

The Second Sunday of Advent

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdelene,
Hewelsfield, 2023.*

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

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

Our journey through Advent continues, and we arrive today at the second Sunday, and almost the halfway point of this year's incredibly short Advent. And although Christmas might be breaking out all around us in shops and streets, and maybe also in our own homes, today's readings make it very clear that it is the great Advent theme of the return of Christ, what is often referred to as the 'second coming', that we are to focus on today. I've done quite well I think, because I've arrived after the Nativity scene festival [at Hewelsfield] last week, and by being here rather than in Salisbury this week, I am also dodging the Christmas Tree Festival back home!

But of course we are doing two things, or at least two things, at the same time as we keep our annual Advent. We are preparing to remember the first coming of Christ at Christmas, getting ready in our hearts and minds for that joyful occasion, but we are also pointed very firmly by the readings of this season at the fact that Christmas was not the end of the story, but rather, to borrow Churchill's words, the beginning of the end.

It is a season of prophecy. At Advent and Christmas carol services we pretty much always hear those great prophecies of Isaiah, and Micah, and Malachi, and we heard some of those words in our gospel reading this morning. It's always interesting

to read the very opening words of each gospel, because they give us a really clear insight into what the gospel writer thought was important. And for Mark - who of course doesn't write about Christmas at all, there is no Christmas story in Mark's gospel - for Mark what is important is that Jesus is all about the fulfilment of prophecy. Or to put it even more strongly and confidently, Jesus *is* the fulfilment of prophecy. So his opening words are words of six or 800 years earlier: 'see, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, he will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord.'

And Mark is of course referring to John the Baptist. Mark sees John the Baptist as the fulfilment of the promise that a messenger will come to prepare the people for becoming of their Messiah.

And I'm going to leave John the Baptist largely to next week's preacher, because we hear lots more about him in next week's gospel reading, and instead focus on prophecy this morning. I'm not utterly convinced by the Advent candle themes that people seem to think we need to follow, but one of the sets of themes suggests that we light the first candle to remember the patriarchs, and the second candle to reflect upon the prophets. So that's quite neat.

What's really interesting is that we think about prophets as belonging to the Old Testament, we might imagine old men with colossal beards standing on hilltops, but of course this morning we heard some New Testament prophecy. That passage from 2 Peter is really quite extraordinary isn't it? And it's a really interesting mixture of some quite terrifying stuff, and some less terrifying and more comforting stuff. And don't forget this is being written after Jesus has lived and died and risen and

ascended back into heaven. No one is quite sure when this letter was written, but it's probably about 100 A.D., something like that. And it's reminding the early Christians that the world that we live in now is not the end of the story. That although it is important to live as Christians in the world now, we are to look towards, as the letter puts it, 'the coming of the day of God'. And actually although the descriptions of how the world will end are quite alarming - the elements being dissolved, the heavens passing away with a loud noise and whatnot - actually most scientists would want to say something very similar. If we don't manage to burn ourselves to death through mismanagement of creation earlier, when the sun goes supernova the planet will indeed be destroyed, and most of this language is not entirely inappropriate to that.

So we all know, and most rational people would agree, that what we see now is not what will last forever. Created things have a lifespan. What second Peter is trying to do is not to provide a scientific explanation or description of that. The author is trying to put some theology around it. What will it mean to God, and to you and me and the millions of Christians who have come before and will come after, that this is not the be all and end all. That there is a world to come which is not temporary or fragile. Which is, in the words we heard this morning, 'new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.'

And there I think is the key. 'Where righteousness is at home.' What we are to look forward to is a place, whatever it might look like, whenever it might happen, where righteousness is the default. Where righteousness is what there is. Where the injustices, the discriminations, the sinfulness, the lukewarmness, and the downright evils of the world, have been refined away, have been eliminated, and righteousness is at home. And that begins at Christmas, with the birth of the baby, and like the first

hints of the Dawn, we can see it coming, but it doesn't arrive until the end.

And as I've probably said to you before, if we want to try to understand difficult bits of Scripture, which I think this reading is, then one of the ways to do that is to look for repeated words. And the words that are repeated in the passage from second Peter this morning are 'patience', and 'waiting'. And those are both very 'Adventy' words. Actually even in the knowledge that the world we currently live in will be ultimately destroyed, whether by us or by the natural processes of creation, we are not to panic, we are not to obsess, we are not to try to predict when and how that will happen, we are to be patient, and we are to wait. And alongside that we are to strive to be people of peace. So were not off the hook about what we are doing to the world. We absolutely need to be people who work for justice, who work for a proper and respectful handling of our natural world, and our brothers and sisters. But the watchwords are patience and waiting. Prophecy gets terribly misrepresented. Prophecy isn't really about predicting the future, it is almost always about how to live now. And this is a really good example. Why should we be patient and wait? Because that is what Christ does. The reading ended with the words, 'regard the patience of our Lord as salvation'. God is patient with us. He waits for us to sort ourselves out and come to him. So we should!

In one of the other schemes of what the Advent candles mean the second Advent candle is the candle of peace. That's a word that fits right in with patience and waiting. Advent is a time for us to find the place of peace in our hearts, in our own lives of faith, so that we can speak peace to our communities and to the world, all while we wait in this space given to us by the patience of our Lord, which is our salvation. Amen.