

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE  
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Advent Sunday – 27<sup>th</sup> November 2022

*Canon David Pickering*

***Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.***  
*Matthew 24.42)*

So here we are again, Advent Sunday, the beginning of the Christian Liturgical Year. As we start a new year of worship, perhaps I ought to wish everyone Bonne Année? But instead, I'd rather ask a question: "How awake do you feel?" That seems to be the call of all this morning's readings. The popular Christian writer Susan Stones puts it succinctly, ***The Church begins its new year on Advent Sunday with the alarm clock jerking us out of sleep. There isn't even a snooze button. There is a sense of urgency as we listen to the readings.***

So how awake are we? And to what are we called to be awake?

All our readings seem to challenge us to be awake for special events not far away. In today's well-known and radical passage, Isaiah says of the Lord: ***He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2.4.)*** - words that surely should shake up and wake up our present-day, war-torn and oppressive world. Today's psalm calls us to be awake for the need to ***Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.'*** Psalm 122. 6&7.

And again, in the New Testament reading, another well-known passage, Saint Paul has a clear wake-up call for the Romans: ***Besides this, you know what time it is, how now is the moment to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. (Romans 13. 11 & 12.)***

Isaiah, the psalmist and Saint Paul are all very clear about the need to stay awake and alert to the circumstances and situations that we see around us, the urgent need to establish real peace - and even the need for radical change in the way we live. Yet the Gospel reading seems to be a wake-up call to something more dramatic, even climatic; the Second Coming. It begins: ***But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, only the Father. Matthew 24.36.*** And closes: ***Therefore you must also be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matthew 24.44.)***. So are we awake? Are we ready for the Second Coming?

The word Advent means 'coming', and of course we're looking forward to celebrating and commemorating the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet today's Gospel and other readings call us to be ready and awake for a second coming. In a few moments we will declare in the Nicene Creed: ***He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.***

In its very first years, the Apostolic Church certainly expected Jesus to make an early return. Saint Paul writing to the Church at Philippi says, ***We eagerly wait for our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from heaven (Philippians 3.2)***. And in what are possibly his earliest letters, Paul constantly calls on the Thessalonians to be ready for the Second Coming. ***May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*** sums up his message well (*1 Thessalonians 5.23*).

Over the centuries there have been various speculations about the date. Towards the end of the first millennium many in the Church believed that the year 1000 would see the coming of ***our Lord, King and Judge***. There were a few similar quiet mutterings in the late 1990s - some believed that during 2000 would mark his reappearance. Back in the seventeenth century the scholarly Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher, was more precise. He predicted from his 'biblical calculations' that the 22nd of October, 1996 would be the day. Can any of us remember anything about what we were doing then? I expect that for most of us, it was a very normal Tuesday. So far Jesus has not appeared at his Second Coming.

So perhaps we should consider this. Since the early days of the small and persecuted Church, history and thinking have moved on. We often have no difficulty in responding to the metaphors and images in other poetic biblical

passages. Maybe we're in danger of interpreting these particular texts in a far too literal sense? In our gospel text, Jesus seems to emphasise that ***you do not know on what day your Lord is coming***. The greater stress is upon the idea that we need to ***keep awake***. Instead of speculating on the date of the Day of Judgement, or whatever other title we may wish give it, the focus should be on making sure that we're ready for it. To paraphrase the hymn *Awake my soul*, "***live every day as if it were your last***".

If we respond to these words with fear, they can seem restrictive and intimidating. But perhaps we might rather see them as an exciting invitation - a call to be awake and alert to the presence of God and Jesus in our world and lives in the here and now. "***Read the papers, and see what God is doing in the world***" was a saying attributed to Fr Herbert Kelly. In 1893 he founded an Anglican Religious Community, the Society of the Sacred Mission, where I trained for the priesthood in the 1960s. Of course he was speaking and I was training in the days well before the internet and rolling news channels. But Fr. Kelly's basic concept is still true: stay awake to what's going on in the world and try to understand where God may be at work.

Do we centre our understanding of the world and our own lives on where God is being revealed? So many forms of the modern media bombard us with negative and alarmist views. How many of us are now drawn into *doomscrolling* on their various devices? No doubt in Fr Kelly's days there was bad as well as good news in the press of the day, but 24-hour rolling news on smartphones and TVs didn't invade people's daily lives.

Is it through a lack of faith that we don't see God and his love working away in our own lives and the wider world? In our evening prayers do we look at what has been good that day? Do we ask ourselves what we've seen or experienced in our personal lives of God's love and goodness? The very fact that we woke up that morning can be counted as a real blessing. And from that moment we should go through the day aware of God's presence in all that surrounds us.

In a recent homily Christine referred to some words of Etty Hillesum. Throughout her writings, this young Jewish woman retained a strong sense of the presence of God, even as, in the most dire circumstances, she awaited her own journey to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. God never goes away. He is always there, waiting for

us to wake up to his presence. And it is this sense of the divine presence that can strengthen us in whatever trials and tribulations we may face in daily living.

To help us awaken ourselves to God in our worship on this new Advent Sunday I found three “awake” hymns. For our offertory hymn I chose *Awake, awake: fling off the night*. It’s always suitable for morning prayer, especially for its reminder in the opening words of the last verse; ***Then sing for joy, and use each day, give thanks for everything alway.***

Amen.