

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

**Sermon – Advent Sunday**

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

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Today is the beginning of the church's new year. As ever, it begins with a season of expectation as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ in his incarnation. The season also looks forward to his final advent as judge at the end of time. In many ways we have lost sight of the second aspect, but it means Advent gives us a chance to reflect on some fundamental questions of living. That's why clergy were instructed to preach in Advent on the so-called 'Four Last Things' of death, judgment, heaven and hell.

For decades this has meant that the church felt out of step with the rest of society during Advent. While the church was contemplating the 'end times', outside Christmas carols were playing in the streets. So there was a mismatch, not least because people simply didn't have a sense any more of the 'end times' affecting them.

Yet my hunch is that the pandemic has made this less of a mismatch. It feels as though 'end times' are in focus in our society in a way they probably haven't been since the nuclear arms race subsided. Just as the church has more or less given up preaching about the Four Last Things in Advent, society now seems more preoccupied with them. Out of step again.

In our Gospel reading from St Luke today, Jesus refers to the importance of interpreting the signs of the times. There are plenty of those at the moment. The pandemic was viewed by some as a sign that the world was out of control. In parallel, the climate emergency has confronted us with the prospect of a planet no longer able to support human life. And if all that weren't enough, cosmologists now speak of something known as the 'big crunch' in which they foresee the 'big bang' of the universe reversing. That *would* be the end of the world.

All this adds up to a growing secular sense of the 'end times' that is surprisingly in tune with what the biblical authors wrote of centuries ago. Suddenly the church's talk of 'end times' doesn't seem so far out of step with the sense of foreboding many are experiencing today. What, if anything, does the Christian faith have to offer, to help us to live well within these times?

Well, it turns out, quite a lot. Let's look for a moment at the Four Last Things.

Death. Our society does a pretty good job of managing not to think about it most of the time. But the pandemic changed that. People no longer feel 'safe' in the way that they did. Perhaps as a result, there is renewed interest in a Gospel of resurrection, even though not always expressly articulated. (Try standing at any gathering in a dog collar and you will see what I mean.) Resurrection is what the Christian faith has to offer in the face of death. It's a good way of living with the knowledge that all of us one day will come to die.

Judgment. In Normandy there used to be a tradition on Advent Sunday of sending children to run around the fields and hit the haystacks so that all the rats ran out of the reaped harvest. It is quite a good image for the kind of spiritual work we should try to do in Advent. Advent exposes our 'darkness', the faults that are usually more forgivable than the ways in which we try to hide them. Advent encourages us to face up to ourselves, to pray for forgiveness and for the light of God to infuse us as we wait with humility and honesty for the coming of Christ.

The idea of judgment (the Old English word for which is 'doom') is often thought of with a sense of dread. Think of those medieval 'doom' paintings with people being sent downwards or upwards. Judgment makes us think of the things we have got wrong, messed up, wished we hadn't done or wished we had. Yet the Christian message is that God's judgment is inseparable from God's mercy, that they are two sides of the same coin. We should learn to think of judgment as an act of God's grace. The reason we can trust this is that the nature of God has been revealed to us in the form we are best able to understand – that of a human being. One who, in dying on the cross, prayed that his torturers might be forgiven.

Meanwhile, the sense that we will be held to account at the end of the day is a salutary one. The spiritual writer Gerard Hughes suggested that if we want to know how to live well, we should start by writing our own obituary. How would we wish to be remembered? What would we need to do with our lives in order to be remembered like that? When we reflect that none of us knows how long we may have to make those changes, it becomes an urgent question.

Heaven. Our reading today from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians ends with an encouragement to keep their hearts holy in order to be found blameless at the second coming of Christ. It's a traditional vision, though in some ways a limited one. There is an idea in contemporary theology that offers a different perspective when we think about heaven. It is known as 'Living God's future now'. It's about creating a community in which the virtues of heaven are practised on earth now. If we will allow the Holy Spirit to make us instruments of God's peace, we will be 'living God's future now'.

That idea also seems to me bound up with how we prepare for God's judgment and mercy. I'd like to suggest we try an exercise this Advent, an exercise in living God's future now. Perhaps the thing human beings crave most is forgiveness. It's the thing Jesus kept saying to people who came to him in need: 'Your sins are forgiven'. He discerned that even if they appeared to want something else, such as physical healing, underneath forgiveness was what they longed for most from the one who called himself the Son of Man.

Forgiveness. What if we started now? What if we decided to forgive someone who has wronged us, not because they deserve it or have even asked for it, but because we believe God forgives us, and we know that we don't deserve it or even ask for it most of the time. We can see the beauty and the freedom in that, and we want, however hesitatingly, to offer it to others.

So, over the next four weeks, let's try forgiving one person. It may not even be someone living now. Try forgiving them, not because they deserve it but because they don't. Then try the same with another person. And then another. And we may discover that we begin to walk more lightly, live more fully in the

present, not ruminating on the past. Giving attention to other people, not always preoccupied with ourselves. We may even get to a point when we are living so fully in the present that we are able to give full attention to the birth of Christ at Christmas. And give thanks with our whole heart, a heart we will know by then to be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

I've left one out. Hell. Based on what we have been thinking about, I'll leave you to work out what that is.

Amen.