

## Sermon for the first Sunday in Advent: 27 November 2016

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Readings---- Isaiah 2 v. 1-5; Romans 13 v.11-14; Matthew 24 v.36-44;  
Psalm 122.

Advent calendars are now increasingly popular for families. Not only do they provide daily chocolates and other surprises hidden in numbered pockets, but also encourage the increasing excitement of the younger members of our households as they provide a countdown system for the anticipated arrival of Santa, Father Christmas, or as our very young grand-daughter used to ask 'When is 'Ho, Ho, Ho,' coming?'

Those of us who have our own preparations for the Christmas Festival looming during the coming days' tend to feel overwhelmed as we face the next few weeks; but should we perhaps be seeking to reorder our priorities so that we may give the gift of this season, the attention it deserves. It is important if we are to be ready to welcome Christ once again into our hearts and homes.

'Advent then is important not simply as the first season of the Christian year but as a time for a deepening encounter with reality, including the ultimate Reality seen in human form at Christmas as the Christ Child, when a vulnerable infant is born and cradled in a manger!

The themes offered by the lectionary readings for the first two Sundays of this season are not welcomed by many of us because they draw attention to subjects which we try to avoid; our mortality, and the end of the world. Added to these are the 'little deaths' which are part of all life experience, such as the need to face the losses that are the result of physical ageing, as well as the bigger issues such as sorrow, judgement and the second coming of Christ. Yet this season offers another important perspective, how the ultimate saving purposes of God will find their completion. Advent is classed as a penitential season as it is concerned with helping us to face reality rather than avoiding difficult questions out of fear or a sense of insecurity. This is important for us all. We all need to be able to take a steady look at the way things actually are.

Advent also gives us the chance to think about God and his relationship with human beings in the light of the great facts of the gospel; the fact that Christ has come and the truth that he will come again in power and glory.

Let us have confidence in our God of hope who transforms uncertainty into opportunity and be willing to trust him both for our own future and the futures of those we love.

How are we to prepare ourselves for celebrating this season?

A large part of our preparation should be to consider how we ought to deal with the difficult theme of the second coming. The New Testament uses vivid and perplexing images such as the sounding of the last trumpet and the rending of the heavens. Many first century Jews were looking for the coming of the Messiah.

The natural longing of a subject people to be freed from the occupying power, inclined them to think of a kingly deliverer but Jesus proved to be a crucified Messiah. So we need to be open to the possibility that the second coming will be as strange as the first.

The themes of the first and second comings are intertwined by 'hope'.

The hope of true peace on earth together with the hope that there is a final destiny awaiting us beyond our deaths. The intuition of hope lies deeply within the human heart as Julian of Norwich wrote as she shared her meditations on the visions of Christ 'All will be well, and all manner of things will be well.' Christian hope is open to the unexpected character of all which lies ahead precisely because it relies on the faithfulness of a God who is always doing new things. Only God is ultimate and that is a sufficient basis to enable us to embrace the Advent hope. As Jesus reminded the Sadducees that God is not the God of the dead but of the living. We matter to God for ever in life or death.

Advent is a special time to remember that God will once again visit this his world and make all things new. Let us chose to trust him to continue faithful, and be ready and willing to look forward with confidence and continue to live with hope and praise.

As the hymn writer Charles Wesley, reminds us in the chorus of this Advent hymn.

'Yea, amen let all adore thee high on thy eternal throne;  
Saviour, take the power and glory, claim the Kingdom for thine own.  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.'

Judith Weston