



28 November – 04 December 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

And so, we reach the start of a new year in the Church Calendar – Advent Sunday. The word "Advent" means "arrival", and in the next few weeks, we will be learning to recognise the arrival of Christ among us. This season is both a preparation for Christmas – the celebration of the incarnation – and a reflection on the consummation of all things. The first Sunday in Advent always focuses on what we now call the return of Christ. This is to remind us that our world is going somewhere. There is a purpose, a direction and a meaning to the created order, and God is at work to fulfil that purpose – to bring all things into wholeness and unity in Christ. The Christmas celebration, then, is not a "stand-alone" event. The incarnation can only really be understood in terms of God's saving purpose for all creation.

The key word for the Advent season is "watch." God's Reign is not just something we wait for. Our salvation is not just about going to heaven when we die, or about living until the glorious return of Christ. God's Reign is always coming to us. Jesus is always being incarnated among us. Our salvation is a reality that we can embrace and experience now. For this reason, we are constantly called to watch, to be mindful and aware of God's presence and activity among us. We are challenged to respond to God's Reign as it seeks to enter our lives, and to become messengers who proclaim God's salvation through our lives and words. This week we explore how we can become watchful followers of Christ.

SUNDAY 28 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Luke 21:25-36

Reflect: Today's reading continues from yesterday. Jesus is still speaking about the coming destruction of the Temple and the conquest of Israel by the Roman Empire. The language he uses is

taken straight out of the Old Testament prophets – especially the apocalyptic messages of Daniel. For example, verse 27 has echoes of Daniel 7:13 – which Jesus' hearers would have recognised. This image is less about Jesus returning to earth than about Jesus returning to his eternal throne in glory because his task of winning salvation is completed.

Whenever biblical writers wanted to express the inexpressible glory and power of God's activity in the world, they used images of natural upheaval. Their purpose is not to give a journalist's report of future events, but to communicate the impact of God's presence on the entire universe. When God acts, the effect resonates throughout creation. We need to be careful, then, not to take these images too literally, but to listen carefully for the message Jesus is trying to communicate – which is expressed in the parable of verses 29 & 30: "Watch out!" Live a life that keeps you mindful of God's presence and purpose and pray at all times for God's strength to remain faithful when tough times strike.

How can you be more aware of God's presence and activity in your life today?

Do: All the disciplines of our worship are designed to train us in mindfulness, but one of the most effective is the practice of invocation in which we invite God's Spirit to fill us and empower us. As you go through today, constantly invite God's Spirit to speak to you and lead you.

Pray: Come, Holy Spirit, open my eyes and heart to your glorious presence.

MONDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: 2 Peter 3:1-18

Reflect: This is a difficult passage which can have significant consequences on our lives, depending on how we understand it. It is important to take note of what Peter's main message is here. While he speaks about Jesus' return, that is not really his point. Rather, he is calling his readers to stay strong and faithful. He notes that the believers are being challenged by those who ask why Jesus' has not yet returned. The implication is that these people are trying to

discredit the faith and lead the believers into lives of immediate gratification and ungodliness. Peter calls these mockers false prophets in Chapter 2 of his letter, and he encourages the believers not to be swayed by them. Then he reminds them that God does not work on a human timetable, and so their faith must be about patience and mindfulness.

It can be tempting, in the light of verses 10 and 11 to think of this world as doomed for destruction. When we fall into this kind of thinking, it makes no sense to care for the planet, or work to address the problems of climate change, because it's all going to be destroyed anyway. But, here again, we need to be careful not to take metaphorical language too literally. Peter refers to the destruction of the old world so that a "new heaven and earth" can replace it. This is really about God's Reign replacing human systems of power and wealth. It is about the world being transformed into a place of justice, peace and love. And, for this world to come into being, we need to remain faithful to the message and mission of Jesus, bringing justice into this planet in whatever small way we can, and growing in grace and in the knowledge of God.

How can you commit to constantly growing in grace today?

Do: In order to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, we need to stay mindful of the presence and character of Christ. One of the best ways to do this is to meditate on the Scriptures, allowing them to drive the vision of God's Reign deep into our hearts. Spend as much time with the Word today as you can.

