

I want to start this morning with an extract from morning devotions which seem to me to sum up the state of the world, and it being Advent Sunday.

“This has been an exceptionally tumultuous year, full of war and uncertainty. But today, on this Advent Sabbath, I choose to put aside every anxious thought and, pausing to be still, I pray these words from Psalm 85 . . .

Show me your unfailing love, LORD,

And grant me your salvation.

I will listen to what God the Lord says;

He promises peace to his people.

And so I prepare my heart for Christ’s coming.”

So, Let’s start this morning by asking what appears to be a fairly simple question - What is Advent?

Advent is the period of four Sundays and weeks before Christmas (or some people will see it from the 1st December to Christmas Eve!). Advent Sunday can be from the 27th November - when Advent is the longest it can be (as it was last year) to the 3rd December - when Advent is the shortest it can (as it is this year). So depending on when it starts, Advent can last between 22 and 28 days. Advent only starts on the 1st December, and lasts 24 days, when Christmas Day is on a Wednesday (as it will next year). So next year, our Advent calendars, and Advent Candles, and the Church’s period of Advent all coincide. We really don’t believe in making life easy for ourselves do we?

Advent means 'Coming' in Latin. This is the coming of Jesus into the world.

There are three meanings of 'coming' that Christians describe in Advent. The first, and most thought of, happened about 2000 years ago when Jesus came into the world as a baby to live as a man and die for us. The second can happen now as Jesus wants to come into our lives now. And the third will happen in the future when Jesus comes back to the world as King and Judge, not a baby.

No one is really sure when Advent was first celebrated but it dates back to at least 567 when monks were ordered to fast during December leading up to Christmas. Some people fast during advent to help them concentrate on preparing to celebrate Jesus's coming.

In many Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, Advent lasts for 40 days and is known as the Nativity Fast and sometimes Winter Lent. For Orthodox churches, which celebrate Christmas on December 25th, their fast starts on November 15th. (Advent also starts on November 15th in Celtic Christianity.) Most Orthodox Churches, which celebrate Christmas on January 7th, start their fasting on 28th November. The Nativity Fast of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches starts on November 24th/25th. Coptic Churches who celebrate Christmas on January 7th also start their Advent Fast on November 25th. The Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates Christmas on January 6th; their Advent Fast is known as 'Hisnag' and is a 50 day fast made of three fasting periods. It starts about seven weeks before Christmas.

And for those of you who are interested in church history I could have gone on for quite a while yet – as the history of how Christians prepare themselves for – well some form of the coming of Jesus – is fascinating – except that if we are not careful we get distracted away from what we actually should be considering which is, “What are we preparing for – and why?”

When we go back to those three meanings of coming, how do we prepare ourselves for each of those during advent. Perhaps the first one is the easiest to do: considering what happened 2000 years ago

when Jesus came into the world as a baby to live as a man and die for us. Let's face it that is what society, if they focus on a true meaning of Christmas at all, focuses on. That is what we as a church will be focusing on for the next three and a bit weeks. And that is absolutely the right thing to be doing.

When we feel saddened by how little most people these days seem to know about Christianity, about Jesus, perhaps the one exception is Christmas. Yes we all hear about how little Archie is playing the second lobster in the school nativity, and we wonder what happened to the sheep and the donkeys and the oxen, but even these days I think it has to be a very deliberate act if people don't know that Christmas exists because of the birth of baby Jesus. Perhaps that's me being optimistic. But the story of the first Christmas is surely where we all start our own Christian faith because without the birth of the baby Jesus, there would be no Jesus who was both human and divine, and there would be no crucifixion and resurrection which is the central pillar of our faith.

So the first of our meanings of coming, as we prepare ourselves during advent, is vital.

The second of those meanings is the coming of Jesus into our lives today. This is both important for ourselves as we all try and develop that closer and deeper relationship with Jesus, but also for those people who will be coming to one or more of our various services during Advent and the Christmas period, who have not yet been able to develop a relationship with Jesus of their own. So how can we prepare during Advent, for those people? Well, can I suggest that there are three things you can do.

