

Worship for Sunday 27th November 2022: First Sunday in Advent

Call to worship

Watching, and waiting...

Watching and waiting to see what the politicians will do...

Watching and waiting to see what our families are planning...

*Watching and waiting for cards to start to arrive,
and deliveries to come and shopping to be done...*

*And here, in the house of God, where the people of God gather,
where God may be heard and encountered and rejoiced over,
here we watch and wait, for Jesus is coming and coming again.*

*May we be found ready, alert, and eager, in worship, in service,
and in the generous sharing of the gifts God has already given.*

Hymn 273: O come, O come, Emmanuel

Prayer

God who is coming in Jesus and has already come, we worship you on this first Sunday in

Advent. And everything is the same, in some ways, and different, in others. Last year and the year before it was worry over illness, isolation, restrictions, cancellations. This year it is fuel costs, rising prices in the shops, and, once more, the question: where will it all end. And as we attempt and want to focus and gear up and make plans and look forward to Christmas, distractions abound, more than ever. So, on this first Sunday in Advent, we come to offer our prayers, to be pulled back into shape by your word, and to sing our songs in anticipation of Jesus coming again.

God who is coming and has already come, we still our hearts and minds for contemplation and confession. This time is given to us for preparation, for deepening faith, for growth in generosity, so, if these have not been uppermost in our minds, forgive us. Speak to us above the chorus of noise, the glitter of decorations, the lure of brightly lit shops, and draw us towards the journey to Bethlehem, that we might see the faith of Mary, the honour of Joseph, the joy of the angels and the wonder of the shepherds; and, seeing all these, believe that you are coming, indeed have come, and have your plans for us in the ushering in of your kingdom.

God who is surely coming and keeps coming, again and again and again, help us to believe, to trust, and to depend on you. You are mighty and kind, eternal and gentle, and you are truth. Make us open to receive all you give to us in our need and in our brokenness, courageous enough to know what you would have us be, and embolden us that we might, in this Advent season, stay awake, stay alert, and keep watch, that we might not miss, or ignore, the signs of your coming. Amen.

Reading: Matthew 24 verses 36 – 44

Hymn: My advent hope, borne out of love Words by John Millar of this Parish

Sermon

Matthew 24 verse 42: Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

Not so long ago, someone on duty at the door made me smile. Looking at the intimation sheet, he said, good naturedly, and with more than a hint of a twinkle in his eye, "Oh, I see it's Luke's gospel again." There was no denying it. Luke's gospel was the gospel of choice in the lectionary for the year that ended last Sunday on the day the church knows as "Christ the King". And, as I like to preach mostly on the week's gospel verses, you've been saddled with... Luke's gospel. Occasionally, taking my life in my hands, I have dived in elsewhere: to a psalm or some rich and engaging story from the Old Testament. But mostly, it's been the gospel. And from this Sunday last year until last Sunday, in what the lectionary calls rather prosaically, "Year C", it's been Luke. And so we have encountered some of the stories he, uniquely, records: the parable of the good Samaritan.... recently, the story of the vertically challenged tax collector, Zacchaeus.... and, way back last Christmas (there, I've said it, the word's out there), the stories of Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna. But it all ended last week. Perhaps you breathed a sigh or relief, not maybe just never thought about it. But here we are: it is the first Sunday in a new year in Christ, "Advent Sunday". It means a lot of different things, and, among them, this: for the year ahead, the gospel of choice is Matthew. I invite you to pay close attention and see if you can spot the difference. We're all set then... the countdown to Christmas can begin. Jean's Christmas Fayre took place yesterday.... the annual bereavement service is coming in a fortnight... and the Guild is gearing up for its Christmas lunch. Let the carol singing begin.....

.... but wait a minute. Surprise, surprise! (Apologies to Cilla Black). We have moved to a new gospel and there's not a mention of Christmas, or anything remotely Christmassy, anywhere to be seen or heard. Instead we get sober-sided Matthew, giving us grief about judgment. He even offers us two very stark but mercifully brief incites into how this judgment will play out. **Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.** Go on... admit it! This isn't what you turned up at church today hoping, or even expecting, to hear. If it's any consolation, me neither.. It could be worse: the folk who turned up at church in Old Kilpatrick last Sunday for a baptism didn't get anything soft, cuddly and warm, like Jesus' attitude to children. Instead, they got Jesus on the cross, and a criminal pleading with him: **Lord, when you come into your kingdom, remember me"**. But they paid close attention and laughed in all the right places.

What are we going to do this morning, then, this first Sunday in Advent, when, instead of Mary with an advancing if inexplicable pregnancy, we get her grown up son labouring on on the subject of judgment? It can go one of two ways.

Some followers of Jesus wonder and worry about judgment, and understandably so. If our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ serves more as an add-on to our lives rather than a game-changer – which is it for you? - we might prefer to hang with those words of Jesus that suit us, and ignore the ones that deeply challenge. So parables might do it for us, so long we don't delve too deeply. The one about the prodigal son, for example: that's fine if we keep company with the younger brother, but it offers a disturbing edge if we ponder the older son's understandably resentful attitude and let it question our own tendency to harbour grudges. But, unless faith in Jesus has really gotten a hold of us, we might like to give a body swerve to the issue of judgment. Who wouldn't? It's a bit scary, and even to speak of it might seem to suggest that we might feel we're "in" and others are "out". Best give Jesus a wide berth when he's talking like this....

