

**St Brandon's 10.15 am
Advent Sunday**

3 Dec 2023

Readings: Isaiah 64: 1-9; Psalm 80; Mark 13:24-end

Advent Sunday – but already 3rd December... A reminder that the church's season of Advent is *not* 24 days of Christmas run up with a chocolate for each one, *but* the period of preparation, including 4 Sundays before Christmas, when we wait, pray and *fast*, before the *feast* to come.

That's why we have no flowers in church until Christmas, why we don't sing the Gloria and do use the Kyrie in our prayers of penitence- *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy*- and, by the way, why we continue to celebrate Christmas for two weeks *after* 25th December, rather than forgetting all about it on Boxing Day! Of course the world tells us that *shopping* is the most important part of our Christmas preparations. I beg to differ. As I once read,

Hope in the night, not glitzy commercialism, is what we want and need.

And Radio 4, even this morning, used these words:

We'll visit the Christmas markets around the country, as a foil to the death and destruction which is 'The World this Weekend'.

UK Christmas 2023 calls us to cosy consumerism, as an escape from 'the winter of our discontent',

**Advent calls us to stay awake, to watch and pray
for God's kingdom to come.**

Let us stick with **Advent** in the coming weeks; let us dare to recognise and acknowledge the darkness into which Christ's light came and still comes- let's not rush to switching on all the lights and pretending the darkness isn't there.

Not that today's readings offer us much chance to do that: rather, both Isaiah and Psalm 80 strike chords with how the world still is, in its brokenness and sin- or iniquity as Isaiah names, and nails it:

'You have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity' – in other words, the mess we are in is the result of human greed, hatred and pride, and who can dispute that? We pray that this truth may be recognised and acted upon, especially at and after the COP 28 talks continuing today.

The prophet Isaiah expresses the anger and despair we may well feel as we are faced with today's news, whether global or local: prejudice and discrimination, violence, suffering, poverty. One response is to give up and shut it all out, overcome by the anxiety and fear which such darkness induces in us. Just stick to shopping and *Strictly* and pretend everything's alright.

But another response, the Advent response, as those who know the saving love of God in our lives, is to stand with Isaiah, name the darkness and cry out to God, to bring justice and mercy.

*O that you would tear the heavens and come down,
So that the mountains would quake at your presence....*

And with the psalmist to put our trust in God:

*Hear O shepherd of Israel,
Sit up your mighty strength and come to our salvation.*

Throughout the Old Testament God's servants, be they prophets, priests or musicians, cry out to God to bring justice, to have mercy on his people in the midst of their troubles,

and to wake them up, show his power and might to those who have turned their backs on him, or never known him.

That should be our Advent prayer too.

But I need to say a word at this point about **judgement**.

Advent is perhaps the only time when we do (or don't) focus on Christ's return to judge the earth.

The scriptures teach us that when Jesus returns it will be

'in clouds with great glory' – as in today's gospel, echoed in our next hymn.

Do we look forward to that day when Christ returns?

Or are we, am I, much more comfortable with Jesus' first coming, in humanity and humility, though we still gloss over the difficult bits so his birthplace has clean straw and no rats....

To speak of Jesus returning as judge takes us into the territory of 'prophets of doom' wearing sandwich boards and shouting 'the end is nigh!' We ridicule this so we can distance ourselves and ignore the truth that one day we will all be judged by God, who made us, knows us and all our choices and actions, even the secrets of our hearts.

But **judgment is not condemnation**.

God is unwilling to condemn anyone, much as we humans jump to do so all the time.

Hear these words from John chapter 3, often used before the confession on Sunday mornings.

⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

And hear too the next verse:

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

Judgement is not condemnation.

The same Jesus who came to earth as a vulnerable baby and gave his life on the cross to rescue the whole world from sin and death, *will return* as judge, to set right all that is wrong, and to usher in the new creation when God's kingdom finally comes on earth as in heaven.

This is the Hope of Advent, that God has not abandoned our dark world and that Christ will return.

We say this week by week in the Creed, and in Advent we are called to think more deeply about it- to recognise the darkness and our need for light, both the light of Christ at Christmas and the light which is to come when Christ returns.

Judgement is not condemnation: judgement is the prelude to God's kingdom coming, for which we pray every time we say The Lord's Prayer.

But we may still feel uncomfortable about all this. We may hope that this second coming of Christ does not happen while we, or our loved ones, are still alive on earth.

Let us be assured that Christ the judge is also Christ our Saviour. We who deserve condemnation have been saved by Christ, we live in Christ, along with all who have gone before us in faith. We will not be condemned because we will stand before God clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

We are God's children and nothing can ever separate us from God's love. That too is the Advent hope and the good news we seek to live out and share. Hope in Christ our Saviour, hope in Christ who will return as judge – judging with the truth and mercy which are at the heart of God.

This Advent, **let us hold fast to Advent hope, stay awake, watch, pray and work for God's kingdom to come.**

Amen.