

Hexham Trinity Methodist Church

Sunday 29th November - Advent 1

Sermon

Reading: Mark 13:24-37

Prayer

As we've already said today is Advent Sunday the start of our journey towards Christmas. Today marks a number of different things.

It marks the beginning of the new lectionary year. Over the last year and particularly over the last few months we've been working our way through Matthew's Gospel, today we move to Mark and over the next year will hear Mark's particular understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Advent season is a season of preparation for the celebration of Christmas, we move from ordinary season, the period after Easter through summer and autumn to a season of preparation, 26 days to get ourselves spiritually, and practically, ready to celebrate Christ's birth, to celebrate Jesus coming amongst us in the Christ child. Just like Lent in Advent we prepare by thinking about who we are before God and what we can do to be more inline with God ready to celebrate Christ's birth and to live for the Christ child.

Advent is also a season in which we prepare for Christ's return. We are not just looking at our lives to say are we ready to celebrate Christ's birth but are we living in the way we want to be when Christ returns. This can seem like a very gloomy thing to be doing as it is easy to get drawn into lots of negatives but it is in fact the opposite. Advent reminds us that Christ will return, that Christ's return is something filled with hope. As Christians we should look forward with hope to the day Christ returns but it is something we so often forget about. This second great theme of advent is our focus today as we begin advent.

Advent marks a new year in the church calendar, one that invites us to prepare well for Christmas and to make sure that we are living ready for Jesus to return.

But Advent 2020 like so much of 2020 seems so very different from any other advent we have known before. It is advent which begins in lockdown, it is an advent which is surrounded by questions of ill health and death, more than ever it seems it is an advent which is being ignored by a want to celebrate Christmas already.

I saw this picture on Facebook yesterday '*Still November*' and for me that said it all. There seem to be more Christmas Tress and lights up already then ever before on Advent Sunday, people seem to want it to be Christmas already and maybe given all that we've been through in 2020 that's understandable and I shouldn't be such a Scrooge about it!

For me, the reason that advent is so important is that to have the best celebration of Christmas we need to prepare well, not just prepare by decorating the tree, sending cards, wrapping presents but preparing ourselves spiritually. By taking time to listen to words of scripture, to ask ourselves am I living as Christ would want me to, am I treating others in a way that shows God's light. In advent as we spend time in prayer and reflection we lift a mirror up to our lives and are able to align ourselves more to God. In preparing well, by being more inline with God when we get to Christmas we will then be able to celebrate God's great gift with even more focus and joy and to continue that through the whole season of Christmas, which lasts 12 days to Epiphany and some would say through to Candlemass on 1st Sunday of February.

I'm always somewhat surprised that those who want to put their Christmas trees up in November, before Advent has even begun, take them down on Boxing Day when Christmas itself is only a day old! I realise like this may seem like a counter cultural message and it is, for it we place ourselves into Christmas mode in November then we take away from ourselves the great gift of preparing well and therefore celebrating with God as well as we can. Now if you've already put your Christmas tree up don't worry I'm not going to come round and cut the plug off the lights until 20th December. I realise 2020 has been tough and a bit of light around the house is helpful! But I do encourage you to think about how you can remain in advent whilst brightening up a dingy 2020 with your Christmas tree lights and how, if you have a real tree, you're going to keep it alive until epiphany! That way you'll prepare well in advent and continue to celebrate well for the 12 days of Christmas.

As we begin our advent journey today our reading from Mark focusses not on preparing to celebrate Jesus' birth but on being ready for his return. It follows on from the three parables in Matthew 25 we looked over the last few weeks that have helped us to think about what the Kingdom of God is like now and will be like when Jesus returns.

In Mark 13 Jesus speaks to the disciples about the end times. In the first 23 verses which we've not heard read today Jesus speaks about the signs that will lead up to the end times and then from verse 24 tells us what the end times, the times when Jesus returns will be like. I don't know how you responded to these verses? If we're not careful they are the sort of verses that turn us off from listening, the descriptions Jesus gives, the vocabulary he uses is mythical, it describes the what will happen in big bold brush strokes rather than scientific or practical detail. Its easy to think oh this doesn't apply to me, this isn't going to happen in my life time and to turn off. The verses might leave us wondering what it will be like but the assurance that the day will come when Jesus will return is a great message of hope. These are verses of hope, verses that remind us that a better time will come, that Jesus will return and bring the Kingdom to completion.

The last five verses take a slightly different tone though as Jesus tells a parable about a man who goes away and leaves the responsibility for his house to his servants. If you like having painted the picture of great hope in telling us about his return, having shown us what will be Jesus tells a story about how we can live until that time comes, how we can live as people of hope in the reality of world as it is.