Pray: As I meditate on your Word, O God, grow me in grace and in the knowledge of you.

TUESDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Revelation 22:12-16

Reflect: Throughout the Bible, the Messiah, the One who establishes God's Reign, is described as a descendant of David, the one who inherits David's throne and fulfils the promise that David would have an eternal dynasty. Today's verses, which are among the very last in the book of Revelation, claim that Jesus is this one. But all of this talk of God's Reign can be confusing when we look

around us and still see so much suffering and pain. Didn't Jesus come already? Didn't he say that God's Reign was near? Didn't he cry from the cross, "it is finished"? Of course, the answer to all of these questions is "yes." But what we often miss in our faith is that God always seems to work through processes that may seem slow or even contradictory. In the light of this we can affirm that Jesus has come, Jesus is always coming to us in every moment of our lives, and Jesus will come at that time when all things are brought to wholeness and unity in him. This is why the New Testament calls Jesus the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. This Advent season is all about learning to recognise all of these different "comings" of Jesus and opening our lives to them.

It's disturbing to notice here, after all that has already happened in Revelation, that there are still "evil-doers" who are outside of God's city. This tells us two things. Firstly, Revelation is not a literal, chronological account of future events. It is a metaphorical, symbolic account of God's saving work. Secondly, we always have a choice as to whether we will live within God's Reign or outside of it. God doesn't choose this for us, and we can't choose it for anyone else. But inside is where life is found.

How will you choose to live today?

Do: The Advent Season, with its reminders of the Coming of Jesus, invites us to recommit ourselves to the purpose of God's Reign. Today, try to use every chance to recommit every part of our life to God's mission.

Pray: Jesus, you are the Start and End of my faith and my life, and I commit to you again today.

WEDNESDAY 01 DECEMBER 2021

Read: Luke 11:29-32

Reflect: Women and men have always seemed to be fascinated with "Judgement Day". There always seems to be some prophecy the fulfilment of which we're waiting to see. We're always looking for signs to prove that the end is near. In the Christian faith we love to think that Jesus is coming back "soon" – which usually means "in our lifetimes". Some of us even speak as if this is established fact.

But, of course, Christians have always hoped for Christ's return, and there have always been those who have turned that hope into a false expectation of immediate fulfilment.

This is a little bit like the scenario in Jesus' day. Then, the Jews were hoping and waiting for the Messiah to come, but, with all of their expectations, and with all the "false alarms", few people recognised Jesus when he finally arrived. This is why Jesus refused to give people a sign – except for the enigmatic "sign of Jonah", which is probably a reference to his death and resurrection. And Jesus challenged his hearers by reminding them of some famous people from the past. Unlike those to whom Jesus preached, these past God-seekers listened to the message they received.

The point of all of these strange stories and symbols is this: the signs are not what are important. It is Christ and his message that matter. It is not important to predict when Jesus may return. It is more important to live what Jesus taught now. Don't let the quest for "signs" to distract you from following Jesus.

Do: It's natural to sometimes get off track. The call of Jesus can be tough, and sometimes we get it wrong. When this happens, we simply need to acknowledge it, confess it, and turn back to following Jesus more carefully. What do you need to confess today?

Pray: Forgive me, Jesus, when I get distracted by chasing signs and miss your call to follow you today.

THURSDAY 02 DECEMBER 2021

Read: Philippians 1:12-18a

Reflect: Paul was no pushover. He could speak his mind when necessary, he didn't shrink from challenging those with whom he disagreed, and he endured great physical and emotional hardships in his ministry. But the letter to the Philippians, which was written toward the end of the apostle's life as he was in prison, indicates that Paul had mellowed a bit through the years. His primary commitment had not changed – to preach the life, death and resurrection of Christ. He remained utterly convinced that Jesus offers life, and he would do anything to help others to encounter Christ for themselves. So strong had this mission become, that he

no longer cared even about people's motives when they preached. He knew that some people were trying to discredit him and usurp his position as a leader in the Church. He knew that some of his companions in Christ did not have his best interests at heart, but he was completely unconcerned about any of this. He could only celebrate the fact that Jesus was being preached, and people were getting the opportunity to encounter the Risen One.

