

SERMON for Advent Sunday – November 27th, 2022.

Readings: Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13: 9-14; Matthew 24: 36-44.

I have always loved the analogy of the “Journey” as a metaphor for life. Whether it is just living day to day or the deeper, and hopefully richer adventure which can be our experience of getting to know God – our faith “journey”.

Welcome to Advent and the start of another Church year! Happy New Year!!!

With the seasons of Advent and Lent, I like to find a theme to see me through the preparation seasons to the great feasts of Christmas and Easter respectively and helps to shape my preaching.

This year I have chosen the theme of “Who we meet along the Journey to Bethlehem”, and, as you will see from the Candle Lighting liturgy, I am going to go with the more traditional themes of Patriarchs, Prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, with a few slight variations.

The readings for the First Sunday of Advent are always a little challenging. At a surface read, they seem quite depressing and confronting. As Revd Sue says in her reflection this week:

There is nothing gentle or particularly subtle about the beginning of Advent. Which is kind of appropriate as our world is so tired and bruised, so disturbed and disturbing, that only a trumpet fanfare or an alarm could be heard over the background sounds of fear, war, hunger, and every kind of daily distraction.¹

Hope and fear: two of the most powerful and overwhelming of human emotions, are both evoked in dramatic fashion in the readings this morning.

Today I am hoping to “meet” and honour the Patriarchs as I start my journey towards Bethlehem.

I think of the Patriarchs of our faith, who we traditionally think of as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Men who, if you read their stories, were very human and yet had great faith and an openness to God.

I don't know if you have ever done any genealogy, delving into your own family history, to discover who your patriarchs and matriarchs were and what their story was? After all, they made you who you are! Without every one of them, you would not exist - but you do exist because of them.

I don't know if you have ever watched, I think it is called, *Who do you think you are*, a program on SBS which takes a celebrity and traces their ancestry back several generations. I have only seen a few episodes, but it is fascinating the history they find.

Our lives are full of joys and challenges and that is the same for everyone, in every generation, in every place, our ancestors, and the ancestors of our faith. We have all been challenged, we have all had joys and sorrows, times we have been tested, times we have found great blessing.

With that in mind, rather than complain about today's readings, I found I have started looking at them with new eyes.

The prophet Isaiah, who we will journey with, all the way through to Christmas morning, reflects humanity's basic desire for peace and the hope of the one who will come:

He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. [Isaiah 2: 4]

Something I believe we all yearn for.

In today's Epistle Paul says:

You know what the time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of life." [Romans 13: 11-12]

For Paul, everything without exception is built on the foundation of the coming of Christ - his first coming in which his death and resurrection turned the world order upside down, and his return which demands that we live in its fierce uncompromising light:

Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." [Romans 13: 13-14]

The Scriptures from Isaiah and Romans prepare us for our opening salvo from Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's basic message was to prove that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures – the long promised of God.

Note that in our readings from Matthew's gospel, we don't immediately hear the gentle call, "Come to me, all who are heavy laden" [Matthew 11: 28]; nor do we hear "Blessed are the poor in spirit ... the grieving, meek, broken and persecuted" [Matthew 5: 3-12]. Instead we hear a note of uncertainty, of trouble, a solemn warning to be **ready** for the entirely unexpected and while this seems so relevant each time we hear it, we must remember that it has always been relevant to our forebears down through the ages.

How does this make you feel? Does it fill you with hope or fear? Or do you dismiss it all together because so many cranks have used passages such as this to cause fear and uncertainty, and as we see, dates come and go, and we are still here!

Our Gospel passage is extracted from a long chapter, the whole of which is about events, real or symbolic, that in Jesus' day remained in the future. As in the chapter before it, much which is described is more reminiscent of the time when the might of the Roman Legions was unleashed on the rebellious Israel. This occurred during the Great Revolt of 64-73 CE, around four decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. With the unrest which was already around in his day, Jesus undoubtedly anticipated something like this dreadful, pointless revolt - the writing was well and truly on the wall. So, as he speaks of things to come, he draws images from other wars in the long, sad history of his people, as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Matthew was writing after the fact and knew well the horrors of the war, but sadly for us, he leaves the strands of prophesy tangled.

Jesus told his disciples that they can discern the signs of the times just as anyone can tell when figs are ripening on the tree. Jesus himself could see the signs of the tragic events

that would unfold over the next decades, and so could others. But they could not predict the coming of the son of Man - the return of Christ. **No one can**, not even the Son - only God the Father. Only foolish people would try ... and yet there seems to be a large crowd of those who are ready to have a go!

We are reminded that we can't predict catastrophe - if we could, like the householder lying in wait for the burglar, we would prepare specifically, but we cannot. So instead, we need to follow Paul's advice in the Epistle: live every day "in the armour of light", being awake, alert and devoted to walking the way of discipleship - then we will be far too busy to speculate about what we cannot and need not know.

When Jesus returns, it will be personal, public and a total surprise - and it will be the fulfilment of the human story. The Second Coming of Christ is not a threat, nor a catastrophe, but the fulfilment of all that God has done in Christ. His Face of Love is not changed into a face of doom, but steadfastly looks on us ... with love

So, what do I take with me from this first stop on my Advent journey?

For me it has been a new appreciation of the struggles and joys which the Patriarchs faced and overcame, the challenges which day to day living put on them in difficult times. I am impressed that so many were able to remain faithful and open to God.

May I, may we, honour our ancestors by remaining faithful and open during these challenging times before us.

The Lord is with us. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Peter Llewellyn *Readiness for Jesus' coming*, in *Reimagining Matthew*. The Advent Study for the Diocese of Perth in 2013.

1. Revd Sue Lodge Calvert, *Advent One – Awaken*, as posted on her website: www.companionsontheway.com on November 23, 2022.