

Sermon for Advent Sunday 1 December 2024 Holy Trinity Geneva

Texts: Jeremiah 33.14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3.9-end; Luke 21.25-36

Advent Sunday

Holding together two very different perspectives can be hard and leave us wondering in which direction we should be going. In the case of Advent which starts today, we experience the tension in a very direct way.

For, on the one hand, the season of Advent which starts today, is characterised by joyful anticipation as we await the coming of Christ. We see this today in church as we light the first Advent candle, children (and a number of adults) too, will open the first door of their Advent calendar and tonight, in a candlelit church, we'll celebrate with carols and scripture, the forthcoming birth of Christ. Some of you may have noticed too that the normally austere frontage of our neighbour, the Bristol Hotel, has been transformed into a brightly lit, Advent calendar.

Yet, there is another aspect to Advent. You will probably have noticed as you came into church today, that the altar frontal and hangings have changed from red to purple, the colour of penitence. For Advent is also a penitential season, characterised particularly in the medieval church and right up to the early modern period, with a focus on what we traditionally call the four last things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell.

This aspect of Advent also has special focus on time: Jesus entering into human history at a certain point of time; our lives and our mortality; and the Second Coming of Christ in Judgment. Seen through this lens, in Advent we think about the present reality of Christ coming into the world; reflect on our own lives; and think about both our fate and the fate of the world when Christ returns again. It has often been linked, particularly on account of some of the Biblical texts set in Advent, with apocalyptic images of the end of time, often the destruction of God's enemies, the ending of injustice and corruption and the blessing and salvation of God's people.

Should we try to hold these two very different aspects together of Advent? Is it indeed possible? And if we do, how do we deal with the more difficult elements of this, many of which seem be outlandish in terms of how we understand our world today?

The answer is that we do need to hold both together – both the joyful anticipation and the penitential aspect seen through the great prism of Christ's coming at Christmas and coming in judgement to the end of time. If we don't, we are only seeing half the picture, missing the full significance of Advent and losing out ourselves as we fail to take its message into our hearts and lives. But we can only do this, in a way that makes sense, within the context of God's love for us and His call to us to live out that love in our relationships with others. It is this which I wish to explore with you this morning.

In our Gospel today, Jesus warns his followers of the trials and traumas which will come upon the earth. In the previous passage, he has prophesied the unthinkable – that the great temple of Jerusalem, symbol of the faith and hope of the Jewish people would fall – not one stone would be left standing. This would happen because the temple itself had become perverted- instead of being the place in which Israel could witness to the rest of the world, God's salvation, it had become a place of exploitation and corruption.

Now, in the passage we've heard today, Jesus alerts them to the signs which will accompany the end times – physical manifestations of earthquakes and floods and fear and uncertainty. Much of this was to become a reality after his death – after the revolt against Rome in AD66-70, the Romans destroyed the temple in AD70 with terrible destruction, following the suicide of the Emperor Nero in AD68, there were four emperors in two years – uncertainly and fear predominated.

There are certainly parallels with our own times – in our world which feels more precarious each day. Politically, we live in what feels like a knife edge with the war between Ukraine and Russia and the real risk of escalation. We've witnessed the terrible destruction of Gaza, the West Bank and Beirut, the tragedy in the Sudan and uncertainty as we await the new US Presidency. Environmentally, the recent COP 29 conference has shed another light onto the environmental disasters we face. And as societies, we are becoming a more fearful and in many ways, a less open world, increasingly keen, particularly in the West, to draw up the barriers against the outsider and the refugee.

In the face of all this, it's easy to lose hope. But now we need to come back afresh to our Gospel today and see what Jesus is also saying. He tells his followers that as they see these signs, they should not lose hope but rather look forward with expectation because their salvation is near at hand. What did he mean?

Jesus speaks to them of the coming of the Son of Man, a reference to the apocalyptic figure, mentioned in the Book of Daniel, who will bring God's justice and redemption to the world. There is judgement because of the consequences of human action. But there is also hope, as God's coming brings the opportunity for a new way of living together – a bringing of God's kingdom on earth.

We can only understand this within the context of God's love for us. This is the love which enables us to hold together the radically different aspects of Advent and helps us to see how we are called to responding the renewal of our lives.

In Advent, as we look forward with joyful expectation to the coming of Christ, we are reminded that this is happening because God loves us and longs to bring us salvation through Jesus. And as we also look ahead in Advent to the Second Coming of Christ, we are reminded that this is also taking place in the context of God's love for us – to help bring our renewal and redemption. God calls us, in love to respond and join in with this, in love not in fear, because, as St John reassures us 'There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4.18).

What does this mean for us now in terms of how we approach Advent:

1. First of all, Advent is a time when we are called to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love. Advent is a time of waiting when we wait on God whilst daily seek to open our hearts to Him. Just as we cannot hasten a human pregnancy but need to watch and wait and let the child develop in the womb, God calls us to watch and to be alert to the signs of his love already at work in the world so that we, in turn, can be witnesses to this. It's important that we give ourselves time and space for this and setting aside a quiet time each day of Advent, to pray and reflect using Bible, an Advent book or even a work of art or a poem can help us to do this.
2. It is a season in which we, as a Christian community, are particularly invited to grow together in the love of Christ. If we do so, we shall be better equipped in turn to witness to God's love and share it with others. We had a wonderful example of this in our epistle today when St Paul responds with joy when he learns that the little community of believers in Thessalonica which he founded and nurtured, is growing daily in their love of Christ and mutual support for each other. St Paul responds to them that they are able to do this because they are rooted in Christ. Each day, they are listening closely to God as to how He is calling them to grow in mutual love and to witness with courage to the external community in which they are based. Although he warns them of greater trials to come, he promises that as they grow as a community in God's love, they will be equipped to cope with what they have to face.

In the same way, Advent is a time for us to grow both spiritually and as a church family in God's love. Spiritually we can do this through praying for each other with a very special focus at this time; by joining in our Advent worship including our online Compline together and through our Advent discussion book groups and other sessions. Socially, we have wonderful opportunities to learn to get to know each other and to grow together in love at this time as, for example through our fair yesterday, the fellowship after our Advent Carol service tonight and with the whole church community at our forthcoming Nativity Play.

3. Finally, during Advent, as we are touched by the needs and suffering of the world and our own part in it, we are called by God to look and reach outwards. Jesus tells his followers to be alert and to be responsive. We need to do the same – not succumbing to despair at the state of the world, by instead, that our God is a God of justice, peace and love and He is already acting in the world to bring in His kingdom. We, as his followers are called to witness to the signs of God's love breaking in, often in unexpected ways and to see where God is inviting us to help make His kingdom on earth a reality.

In part, this may be through very practical acts of love we can undertake, for example, going to sing, as our Community Choir did yesterday, in an old people's home, or joining in with our shoebox appeal and preparing a box of

Christmas goodies for refugee families in Geneva who will have little at Christmas. It may be as a church or working with other churches in Geneva, we can use our fellowship and advocacy skills to challenge injustice and help develop a more compassionate and caring society. As we respond to God's great call to join in to further God's kingdom of justice and redemption, it's a time for us to look at our priorities, and to consider how we can use our gifts of time, resources and our power to be advocates, to bring good and lasting change.

This Advent, may we have the courage and integrity to hold together the challenge and joy of this season, to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, and to be willing to enter into God's great invitation to help bring his kingdom of love, justice and mercy on earth.

Amen

Canon Daphne Green 01 December 2024