and put on the armour of light. For 'the Christian's life is not a sleep, but a battle'.
- To behave appropriately as in the daytime, that is, as if the day of Jesus' return had already dawned, and to turn from the kind of things people do under cover of darkness, the things that are opposed to Christian behaviour - lack of self-control in the areas of drink, sex and social relationships.
- To focus our total attention solely on Jesus and to make a radical turn from our human nature, our fallen, self-centred human nature: 'Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.' We are called not only to put on the beautiful clothing of 'compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience', but to put on protective clothing, laying hold of Christ himself, and 'living under him as Lord.' 'Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ.'

And we are called to turn from our ugly, self-centred nature with its clamant desires, not making any 'provision' for them. But rather being ruthless in putting them to death.

There is no greater incentive to live the Jesus way than a lively expectation of the Lord's return, a day that is steadily approaching.