

Advent Sunday Year B

Mark 13.33

Fr Peter Groves

Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.

Advent Sunday is, as far as the Church is concerned, New Year's Day. And whereas the church is normally making its insistence of newness just as the world is ignoring Advent and cracking on with Christmas, this particular week in this particular year, we can see signs of renewal. One simple piece of good news is the fact that our churches are able to reopen for public worship, and so this will be the final solemn mass which takes place behind closed doors. We are of course enormously grateful to those who have made our broadcasts possible, and to the choir for the glorious music we have been able to enjoy in our own homes, but virtual reality is not actual reality, and the prospect of the people of God coming together in person to keep the Advent vigil is much more than welcome.

Also this week we have heard very encouraging news from our own city about the prospect of an affordable and widely available vaccine to combat the pandemic, a vaccine which has been deliberately prepared so that it can be supplied to all parts of the world and provide help to communities and societies far less fortunate than our own. If all goes well it is right that Oxford will take pride in such a contribution to the wellbeing of humanity, and it is yet another remind to all people of faith that scientific knowledge and experiment is among the greatest of God's gifts to his people.

So even as we continue to be concerned, even as we worry about how we will manage this strangest of festive seasons, there is a wordly light at the end of the tunnel to which we can look forward. We do so in the knowledge that we are always and already looking forward to the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and this season of Advent challenges us to pause and to reflect on that looking forward.

“Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning.” In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is going out of his way to warn his hearers that the day of the Lord may come suddenly upon them, and therefore they need to watch, the need to stay awake. They need to be paying attention, because nothing is certain. Perhaps the coming of Christ is near, perhaps it is not. Be on your guard. For us, this warning is doubly important, because we are being asked to pay attention not just to what is going to happen, but also to what has already happened. In fact, the church maintains, it is the one which makes sense of the other.

While new things are often exciting, novelty is always also a little bit disconcerting. The problems we faced in our initial responses to Covid arose in part from the assumption that the disease would behave like other diseases with which we were already familiar. It didn’t, but one cannot blame doctors and scientists for proceeding on the basis of something they knew – what

else could they do? The church, like everyone and everything else, has lived with uncertainty for most of this year – a friend of mine commented that we shouldn't really be entering into Advent today, as it's been Advent for us all ever since March. But now we can begin tentatively to plan for a new calendar year and a new ecclesiastical year, and look towards a time – probably after Holy Week and Easter, alas – when our worship can again reflect the fullness of God's love more fully, and when the life of church and of parish can respond more fully to all that God is calling us to do. So we have begun preparing people for confirmation, we are planning baptisms and weddings, we anticipate the arrival of a new curate, and so on and so forth. Indeed, there will be no clearer reminder that we are picking ourselves up and dusting ourselves off than the fact that you will shortly receive an appeal from the Vicar and churchwardens to make a financial gift to the church during this Advent season.

As we do new things, we also remind ourselves that the initiative with which Advent is concerned is not

ours, but God's. The Christian church has since the earliest times prepared for the coming of Christ among us at Christmas by reflecting upon the second coming of Christ, the future hope which is the gathering together of all things in God's good time. The images of Advent are alarming and deliberately so, because nothing can begin to describe the enormity of the world's accounting for itself in the presence of its maker. But also because the looking forward of Advent is also and always a looking back – the gospel writers are adamant that we can only understand the future coming of Christ, the fulfillment for which we hope and long, by recognizing that the decisive event of God's judgement in history has already taken place: God has come among us, God is present with us, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, is real and here and now in word and sacrament, in our neighbour and in our needs and in our present crisis.

Even as we look forward, we are called to respond to the here and now, to the presence of Christ among us, to the fears and wants and limitations of all those who

cannot look forward with hope. Jesus' call to watch is a reminder to be alert, to stay awake, to avoid missing out on what is happening. But it is also a call to look around us, to acknowledge that God will not be predicted, that the Lord will and does come among us in people and places which we are apt neither to expect nor to accept. If Advent and Christmas are defined by what we want them to be, then they are not Advent and Christmas at all, they are no longer the anticipation and joy of the people of God. As we turn to God in prayer and in waiting, let us ask ourselves what we can do, this Advent, to meet the needs of Christ's world. *Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.*