

First Sunday of Advent

²⁴ *“But in those days, following that distress,*

*“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;*

²⁵ *the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’*

²⁶ *“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.*

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³² *“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.*

³⁵ *“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”
(Mark 13: 24-26, 32-36)*

No matter how often I’ve preached about Advent being a time of solemn preparation or had a little moan about not having enough time to do everything I should so that I’m properly ‘ready for Christmas’, deep down I enjoy all those worldly things which are part and parcel of this time of year. Yes, I’m afraid I buy into the secularism of Advent. I’m sure I’m not on my own so I can’t be the only one wondering how I’m going to manage my Christmas preparations this year. At which point, the little voice in my head says that maybe this year is the chance to get it right. While I would never have wished to see this world plunged into a pandemic, perhaps it is giving us time to reflect on what really matters. On the other hand perhaps we’re no better off than when we’re chasing after the material side of Christmas preparations.

The gospel reading for today, one of the familiar Advent readings has Jesus preparing his disciples for his imminent death and encouraging them to look for signs of hope even when life was being exceptionally difficult. It’s believed that Mark’s gospel was written around the time when the people of Judea led a revolt against Roman rule and Caesar, of course, wasn’t having that, so went in with his forces and destroyed everything that he saw as part of the Judean culture. It was dark times indeed for the people of Judea and this passage served to remind them that however bad things might be they should still hold on to their hope for the Messiah to come again. But they had to be awake to the signs of that second coming. It wouldn’t do for them to be so wrapped up in their disaster that they missed the signs of Jesus in their lives.

As we prepare for Christmas this year we might think that with the limitations on mingling and socialising we might be able to spend more time preparing to welcome the light of Jesus into our world. My reservation though is that we’ll be so focused on the progress of Covid-19 and the restrictions upon us that we’ll miss the signs of Jesus’ presence. Despite living in these dark times God’s love still makes itself known. Can we make sure that we’re not so distracted by endless news conferences and statistical charts that we pass by the joy which is still here in our world? The Church of England has taken the slogan ‘Comfort and Joy’ for this year’s Advent and Christmas seasons and they suggest that every day in the Advent and Christmas season we ask ourselves the question ‘What brings joy today?’. Each joyful moment we think of can help us to realise that there is hope in these uncertain times. Then, as we arrive at the day of Jesus’ birth, we’ll be well prepared to celebrate the true meaning of the season and be ready to welcome the Son of God as he comes in great glory.

Ann Barlow