

Advent Sunday sees the beginning of a new year for the church. Today we start a year in which the Gospel of St. Matthew will feature prominently. So, some reading notes to help you through the year. This gospel features the primary teachings of Jesus, notably the Sermon on the Mount. Traditionally ascribed to one of the twelve Apostles, it is primarily based on first hand evidence – unlike the Gospel of St. Luke which was written by someone who never actually met Jesus. Matthew's gospel is written by someone from a Jewish background, and is filled with references to Jewish traditions although it is quite anti-Jewish in many places: Matthew is probably the most vociferous of the Gospellers in his attack on the Jewish leaders. He goes to great lengths to showing how Jesus fulfils the prophecies of the old testament – he even goes as far as sometimes quoting out of context if it helps him prove a point – so he's no different to tele-evangelists in modern day America.

One way to describe the Season of Advent is to say that Advent operates in three tenses all at once. Advent operates in the past, the future and the present tenses in different but complementary ways. Past, present and future; it almost sounds like Dickens' Christmas Carol, but in Advent we await the birth of the Christ child as the recollection of a past event; of a birth that happened over 2000 years ago. We await a celebration that will happen; indeed, is beginning to happen, right now.

So to begin with, we need to acknowledge that this past event has great significance in the present. In Advent we once again await the birth of the Christ Child into our lives, into our families, into our church community. We await this Christmas - and a Holy Evening, not many days away, where - bathed in candlelight - we will say: "Yes Lord! Thank You Lord" and rejoice in his presence, his having come among us as a babe, a child, a man, a human like us - to love us. And as we wait for 25th December to dawn on us in four short weeks, we savour those things that remind us of all the good Christmas's that have passed. We savour them and make them a part of this Christmas - we think of the songs and carols, the special dinner dishes and treats, the candle-lit worship, visits and phone calls, prayers and readings, and cards and notes, and the wonderful smells and tastes of the season. In Advent we await a past event and indeed we prepare our lives for it (some, it seems, since last July). And the preparation we do enriches our lives and makes this time a special time.

But in Advent we also await the future - a special future: we await the unveiling of the reign of God, something which is continually being revealed, but is yet to be fully realised. We await a time that Isaiah, and Jesus, and Paul describe as a time of judgement: a time when accounts are settled - not always comfortably - but always rightly; a time when two will be in the field - one will be taken and one will be left; a time when at long last all the swords are beaten into plowshares and all spears into pruning hooks, and peace - lasting peace - comes at last. We await a time of judgement and a time of salvation, the time of Christ's return - the time when the whole world is of God's Kingdom - the time when all who have passed through judgement are as one; one in joy, and in faith, and in hope, and in love; the time when sin, suffering, pain, and death are no more.

Over the years there have been many who have tried to predict when this will all take place. Nostrodamus, Mother Shipton of Knaresborough (you probably haven't heard of her – she lived in Yorkshire in the 1500s) and the Mayan culture all have predictions regarding the end of the world. Not only do they inspire Hollywood blockbusters (well, apart from Mother Shipton) but they cause widespread panic and superstition that there may be something accurate in them: as the old saying goes, "there's no smoke without a fire". But Jesus, in today's gospel reading, makes it very clear that the hour of that event is known to God alone. It is clear, therefore that speculation regarding the time of the second coming is a form of

blasphemy – putting oneself on a par with God. Our duty is not to speculate, but to prepare ourselves and to keep watch.

"Stay awake, be alert", says Jesus. "Put on the armour of light." says Paul, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

And that is the third tense of Advent. The present tense. The active tense. The doing something NOW tense.

Advent is not just about preparing for Christ's coming as a child from the past. Nor is Advent just about preparing for Christ's coming as the righteous king in the future. Advent is also (and primarily) about preparing for Christ's coming in our lives right now. For his light to be around us and shining from within us today. For his spirit to be dwelling in our hearts and our minds this minute. For his living presence to be seen in all that we say and do and all that we see and hear second by second.

Do we fully realise what God's light is? It is, as St. John describes it, a light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. It is a light to which the Devil has no answer. It is a light that removes the darkness from a situation so that God can deal with it. God's light is not only something to be anticipated: the fact that Christ lives means we can walk in that light now.

In this sense advent memory and advent hope are joined together: together our past experience and our future expectations about the reign of God and about the Christ, the Messiah, are realised now, not simply because of our preparation for it; but because of the divine truth about God's past and God's present and God's future: the truth that God has been with us, and will yet be with us, and even now is with us.

Advent as a season of the church year, helps us to be prepared, it reminds us to keep our ears, eyes and our hearts open, open for the in-breaking of the saving presence and power of Almighty God.

Advent then, is essentially a time of expectation. If we use it well, then it is reasonable to expect the best Christmas yet. But if we allow ourselves to be swamped by the world of commerce, of the tinsel and glitter that seem to encompass many people's preparation, then we may expect an anticlimax. If instead we look for God's will for our Advent preparation, if we take spiritual stock and make our spiritual new year resolutions, we can ensure that we grow towards what God wants us to be, what he created us to be and what he knows we can be.

Advent speaks to us about God's coming to us, about Christ coming to us, about light shining into the darkness and spears being turned into pruning hooks and about judgement coming upon the earth, and salvation to the people of God.

That speaking is for yesterday, and for tomorrow, and most of all it is for today.