

Advent 1 2021

Luke 21:25-36

I am sure that I have told you this before, but I love Advent. I have always loved Christmas, but these days I find that it is Advent that I really enjoy. For me it really is a time of joyful expectation. Can you remember times of joyful expectation in your life? Maybe the few weeks before you got married, or buying your first house, or having a baby? Maybe you have experienced such times in your Christian life, times when you had felt that particular closeness to God that makes everything feel wonderful and life feels full of purpose and possibility. I have been blessed to have had a handful of times when I have felt like that. But of course, whilst as Christians we must always be ready to meet Jesus face to face, either when we die or when He returns at the end of the world, we cannot live in a permanent state of heightened expectation and excitement. We would get exhausted and possibly even disillusioned. And actually, we would not be living life in all its fullness, which is what Jesus promised us.

Our passage from Luke today is full of paradox. Set in context Jesus is, as John said last week, quoting extensively from the words of the prophet Daniel. We understand that He was predicting the terrible sacking of Jerusalem when the Jews were driven out by the Romans and they destroyed the Temple. However, it is also clear, and the Jewish disciples who were listening to Him at the time would have understood this, that He is talking about the time when God will finally return and take His people to be with Him for eternity. The Son of Man will come in great power and glory!

My friend Steve Day likens the waiting in a state of readiness to firefighters always ready and waiting for the bell to ring, or maybe soldiers always ready at a moment's notice to be called in to battle, or teachers waiting for Ofsted to call and say there will be an inspection the next day. In order to be ready they have to be prepared, firefighters and soldiers have to maintain their fitness and their equipment, teacher must know their subjects and their children and have their lessons planned. But although they must always be ready, they cannot live in a permanent state of tension, that would be unbearable. They have to trust in their preparedness and continue to be disciplined and yes, they must be aware and watchful, but they have also to live in the moment and do the everyday things that need doing.

I think that it is a good analogy for the Christian life. We too should be prepared at all times to meet with King Jesus, as He says, "Be always on the watch, and pray.....that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man". And our preparation is the discipline of prayer, of

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loving others purposely and intentionally, of never tiring of doing good works, of meeting with our brothers and sisters to worship together and bless and encourage each other.

There are warnings for us as well. Whilst we cannot and should not live permanently in a state of hyper excitement and expectation, neither must we allow ourselves to become complacent, blasé, or neglectful. Be careful, Jesus tells us, not to allow our hearts to be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life. I hope that none of us here are given to too much carousing, personally my carousing days are long behind me – I am just too old to carouse these days. I hope also that none of us are given to drunkenness. But we are all susceptible, especially in these difficult days, to succumbing to the anxieties of life. There are just so many things to be anxious and even fearful of, aren't there? Rising prices generally, and petrol and fuel costs going through the roof, the threat of shortages, the now obvious consequences of the climate crisis, and just as we were beginning to feel that we were perhaps over the worst a possible new threat from another corona virus mutation. Pretty difficult not to be anxious and fearful. Well, all I can suggest, and I am not saying that it is easy, is that we hold on to God's promises and to verses such as 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." And Philippians 4: 6-7, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God". This is actually a vital part of the discipline of the Christian life.

Instead of giving in to the temptation to be anxious, to worry away at things, we have to learn to give them to God so that we can get on with the business of living in fullness of life and loving others. When we give in to fear and anxiety, we turn in on ourselves and our world shrinks. Fear and anxiety rob us of peace and joy and can also render us passive unable to act. If there is something that we can do about any given situation, then we must of course do all that we can. If there is nothing that we can do about a situation, then we should pray and leave it with God. Worrying about it will not help, getting on with what you can do in the service of God and others most certainly will! Allow Jesus' perfect love to cast out fear from your heart. And however bad things may be, remember that in this country we all still have so very much to be thankful for!!

So, allow the season of Advent to fill you with joyful anticipation, watch and pray, be disciplined and ready for action and also remember to enjoy rest and recreation and remember to," Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near".