

Advent Sunday
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2022

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Well, happy New Year! It is good to be together on this first day of a new liturgical year, on the first day of Advent. And actually this year, because Christmas falls on a Sunday, we get the longest Advent that it is possible to have. Sometimes Advent is only just over three weeks long, but this year we have four complete weeks: 28 days to revel in this most wonderful season.

And paradoxically, if I may, I would like to begin this morning by taking us to the end. In 51 weeks' time - the Lord being our helper - we will gather here to keep the Feast of Christ the King, and because today we begin the year of readings in which we read St Matthew, most of the time, as our gospel in 51 weeks' time - minus about 2 ½ minutes - we will hear these words read as our gospel:

“When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand, and the goats he will place at his left.”

We begin this new Christian year with the end of the year in sight. That is where we are heading. We are heading for that

vision of judgement. We are heading for the Doom. We begin to read St Matthew this morning, and I want to just flag up where that cycle of readings will end, and there's an important connection to which I will return in a moment.

And it is very hard to avoid that theme, that distinctive Advent theme, in this church, dominated as we are, by that depiction of Christ in glory, with the sheep on his right-hand side rising towards Jerusalem, and the goats on the left, being poked into the mouth of hell. No matter how filled with Christmas trees this building gets, the Doom still dominates. On Good Friday, stripped of all other decoration, there, still, is the Doom.

In the older translations our second reading this morning begins, “knowing ye what the season is, how it is time to awake out of sleep.” The Advent season's call is to wakefulness, watchfulness. To preparation, to be aware that we do not have infinite time. The Advent call is a challenge both to living solely in the moment, never thinking about the consequences, but also a challenge to the seduction of believing that we are immortal, that stuff will just sort itself out. I feel considerably less immortal now than I did was 20, but even so I recognise regularly in my own life tendency to just assume I can bowl along, and that the thinking about the end can wait for another day. But no, St Paul calls to us: know ye the season.

Actually what he is saying is that every day is Advent. We live constantly in the season of Advent, in between the first coming of Christ at Christmas, and the second coming. That coming which is depicted in the Doom, and described in our gospel reading. And just notice that today's gospel reading comes from the 24th chapter of St Matthew, and the gospel on the last Sunday of this New Year will come from the very next chapter, chapter 25. We are to live this whole year pressed between the

pages of chapter 24 and chapter 25. We hear this morning, as we might expect, that stark Advent call, that reminder that everything around us is temporal. That there is going to be an end, and that that end is going to be both unannounced and a judgement. There is mystery baked in here. Notice that not even the angels know when the end will come. Only God. God is the only person who gets to press the stop button. So we're not to fuss overmuch about that. We are to take note, however, that there is active work to do while we wait. We are to be awake, on the watch for the spiritual burglar who wants to have away with our soul, with our faith. We are to defend our home - not our bricks and mortar, but our baptismal identity. We are to return to those promises. We are to hone ourselves. This is not a four-week preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Let us be clear about that. Yes, the light is growing brighter as each sequential candle is lit, but the Advent wreath is much more a promise of the dazzling light of the Kingdom than it is the star of Bethlehem.

And readings like the one we have just heard, out of context, run the risk of being both unhelpful and terrifying. Terrifying because of the language of judgement and separation, and unhelpful because, okay, we are supposed to stay awake, but what does that actually mean?

Well again, throw your mind forward 51 weeks. In the very next chapter of St Matthew, though it will take us whole year to get there liturgically, we find the other half of the map, or the other side of the coin, or the key to understanding how this might work.

Judgement doesn't exist in a vacuum. It exists in a partnership with mercy. Whatever judgement might look like in reality, and today's gospel reading offers us one picture - this was taken up

20 years or so ago by popular range of evangelical Christian novels that explored what would happen if suddenly all the Christians disappeared up into heaven, and all of the non-Christians were left on earth. I don't necessarily recommend them - today's gospel offers one amongst a number of images of what might happen 'at the end' - and the Doom offers another image.

But the *very next* chapter of St Matthew, the chapter to which we are heading this year, tells us that the key to understanding judgement is mercy. "The King will say to those at his right hand, 'come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and in prison and you cared for me.'"

Mercy is the currency of the Christian. Mercy is the currency of the Church. Because mercy is very Jesus. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan: "which one of these, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of bandits?" And he answered, "one who showed him mercy."

It is not for us to second-guess the mysterious operation of the Kingdom. It is not for us to prophesy dates and times. That is the province of Christ the King. But it is for us to heed the Advent call to shape our lives like people who are awake. And people who are awake, people who are safeguarding their baptism, honing their faith, are people who try, day by day, to recognise Christ in the world around them, and to show mercy.

Isaiah's prophecy of a transformed world, the world established in the shape of the Kingdom, is of a world in which people

refashion their weapons into instruments of cultivation. Where a sword and spear become the apparatus by which things grow, and ripen, and blossom, and become sweet to the taste.

Take this Advent season, and see where you can create a pruning hook or a ploughshare. Where you can refashion the world around you into something full of mercy. Keep awake, praise God as the light slowly increases. Oh, and look at the Doom during our final hymn, because there's one more important message in it. Way up at the top there, seated on his rainbow in glory, judging the nations, you can just make out that there are still marks on his hands and feet. Right to the end, judgement bears the marks of mercy. The ultimate act of mercy. With what rapture gaze we on those glorious scars.

Amen