

Advent 1: A Time to Watch

If we're not careful, we can approach the season of Advent in the same way that we approach our weekly shop at Tesco. On Tuesday night as I walked into the supermarket, I was immediately confronted with the same old, same old offers on Christmas tins of sweets - £3.50 this year if you have a Club Card, the same old, same old Christmas decorations and trees, the same old, same old Christmas food, and the same old, same old Advent calendars. Shopping can feel like a commercial roundabout where you can safely predict that at key times of the year, you will *absolutely* know what the shops will be selling. Shoppers, of course, will approach this in one of two ways. At this time of the year, there will be those who will *unbelievably* excited that Christmas is just around the corner, with its emphasis on good food, partying, presents and time with the family; and there will be those who are most definitely *not* excited, for a variety of reasons, not least this year with the rising cost of everything associated with Christmas, let alone trying to keep the house warm. But there's probably a continuum with those two positions at opposite ends, and I wonder where *you* find yourself at this time of year.

The same can be said of Advent. Its emphasis on the coming of the Son of Man can equally produce two quite different reactions amongst church members. Some Christians will adopt the 'same old, same old' response to the readings for the first Sunday of Advent, apocalyptic in nature, and think that the focus on Christ's appearing is much ado about nothing, or at least much ado about nothing believable. Whilst others will start the day with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, searching the Bible for signs of the end times, and searching the newspaper to see if those signs are yet in view. Again, there will be a continuum, and you're invited to reflect where you might place yourself along it. Those of us who are undecided or *agnostic* about the end times might be tempted to fall into a state of perpetual apathy, where we endure the '*most strange*' texts, whilst looking forward to the John the Baptist and Mary readings that help us look forward to Jesus, whereas those Christians who are focused on the last things are tempted to fall into a state of perpetual anxiety. I'd like to suggest though that today's passage encourages faith rather than apathy, and hope rather than anxiety. Here's why.

This passage, coming the week after Christ the King, reminds us of the profound biblical faith that God is sovereign over all of human history. However we choose to read Matthew 24, Jesus tells us in this passage that the God who created history at the beginning is also history's goal – there at the beginning, there at the end, and there in everything in-between. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* may well have said '*Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*', but this isn't what we read from our Bibles. For the people of the Bible and for us as church, life is a tale told by a strong and sovereign God, enacted according to God's pleasure. It's full of both judgement and grace, and it moves towards the time when God will make all things new. What the Advent liturgy [and music] does, if we allow it to, is to assure us that we *are* God's people, and that the history in which we live is God's story, moving from God ... to God. It's therefore very much a story of *faith* rather than apathy, helped if we only look back at what God has done, giving us confidence of what God *can* and *will* do in the future, in God's own time. We see this in the great stories of the Bible, reflected in the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Bible remembered today as we lit our first Advent candle. Go and read the story of Abraham and Sarah as recorded in Genesis 12 – it's a fascinating

story with many twists and turns, with the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise to them of a son. But we also see it in the stories of our *own* lives, as we each have our own testimony of the impact of knowing God as our heavenly Father.

So, if we accept that the passage encourages faith instead of apathy, how do Jesus' words in this difficult chapter encourage hope rather than anxiety? There is no doubt that the passage is full of signs of the end but the initial warning is for us *not* to get caught up in trying to predict the future, to not create an apocalyptic calendar and put it up on the kitchen wall. Let's remind ourselves of the opening verse – '*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*' Many of us will know the Serenity Prayer – you might have it on a Christian bookmark, a postcard or a mug, but it begins with the words, '*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can.*' In relation to the end times, it can be hard to acknowledge the facts that we cannot know; yet with that acceptance comes a kind of serenity. If *Jesus* is hopeful as he waits for a consummation that he himself doesn't understand, surely we can learn our hope from him.

One of the great gifts that we desire as followers of Jesus is to be able to trust in the future without controlling or even knowing the details of what is yet to come. As we read in the words of that great hymn:

All my hope on God is founded,
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

So, if God grants us the serenity to accept the things we can't change, let's pray for courage this Advent to change the things we can. We can make this time of Advent a truly special time. Not a time of apathy or anxiety but a time where we intentionally draw close to God, through Jesus his Son. A time where we heed Jesus' reminder to spiritually remain awake – the last words of today's passage tells us to *'Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'* In the foreword to the *'Love Life: Live Advent'* booklets, available on the church table, the Archbishop of York writes,

'Advent is a season when we are normally encouraged to do the things we normally do, but do them with a purpose, with determination, and with more joy and hope.'

I'd put it very simply, he says: it's time to get up. It's time to wake up. It's time to clean up. It's time to grow up. It's time to serve. But it's also a time to read, to reflect, to pray, and to know that the One who came at that first Advent is the one who is for ever inviting us: Come, follow me.'

So, don't go to Tesco's and come back thinking, like me, 'same old, same old' about the run up to Christmas. Use Advent as a time to change what you can change, and I encourage you to use the Live Advent booklet with its daily practical prayer. Today, it's a reflection on the story of Abraham and Sarah so my suggestion to read Genesis 12 is very timely.

One day Jesus may appear in the clouds, suddenly, like a thief in the night. But before that – as Matthew reminds us – Jesus will appear just around the corner, suddenly, like a hungry person, or a neighbour ill-clothed, or someone sick or imprisoned.

'Therefore, we also must be ready.'

Amen.