

Reflection for Advent Sunday by Rev'd Michael Last

This weekend marks the start of Advent. The way the weather has been recently and the fact that we are still in November, the start of Advent and the new liturgical year seems to have crept up almost unnoticed; but it really is less than a month to Christmas. (Help!).

As the new liturgical cycle begins the focus will be on Matthew's gospel (Year A).

When each of us sits and reflects on the season of Advent, I wonder what are the key themes or ideas that come into our minds?

For many church goers, one of the most striking images of the season is the Advent wreath, with its five candles, often three purple, one pink and the white Christmas candle in the middle; one lit on each Sunday as we approach Christmas, pointing towards the great festival. It's a bit like a stopwatch counting down to the end of a match or some other great event! It is a reminder that time is one of the important themes of this season, but maybe not in the way many of us tend to think of it.

Yes, this is a time of preparation for Christmas, both practically and spiritually: a period of preparing, through restraint and penitence, not dissimilar to Lent, for the great annual feast celebrating Jesus' birth. The noise, though, of pre-Christmas music and celebration often drowns the Advent season.

Advent is also the a period when we look forward to Christ's return, his "Second Coming", and the fulfilment of his kingdom in power and glory.

Often when this topic is raised the question of "when" also comes up. When it will that be? How should our looking forward to it influence the way we live out the Christian life today?

For many of us, living over 2000 years since the events of the first Christmas and the story of Christ's life death and resurrection, the idea of Christ's return and the sense of immediacy that we see in scripture is somehow difficult to comprehend. Look at both our epistle from Romans and our gospel from Matthew this morning - it is a topic we cannot ignore. For the early church it was an expectation that drove them on.

For us it may feel like this - It has not happened in 2000 years why should it happen tomorrow?

One way of looking at this is to think of a setting that we can relate to more easily - one for example, in which we are required to produce a certain piece of work by a certain time. At college or university, it may be an essay; at work, a report or something a customer wants. At home, maybe a room or a corridor redecorated for a given event. If no timescale is set or the deadline is months away there does not appear to be any sense of urgency. It can wait till tomorrow. Yet, if the deadline is next week that is a very different matter. It focuses the mind wonderfully.

For the early church their belief not only in the return of Christ but also in the immediacy of that return focused all they did and said. It gave them a sense of urgency, a sense of drive in their sharing of the gospel message. Maybe that is something we have lost. We need the idea of Christ's return to influence us afresh, as it did in the early church, in a positive way, to renew our sense of urgency in growing the kingdom. And this season reminds us of its reality.

Spend time reading and reflecting on today's gospel reading and the section of Matthews's gospel that follows it up to the end of Chapter 25 - a section that should ideally be read as whole - and it makes several important points.

Firstly, what comes thorough is the clear assertion that The Son of Man will return but that we do not know when. *"No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the*

Son, but only the Father." This is no possible or maybe event: it will happen, and that should encourage us to live our lives as if the boss was to walk through the door at any moment and, as they do, asking us to give account for what we are doing or have done.

Secondly, when Christ returns we will all be accountable to him. There will be no favourites - judgement will be for all and totally fair.

We may be free now to live our lives just as we please - but at the end we will all have to give an account and there will be no place for excuses or mitigation on that day.

Thirdly, we are not all going the same way. Chapter 25:34 - *To one group he will say 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. To the other 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

In the supposedly tolerant, pluralist society in which we live this is an element of the gospels that cuts deep and hurts most. But the return of Christ and judgement are clearly there in scripture and we cannot, as much as we may want to, ignore them. For the Christian, though, it is not so much about finding acceptance before God through good works - justification by works, rather it is about giving account for the way having received God's love and grace, we lived out the Christian life, in word and action.

The challenge of this season is not to try to work out when Christ will return, but rather to acknowledge that it will happen and, having accepted that fact, to live in its light. As Paul puts it Romans 13:12, *"The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light."*

This season is a challenge to look at all parts of our lives, especially those parts that we know need to be touched by the gospel message and the love of God. Yet we have been holding back on. It can wait until tomorrow. Well, maybe tomorrow will not come.

Similarly, it is a challenge to us to renew our vigor and focus more clearly on what is important as we seek to share the love of God with others.

This season of Advent has in many ways been taken over by the commercialisation of the Christmas season, so much so that the real message is drowned out. In our modern world it is more important than ever that Christians take and use this advent season in the way it was intended to be - a time of challenge and reflection; a time to place things into perspective.

The underlying question being:

If Christ was to return tomorrow, how would he address you and me as he looks at the way we have spent our time? Would we hear the words "Well done"?

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."