Whether we were alive in the time of Jesus, when Mark wrote his Gospel or here in 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic these final five verses are still relevant to us. The question of how we live as people of hope in the reality of the world is as relevant today as it was then. The reality of the world has changed beyond measure time and time again as it has again in the last few months but the hope that as Christians we live with, the hope in the Good News of Jesus Christ has not changed and will not change.

How then do we live as people of hope in the reality of world as it is and how might we do that this Advent.

The parable of the man who goes away and leaves his servants in charge of his house has one key message to it, to watch. The man leaves one of his servant on sentry duty at the door to look out for his return. He assigns many other tasks to his other servants and they are to work together to look after his property, and probably his land/business, and to watch for his return. As God's people we are called to work together as a team to look after God's kingdom and to watch for his return. In the parable we are warned that when the man returns the worst thing would be for his servants to be asleep, whether they are the one watching out or those doing other tasks being asleep on the job when the man returns would not be good. Of course the way those who are doing their jobs to not be caught napping is for the servant on sentry duty to be alert and get the message to the rest of the servants that the man is on his way back. The message to keep watch is for all the servants the one watching at the door and the rest. At the end of the parable Jesus says to everyone 'Watch'.

If we are to live as people of hope in the reality of the world we need to be people who follow Jesus' instruction here 'to watch' and in advent we have the opportunity to make sure that we are doing so. To realign our lives so that we are those who are watching. But what does that mean in practice? To help us think about this I want to pose three questions:

1. What are we watching for?
2. What else might we see whilst we are watching?
3. How should we watch this advent?

What are we watching for? In the parable the servant left on the door has one task which is to look for the mans return. There is a wonderful verse in Psalm 130 which says: *'I wait for the Lord more*

than watchmen wait for the morning.' I think what Jesus is encouraging us to do is just what the psalmist says that as we wait for Jesus to return that we should be actively looking for God, yes looking for Christ's to return but looking and longing for all the things of God, for God's love, for God's grace, for God's spirit. Watching for Jesus is to look for him returning but as we do to also notice all the ways God is at work in our lives and calling us to join in with him.

What else might we see whilst we are watching? The story doesn't tell us what the servant on the door saw! We know they were waiting for a longtime and I'm sure that as they waited for the man to return lots of other people came past, visited the house, made deliveries etc etc. If we are watching out or waiting for someone then we also see lots of other things. It's the same as we watch for God, as we wait for Jesus' return we also see lots of other things.

Last week Paul spoke on Matthew 25 and that passage which encourages us to look out for the stranger, the hungry, the prisoner and the call to serve them as we would serve Jesus. As we watch for Jesus to return we will see so much else but amongst what we see will be the lost, the lonely, the stranger, the hungry, the prisoner. Jesus calls us to see those in need as we watch and to reach out to them, Jesus doesn't call us to be so fixed on waiting for Jesus to return that we miss those in need that come our way. Jesus calls us to notice those in need as much as we notice God at work in our lives and to reach out and serve them just as we will serve Jesus when he returns.

How therefore should we watch this advent? How as live amongst a global pandemic should we watch this advent? Well in the two ways I have just described, we should watch for what God is doing amongst us and watch for those in need who we can serve as Jesus would serve them and as we would serve Jesus. When we do this, we will feel more filled with hope in the reality of this world. As we watch for those in need and serve them as Jesus did we will bring the hope of Jesus that we know to them.

I said earlier that these last five verses of Mark 13 are all about how we can live as people of hope in the reality of the world. By being people who watch for God at work, who watch for those who need to be served with God's love we don't just live as those who know hope is there but we become bearers of hope for the world just as Mary was the hope bearer when she was pregnant with Jesus. When the hope of God comes alive in us in a way which transforms us and transforms other, we are living life in a way that truly loves God and loves others as Jesus commanded us to. For me, if we are bearers of hope, if we are loving God and loving others, then when Jesus returns without a doubt we will not be found asleep but very much awake and alert.

So in this most unusual of advent let us watch for God, let us watch for God at work in our lives, let us watch for Jesus returning and let us watch for those God calls us to love and serve as Christ

loves and serves us. If we commit to this then we will be living ready for Christ's return and if that doesn't happen in the next 26 days then we will be ready to celebrate the birth of Christ.

If of course Christ does return in the next 26 days then all those who've got their Christmas trees up and shopping done in November might have wasted their time!!!!

May God Bless you this advent. Amen.