First, you can encourage people to come to at least one service during December – that might be a carol service, or a Christingle or Nativity service, it might be Midnight Mass or a Christmas Morning service.

If someone has the slightest interest then be prepared to say to them – “It will be great, I’m going, why don’t you come with me?”

Second, if you are at one of our Christmas services and you see someone obviously not used to being there then make them welcome, offer to sit with them, encourage them to stay for refreshments afterwards and introduce them to someone else once you have made contact with them.

Third, this is a real opportunity to reprise Thy Kingdom Come – that time earlier this year, between Ascension Day and Pentecost, when we chose a number of people who we would love to see coming to know Jesus and we prayed for them. Perhaps you prayed for them for that 10 day period, but nothing happened and you have stopped.

Well, why not try again. Choose a number of people – it might just be one – who you would love to see coming to church and getting to know Jesus – and pray for them every day during Advent. We are told in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians to be persistent in prayer – so let’s do that (Eph 6 v18)

The second of our meanings of coming is how we build the Kingdom of God in our 4 Villages through a meaning of Advent.

The third meaning of coming will happen in the future when Jesus comes back to the world as King and Judge, not a baby. And this, whilst it sounds like the hardest of the three to understand, will turn out to be the easiest to put into action.

Our reading from Mark’s gospel this morning is one of those readings which you can listen to, and reflect on with a resounding, “What on earth did that mean?” – and actually reading the whole of chapter 13 of Mark’s gospel can make it even harder!

The chapter begins with Jesus and his disciples coming out of the temple, and what started with one of the disciples clearly admiring the temple which was considered by the Jews to be the most beautiful building in the world – even if it hadn't been finished by this stage, ended up with a rather unexpected response.

“As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.””

Er, yes, not exactly what that disciple expected to hear. And a little while later it got worse.

“When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.

For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

Quite an answer.

Let's start with that last sentence – “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” In those days communication about all sort of things was very different to what it is today. People would hear about wars in far away places, months, even years later – there was no equivalent of the instant reporting we have today. But around your home, in your village, everyone knew everyone else's business, and everyone one knew from a very young age, the pain associated with child birth: there was no sound proofing of houses. Which is why so often in the bible, when a writer wants to describe possibly the worst pain you may have to endure, there is the comparison made to the pain of giving birth – and here we have that again.

What Jesus is doing here, though, in his long answer to the disciples question, is to quote from various different parts of scripture about the end of time which is when Jesus will return – and before he returns many painful things will happen.

But this passage is a bit of a jumble – in one passage Jesus refers to both the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, which we now know happened in AD70, and about the second coming which is to happen at some point in the future.

And that is where I am going to leave this passage this morning, because the part we need to focus on is the end of our reading where Jesus is talking about the necessity for watchfulness.

You see there is one really important verse in this chapter which simplifies all this for us today. Verse 32 says, “However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.” What would be the point in us worrying about the precise details of what might happen in the future, if even Jesus doesn't know when it will happen? Only his Father God knows that.

So our third coming, the coming back of Jesus the King and Judge, is important, it is important that we know that it will happen one day, but we don't know when, and beyond that, I don't think we should worry about it, except to say that if we follow what Jesus taught us, if we live the lives Jesus wants us to live, we will have fulfilled his instruction at the end of our reading from Mark's gospel, “I tell you this, and I say it to everyone: ‘Be ready!’”

And in the meantime we are told that before that time does arrive, “the good news must be proclaimed to all nations”. I think that is plenty for us to be doing for now and that should be our priority. That is what we are doing – which is why I said this is the easiest of the three comings to put into action. There is nothing else we can do about the second coming.

So this Advent, remember the three comings:

Remember the coming of Jesus as a baby who will then die and rise again for our sake.

Remember the coming of Jesus into our, and other people’s, lives made relevant through our telling of, and celebrating of, the story of the first Christmas.

And remember that one day Jesus the King and Judge will come again, and we must be ready.

Amen