

Sermon - prepare for Christ's coming: past, present, future

Based on: Isaiah 2.1–5; Romans 13.9–14; Matthew 24.36–44

Advent: past, present and future

- Today is the start of the new liturgical year - and yet it is also a continuation of what has come before.
- Last Sunday we acknowledged once again all that Jesus had accomplished in his earthly ministry, and completed through his death and resurrection, and we acclaimed his exaltation as the high king of heaven, and Lord of all.
- In a little while I'll show how that ties in with today's focus on the start of Advent.
- In the Advent season we once again anticipate Christ's arrival from several perspectives.
- Indeed, the word Advent is derived from the Latin *adventus*, meaning *coming* or *arrival*.
- So in the Church season of Advent, we look at Jesus' coming or arrival in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Past - the first coming

- For many people the most obvious perspective is preparing for the annual remembrance and celebration of the Son of God arriving as a newborn infant, with the nativity at Bethlehem.
- It is a yearly reminder of God humbling himself to become one of us - but not simply as a full-grown adult: rather as a baby, fundamentally dependent on the love and care of others, who needs to be nurtured and taught, and who experiences the whole process of growing up, with all the delights and discomforts that are part of that.
- With Jesus being born as one of us we are reminded again that he was fully human, so that we can know that, through Jesus, God shares personally in our lives and experiences.
- So over these next four Sundays we increasingly anticipate the coming of the infant Jesus, and the new life and hope that this engenders.

Becoming present in us

- A potent symbol of that anticipation is the pregnant Mary, who is given divine inspiration to recognise the child that she carries as being the one destined by God to be the Christ, with all that that means.
- Pregnant Mary, physically nurturing the growing baby within her, is a metaphor for all Christians who have received Christ into their own hearts and lives.
- Those of us who have turned to Christ and committed our lives to him and his way of love, have experienced another advent - the coming or arrival of Christ within ourselves.
- Just as Christ arrives in the world firstly by being conceived and carried to term within Mary, so Christ is likewise conceived within our own hearts, as we recognise and acknowledge who Christ is for each of us.
- The Advent season is thus an annual opportunity for each of us to focus again on who Jesus Christ is for us personally.
- This is the reason why it is appropriate to shift from the words of the Nicene Creed which describes what 'We believe' as a church community, to the words of the Apostles Creed which describes for each of us what 'I believe' as part of our faith expression.

Future - the Second Coming

- So the word advent can refer to celebrating the coming of the infant Christ born in Bethlehem, and it can refer to the coming of Christ into our own hearts, marked by our commitment to being his disciples, and our re-commitment to embodying Christ in our own lives.
- Advent also anticipates what is usually referred to as the Second Coming of Christ.

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- This is the aspect that effectively continues on from last Sunday's acknowledgement of Christ as King, when we look at what happens next.
- Simply put - having acknowledged that Christ is enthroned in heaven, we are left with the question: how long does that situation continue for?
- St Paul wrote many of his first letters with the expectation that the second coming would occur in his life-time, and only in his later letters does he start to acknowledge that perhaps it was going to take place after his own death.
- Through the ages various so-called prophets and Christian communities have predicted the second coming of Christ as a tangible event, often decoding scripture references to come up with specific dates.
- And people will continue to do this for years to come - maybe even for thousands of years to come.
- Because after all, as Jesus himself says:
'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.' (Matthew 24.36)
- Jesus makes it quite clear that whatever it was that he himself understood to be the second coming, no-one knows when it will happen - not even he himself.

'Be ready'

- Jesus repeatedly describes the event as taking place unexpectedly, like the flood in the time of Noah, or like a thief breaking into a house.
- The unexpectedness of the flood in Noah's time has been repeated many times this year in different parts of Australia, where people have suddenly found themselves inundated, and possessions and property suddenly swept away or otherwise destroyed.
- A number of parishioners have described to me some of the destruction they themselves, or people they know, have suffered.
- I think the point that Jesus is emphasising here is only partly on the unhappiness of the event, and more on its unexpectedness.
- Those communities that have been sufficiently prepared with high enough levees and with flood mitigation planning have so far avoided greater destruction.
- And this is the key phrase: 'Be ready.'

Between two extremes

- Today's Gospel reading is part of a longer apocalyptic sermon that Jesus preaches.
- Throughout the whole of it he strives to find a balance between two unhelpful extremes.
- On the one hand, we can make the mistake of thinking that the second coming will never happen - or, at least will not happen in our lifetimes.
- The mistake is then not bothering to be prepared.
- Like a so-called once-in-a-century flood event, after such a flood has occurred, people can make the mistake of assuming it will never happen again in their lifetime, and then find themselves unprepared when it does.

- On the other hand, we can make the mistake of thinking that the second coming will happen imminently - this year, or perhaps in the next few years.
- The mistake is then to become so fixated on everything coming to an end that we forget to get on with life - with celebrating and sharing in the ongoing blessings that God continues to give us, and with continuing the ministry and mission of Jesus.

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- Jesus implies that he expects us to get on with the ordinary business of life.
- In the verses before today's passage Jesus gives the usual apocalyptic description of cataclysmic signs in the heavens and in the world: a darkened sun, earthquakes and so on.
- But he then goes on to describe people continuing with their mundane everyday lives:
- *eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage* - and working in a field, and grinding meal. (cf *Matthew 24.38, 40-41*)
- Jesus even uses the metaphor of a thief breaking into someone's home in the night.
- For me this image provides a helpful counterbalance to people getting excited or anxious about presumed end times and cataclysmic events.
- Instead of getting excited about a potential thief in the night, it makes sense to focus on taking suitable precautions.
- In the context of the rest of his teaching, my understanding from this is that Jesus is reminding us:
 - don't predict the second coming, but also don't ignore the need to be prepared for it;
 - while you get on with living your life, live in such a way that if you were to meet Jesus face-to-face tomorrow, you would not be ashamed to stand in his presence, but rather be able to fully accept his compassionate embrace.

Hope

- This is where today's Gospel reading ends - however, I think it good to be aware that as Jesus continues this sermon he speaks about the joy of those servants whose master finds them waiting for him, and the celebration of the bridesmaids who were ready to join in with the wedding feast when the bridegroom finally arrived.
- The joyful hope of the second coming is expressed in the other readings, and in the hymns we're singing today.
- Isaiah tells of the day when many people will come to the Lord to learn his way of love, where weapons will be repurposed to aid the growing of food, and people will forsake conflict to walk in the light of the Lord. (cf *Isaiah 2.1-5*)
- Paul encourages us to prepare by putting on the armour of light, and living honourably. (cf *Romans 13.9-14*)

- Our collect for today prays that God will renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ. (*APBA, p*)
- So I'm going to end by reading out a couple of verses from our final hymn, which express that hope in King Jesus in which we are invited to share.
- From Henry Burton's hymn:

There's a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the spring
when our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the King;
weary was our heart with waiting, and the night-watch seemed so long,
but his triumph day is breaking, and we hail it with a song.

Hark, we hear a distant music, and it comes with fuller swell –
the great triumph song of Jesus, of our King, Immanuel:
Zion, go you forth to meet him; and, my soul, be swift to bring
all your finest and your dearest for the triumph of our King!

(*Henry Burton, 1940-1930, alt. - Methodist Publishing House, UK*)