

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

**Reflection – Advent Sunday**

**28<sup>th</sup> November 2021**

*Canon David Pickering*

*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise you heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21.28)*

Today is the 1st Sunday of Advent; the beginning of a new Church Year. We move on into Year B in our weekly lectionary, with the whole of St Luke's gospel to look forward to. We anticipate the celebration of God coming as one of us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Advent is the season of looking forward and moving forward. But I hope you will allow me to go into reverse and share a couple memories and reminiscences. As a small boy, probably between the ages of six and ten, Advent Sunday was a special day, when I handed in, with great pride and joy, my almost full Sunday School Stamp Book, crumpled and scruffy from my pockets over the past year. And what a pleasure to hold a pristine new copy for the coming year.

In more recent times, when The Alternative Service Book came out in 1980, each Sunday had an Introductory Sentence related to the readings and seasons. Sadly these Introits were dropped in Common Worship. The one for Advent Sunday really set the tone for the coming season: *Now is the time to wake out of sleep: for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. (Romans 13.11.)* Paul's words call on us to get up and get on with life in faith and confidence. Or to quote a common phrase in Church of England circles at the moment, go forward and live our lives in love and faith.

All our readings this morning are about looking and going forward.

In our Old Testament passage, the often doom-laden prophet Jeremiah looks forward with confidence to the coming of a descendant of king David, a leader who will put into effect God's righteousness rule. *"In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land"* (Jeremiah 33. 15). This promise is repeated three times.

As we enter Advent and move on in our lives, we have to ask ourselves, if this is the Word of the Lord for us, do we have the same trust and confidence that God's righteousness, in other words his loving will, purpose and justice, will triumph in the end?

In our New Testament reading, St Paul takes this looking forward a step further. Are the Thessalonians ready for the coming of the Lord? Paul's letters to the Church in Thessalonica may well have been written when there was an early expectation of Jesus' return. So the Apostle calls on them to live in mutual love and holiness for the coming of the Lord. To quote the final verse from our reading, *"And may he (the Lord) so strength your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."* (1 Thessalonians 3.13).

Of course there was no immediate return in historical terms. But we can say that Jesus does return every time goodness overcomes evil, love replaces hatred, justice triumphs over any kind of corruption.

And this brings us to our Gospel reading where we meet the nub of the matter with what might seem at first sight a doom-laden prospect: *"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves. People will faint with fear and faint with foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."* (Luke 21. 25 & 26).

Not a vision of the future any of us would look forward to!

So what are we to make of these readings? How might they help us in any way to prepare for the celebration of God born among us? In Jesus' warnings there are words that we might take literally. The recent Cop26 Conference revealed, *"on earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and wave."* And we know why this is so as we see glaciers and icebergs melting, raising the

oceans to dangerous levels, people displaced from arid or flooded lands. But as with so much of scripture, the poetic truth is more revealing than the literal text. And the poetical truth can have a strong message for us.

We often say that things have to get worse before they get better. This is what some fear about the present coronavirus pandemic, especially with this weekend's news about the Omicron variant. This is what I think Jesus is saying to us this morning when we read the whole of the passage. He knew this would have to be his own experience. Things got much, much worse for him. But they did get much, much better.

*As we affirm each time we say the Nicene Creed: He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day He rose again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.*

Jesus does return and the Kingdom of God is being realised in many ways and places in our world today, even in our own lives. Wherever there is love, care, kindness and creative goodness, there is God's will and rule being fulfilled. We have to believe and trust that one day there will be a complete and perfect fulfilment of God's will and purpose for, and in, his creation. Jesus gives this assurance in the sentences that follow:

*Then they will see the 'Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Again, there is no need to read this literally: we can feel the poetic power of his words.*

*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. And here he speaks to people of all times who read his words: Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Luke 21. 27,28 & 33.)*

Perhaps one of the things that crises like epidemics and climate change teach us and challenge us to face, is that to bring about the better world God promises us in Jesus, we, like him, will have to face a cross of change in the way we live our lives,

changes to our life style, changes to the distribution of the world's riches and wealth. This can be done by the grace of God, and it has to begin in our own lives.

Today's Advent message may sound very daunting, but it shows us that we can rejoice. It points to a great celebration: the birth of the one who by his life, death and resurrection revealed God's love for us. He can and will have the final victory.

Amen.