

Advent 1 2017 Mark 13: 24-end

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” This is not a warning to you about dosing off during my sermon but rather a bit of an Advent cry.

The Advent times of life are times of waiting. In Advent we live in between what was and what will be and it is hard, sometimes even impossible, to see the way forward. We light the Advent candles to show that we are in darkness and are searching for the light- the light of Christ.

Advent challenges us to give up our usual sources of illumination, to let go of our habitual ways of knowing and to question our typical ways of seeing. Advent invites us to receive the God who comes to us in the darkness of life.

At some point our world falls apart, life changes, or the lights go out. More often than not we see this as the end. When these things happen, Jesus says, remember the fig tree. Read the signs correctly. When its branch becomes tender and it puts forth leaves you know summer is near. So also when the darkness overtakes your life know that the Son of Man is near. Christ’s presence, our healing, and salvation, are always taking place in the dark and messy parts of life. We have not and never will be abandoned to the darkness.

“Be alert,” Jesus warns. He commands us to “Keep awake.” Darkness is not our enemy as much as is falling asleep. We fall asleep whenever fear controls or when hope gives way to despair or when we choose what is comfortable rather than right.

Too often we allow the darkness to deceive us into believing there is nothing worth waiting or watching for so we close our eyes. We fall asleep and we become part of the darkness and cannot see the One who is always coming to us. The danger in the darkness is that we do not give our eyes time to adjust. We do not trust our night vision.

The Advent of our lives asks us to trust the light more than the darkness. It means we must sit, listen, wait and watch. That is contrary to what most of the world believes and what our society rewards.

We are called upon in Advent “to be alert” and “Keep awake”. But for what are we being called to be alert and keep awake?

To know the future is a possibility that fascinates human beings. Jesus’ disciples have asked him eagerly about the signs that will foretell the coming of the age.

Earlier this had happened and as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him,

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”² Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

³ *When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,⁴ “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”*

Jesus responds in a very enigmatic way. His response comes as a result of the question about the destruction of the Temple. These colourful and graphic words are just as meaningful today as they were in the days of Jesus. At Advent we are called to look forward to the coming of the Messiah, the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus. To quote Lucy Winckett, Rector of St James, Piccadilly, who writes;

“The sense of God being, “at the very gates” as Jesus says, just beyond, just out of reach, the other side of the door- all these spiritual truths are recognizable to anyone who wants to take their own spiritual lives seriously. In the rhythm of night following day, as spring follow winter, we learn to expect change and movement of the heart of creation. Jesus is urging his listeners to learn from the fig tree’s seasons, to be attentive to its transformation and to know the potential for transformation for us too.”

We prayed earlier the Advent Collect;

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

For Jesus, the temple is destroyed at his crucifixion and the whole world is radically altered at his resurrection. So, in one sense what has been described in today’s gospel has already taken place. Even the final gathering together of the elect is already taking place;

“Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven”.

That is to say that people from all nations are being baptized into the life of the new and eternal Kingdom and are joining to share in the food of that Kingdom at the Eucharist as we will this morning as we wait with those who have gone before us for, as the Creed puts it wait for, *“the life of the world to come.”*

This is not to say that the end of the age has come already. It is simply to say that we are not waiting for the future hour of Christ’s return as people might wait for a bus with a sense of boredom and inaction but rather as people who have a positive approach to the goal that is sought whatever the goal may be. That goal for us is living as people who have already begun to dwell within it, in a church that is looking to live out the things of the next world in this one.

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” I hope that you will have a very inspiring and interesting Advent this year.

Amen.