

## **Mark 13:24-37 Advent Sunday**

This morning/afternoon I would like to wish you a happy New Year. "What?", I hear you say, "the vicar has really lost his marbles this time, two weeks off and he thinks he's missed Christmas!" Well, don't worry, I haven't quite lost my marbles, not just yet anyway! Today is Advent Sunday, the first day of a new year in the Western Church's liturgical calendar, and although it might seem quite odd to most people starting a new year at the beginning of December, I think Advent is a great way to start the year, because in so many ways it sets the tone for the whole of each coming year. It sets the tone of what our whole Christian faith is all about, and at the beginning of the year it informs us why that faith is still so relevant, not just to us, but to the whole world around us.

### **Advent**

If you search for the word 'Advent' on the internet Wikipedia tells us: *'Advent is a Christian season observed as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas'*. Now that's true to a certain extent, Advent is the period of time in preparation for our Christmas celebrations, but it is also much more. The word 'advent' initially comes from the Greek word *parousia* and as with many Greek words it's difficult to

translate directly into English, but *parousia* means 'physical presence' and it's normally used when the physical presence of someone special is expected, someone like an honoured guest, a king or ruler. So the season of Advent has this double meaning. It is a time when we prepare ourselves for the great celebration of Christ's birth, but it is also a time when we prepare ourselves and look forward to the second coming of Christ in expectation of his physical presence again on earth. And that's not something we should fear and worry about, but it's something we look forward to with eager and joyful anticipation.

### **Prepared**

I'm one of those people who likes to be prepared, someone who has thought about things before they happen and I like to be ready when things happen. I love having visitors that I'm expecting, I always try to make sure I'm ready, so when the expectant visitors arrive they can hopefully feel relaxed, rather than watching me rush around at the last minute. I guess we're all a bit like that when we are expecting visitors, we do our best to prepare and get ready for their arrival, and if we know the needs of people who we are expecting, we normally try to accommodate them in the best way possible. But sometimes we can't always be prepared, we can't always know what to expect.

## **24hs in A&E**

I try not to watch too much telly, but there are a few programmes which I really enjoy, one of which is 24 hours in A&E. If you've not familiar with it, each hour long programme is set in a hospital A&E department and is supposed to be filmed over a 24 hour period. I like to watch it because the programme really does showcase a small part of our fantastic health service, and for the fact it shows how people and relationships tend to work at their best at the most vulnerable times of our lives. The programme format is usually the same. You meet various people who come through the department in the 24 hour period, some people with minor emergencies and more serious trauma cases who normally come in via ambulance on blue lights.

You always know when the serious cases are about to come in, because the red telephone on the wall rings and someone takes down the details of the patient. The department then swings into action with the right team on standby, expectantly waiting for the trauma patient to arrive through the doors. What I have realised from watching the programme, is that the doctors and nurses have no real idea what they are dealing with until the patient arrives. The casualties injuries are headlined during the telephone call, whether it's a fractured spine from a fall; broken bones from a car crash or

perhaps a heart attack, but the extent of the damage and the patient's condition are not really known until they arrive in the department.

All the staff can do up to that point is ensure they are ready to act efficiently when the patient arrives. They prepare by getting the right equipment together, informing the specialists they may need to help and clear the treatment bay for the arrival. These are highly trained professionals, ready to deal with anything at a moment's notice, their preparations for such an emergency go back much further than these last minute checks. There's years of medical training, learning procedures and developing team-working skills. All of this training and preparation builds up to enable their life-saving care to be put into good and immediate effect as the paramedics bring the stretcher in.

## **Gospel**

Just before today's Gospel passage, Jesus has delivered a spiritual "red phone call" crisis message, by prophesying the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. This was completely unthinkable to his Jewish listeners, the Temple was much more than just a building, but it stood as a prominent symbol of the history and greatness of the Jewish nation. So, deeply alarmed, Jesus' disciples pressure

him to tell them when the catastrophic event will happen and the signs they need to look out for. Jesus outlines the troubles that would happen to God's people before the destruction of the temple in AD 70 and then he goes on to talk about the 'coming of the Son of Man', his second coming and the end of all that is wrong with this world.

### **Signs**

As we enter this season of Advent, the world around us is in a race to read the signs of the times in an attempt to make sense of all that's going on. The media is rife with reports of increased terrorism, nations rising up against nations, rising religious extremism and intolerance. Political, religious and community leaders are under continual scrutiny as reports of indiscretion and misconduct continue to surface, crime seems to be taking over in our streets and people are wrestling each other to the ground just to get their hands on a cheap television. Diseases such as Ebola are indiscriminately killing the innocent, and people are in continual competition for the world's limited resources while those who are the most vulnerable in society suffer the most.

When we look at the world as a whole, we can easily begin to wonder what all this means. It's no wonder that some people begin

to interpret all these events as signs of the end times and other people begin to lose hope in there ever being anything better. In the midst of suffering and despair, the world longs for some kind of cosmic event which will do away with all that is wrong in a single stroke, and in amongst all of that, we get people shouting in the streets warning people that Christ's return is just around the corner. But despite those who look at the signs and are confident in claiming that Christ's second coming is imminent, Jesus clearly tells us that no one knows the time, not even the Angels in heaven, not even Jesus himself, but only the Father knows.

### **Christ's return**

The Christian church is firm in its teaching and belief that one day Christ will return, but exactly how and when this divine event will take place remains a mystery. Our words of scripture don't give any clear indication of the event either, but they do provide us with signs to help us to navigate through our life's difficult journey, along with our trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to assist us on the way. Until Christ's return, we are also reminded by scripture to remain awake and diligently continue doing the work God has laid upon our hearts. Now is not the time to be caught sleeping while the master is away, but to be busy building the Kingdom of God in the here and

now. To be training ourselves in preparation for the event, to be ready, like the health care professionals waiting to receive a patient.

### **Coming year**

Until the time when Christ does return again, Advent really does set the tone for the coming year and every subsequent coming year. In the light of all that troubles the world today, this and each Advent presents us with a unique opportunity to stand in the gap and proclaim the Good News by holding fast the Light of Christ in our own lives, and shining that light in to the dark corners of the world. And in doing so, we shine the light of hope for all to see and just maybe, just maybe people will begin to see that small glimmer of hope that the Light of Christ offers to a world of darkness.

The world is approximately 4.5 billion years old and it was only just over 2 thousand years since Jesus came the first time. Whether Christ returns today, tomorrow, in a hundred or in thousands of years, today is, as is any other day, the day of salvation. If we look closely at the signs of the times, they all point to the One who holds all of the answers to the troubles of the world, and Christ's mission to the world is as clear today as when he first sent his disciples into this world.

May we all continue to be faithful to proclaiming God's love for all creation, and continue to work tirelessly in justice and righteousness, bringing the Light of Christ to this broken world until our master returns in glory.