It is all too easy to get caught up in our own agendas, and in defence of our positions, our ministries and our reputations. It is very easy to become angry and vengeful against those who challenge or hurt us. The tragedy is that followers of Christ get so caught up in fighting with one another, that the message of Christ's coming gets lost. This Advent, why not take a leaf out of Paul's book, and try to discern where Christ is coming into the world even through those whom you dislike or with whom you struggle? And then, when you see Christ being preached, try to rejoice in it and celebrate it, in spite of your reservations. Imagine what a witness to the world this could be!

Do: The practice of proclamation is not just the work of preachers. We are all preachers in the sense that our lives proclaim something about the Jesus we follow. The problem is that our message is heard even when we aren't speaking – in our attitudes to others, our comments about others, and our actions toward others. Today, try to let your entire life proclaim Christ's grace, forgiveness and love.

Pray: Today, I proclaim your grace, Jesus, by living as graciously as I can.

FRIDAY 03 DECEMBER 2021

Read: Malachi 3:13-18

Reflect: Malachi's prophecy – placed last in the Old Testament – is framed as a series of conversations between God and God's people. Throughout the book God makes statements about the sins and injustices of the people, and the people question God's words. Then, God responds in support of the statement, and the consequences of the people's actions are outlined. It's an amazing way to frame a prophecy like this because it reveals a God who is

committed to justice, but also committed to relationship with God's people and willing to engage them meaningfully.

Today's reading comes from chapter three, which begins with a prophecy about God's Messenger who will come to the Temple and purify the priesthood. In Mark's Gospel this prophecy is combined with one from Isaiah to describe the ministry of John the Baptist. John will be the focus of the Gospels for the next two Sundays, so it's appropriate that this prophecy should be referenced as we prepare for the coming weeks.

In today's passage, though, the focus is on whether it's worth it to follow God. The people wrestle with following God's ways, because they don't seem to make a difference. Arrogant and evil people get rich and seem to have no cares, while God's people seem to gain nothing from their faithfulness. This is a struggle that believers in every age – including ours – have experienced. But God assures the people that those who are careful to obey, and follow will be protected, cared for and sustained. It's good to remember that our faith is not about temporary wealth and rewards. God's Reign is about the life that lasts, even when disaster strikes.

How can you open your heart to God's sustaining grace today?

Do: In these difficult times, it can be challenging to stay true to our faith, especially when it seems like the corrupt and godless prosper all the more. As you wrestle with this reality in your own life, offer your struggles and frustrations to God in prayer – only in this way can we draw on God's life and strength for each day.

Pray: Strengthen me and sustain me, O God, when I struggle to stay true to your ways.

SATURDAY 04 DECEMBER 2021

Read: Luke 9:1-6

Reflect: God's Reign always seeks heralds who will "prepare the way" and proclaim its message to the world. John the Baptist was just such a herald, but he was not the only one. In today's reading, Jesus sends out his disciples to be heralds as well. Their job is to proclaim God's Reign in words, and then to demonstrate its presence in actions of healing and overcoming evil. But, in order to

maintain the integrity of their message and their lives, they are to live with the people to whom they are sent. Jesus instructs the disciples to take nothing with them, but to trust to God's provision through the people they will meet. Where they are welcomed, they are to stay (so that they can't just move on if they get a better offer). But, if they are rejected, they are to do nothing more than indicate, through the shaking off of the dust from their feet, that this village has no interest in their message. It's less an act of judgement, than an act of acceptance of the people's right to choose their own way and face the consequences.

It's interesting that this passage comes just before the feeding of the five thousand, and Peter's proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. It's like the ministry of the disciples was a way to prepare the hearts of the people to accept Jesus, but it was also a way to prepare the hearts of the disciples for a new understanding of who Jesus really was. There is no question that it is our following of Jesus, and our ministry in Jesus' name, that really teach us to understand the One we follow, and that draws us into deep relationship with him.

How can you be a co-worker with Christ today?

Do: The act of giving is always a sharing in the work of God. The disciples gave of their time and energy, but also, by relying on the villagers' generosity, they invited these people to join them in ministry. Today, try to be as generous with yourself in service of God as you can.

Pray: I offer you my whole self, O God, so I may be a herald of your Reign.