.... except that other Christians let it preoccupy them. Go into any Christian bookshop – though you'll be hard pushed to find one anywhere now – and you'll find endless titles on this very theme. For example, Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins' series of "Left Behind" novels have been very popular in some circles. Like other American fundamentalists – where they're not championing the cause of Donald Trump – they

anticipate a day on which God's chosen will be raptured, which is to say, lifted up in their physical bodies to Jesus, while the reprobates are "left behind" to incur God's wrath. We must get ready, the thinking goes, because this could happen in our lifetime. Call me a coward if you like, but this is a road I just don't want to go down, and I suspect you don't either. There's just one problem: this is what Jesus himself is talking about, on this first Sunday in Advent. And really, if I have to come down on one side or the other, I'm in a quandry.... One writer puts it like this: *When, then, the preacher sits down in the study with the Gospel reading for this Sunday, there is both the powerful push towards Christmas and the equally powerful pull away from apocalyptic eschatology. Still, in spite of this push and pull, there is the press of the text, just as powerful and commanding.* "The press of the text". I like that.

What if we considered it like this? What if we heard Jesus' opening words: **But about that day or hour** - you realise, of course, that what we have today is just a section of a much longer discourse – **about that day or hour no one knows...** and realised that Jesus was speaking to ordinary folk in ordinary time, and that his theme was judgment, yes, but also a much more generalised uncertainty? Does that help at all? Or does the fact of uncertainty simply scare you? Whichever, it is simply a fact of life, for everyone. It was even, get this, a fact of life for Jesus. Not even angels, not even the son of Man, knows when God will bring things to an end.

The people of Angus knew the power of uncertainty last weekend when some parts of the east of Scotland had a month's rainfall in two days. And last Sunday evening, the folk of Monymusk gathered in their church and held a vigil and lit candles for a local woman who had been swept away by the rising, turbulent waters as, apparently, she tried to rescue a dog. Our verses speak of how, in the days before the great biblical flood, people went about their business: eating, drinking, marrying. The folk of Aberdeenshire and Angus did exactly the same in the hours prior to their own experience of flooding. About that day or hour, no-one knew. One woman, taken... others, left. Only in the biblical record, Noah knew, and he built a boat.

Jesus continues his cautionary tale. He moves to the theme of house break-ins, and states the blindingly obvious: if, as a house owner, you knew you were going to be broken into, well, you wouldn't have gone out and left the windows open, your door unlocked, and a big heap of wrapped Christmas presents piled up on the living room

floor, would you. And this is in the here and now, not in the future. It seems as if, according to him, we are not completely powerless in the face of uncertainty.

Sometimes even folk like us, who may not always be thinking about judgment and the end times, look around us, and think: how much longer can this go on. We see flooding and drought and other natural disasters, and starvation and war, and fleetingly the thought passes through our heads: that's what the Bible talks about when it talks about the end of times. And we do feel powerless.

Except that, according to Jesus, we are not. **Keep watch**, he says. How would that do as a watchword for us in this Advent season in which, once more, uncertainty reigns? (Yes, we thought the wreckage the Covid 19 pandemic wrought could not be surpassed, only to find ourselves, shell shocked and eyes watering, at the cost of everything from mortgages to milk). Keep watch, as we hunt round for bargains and ponder what to buy for our relatives and friends who have, well, pretty much everything – everything that matters, anyway. Keep watch, and feel the nudge of Jesus as we pass the bin collecting items for the food bank. Keep watch, as we battle for a parking space so that we can conveniently load all we have bought into the boot, and wonder what Jesus, who had quite a lot to say about floods and natural disasters, might want us not to do in view of climate change. And keep watch, keep very careful watch indeed, just in case, either here in church or in the aisles of the shopping centre, Jesus himself is waiting – dishevelled, hungry, cold, frightened, embarrassed, lonely, easily mistaken for just another poor soul – just waiting to see what you and I will do, and when we will do it, before he makes his appearance, accompanied by a choir of angels, singing in perfect harmony, in a rather downbeat B & B in occupied Palestine....

Hymn: Advent is a time of waiting Words by John Millar of this Parish

Prayer

Keeping watch... it's not always something we do so well, Lord God. After all, we have life to be getting on with: appointments to make and keep, people to see, places to go, things to do. But today we pray: help us to watch and, if necessary, to do that other very difficult thing: to wait.

God of all kindness, help us, in the Advent season, to watch out for the lonely ones, for whom Christmas always underlines the absence of family and friends in their lives.

And let us start now to figure out how we might reach out to them from the midst of our family centred plans.

God of all grace, help us, in the Advent season, to remember the ones we tend to forget: those in the grip of addiction, for whom this time of partly false celebration increases their temptation; those who are in prison, and those who, in their humanity, extend compassion on behalf of us all; and the bereaved, whom soon we will welcome in church and greet in the street and encounter in the shops. Help us to speak peace to all, from the prince of peace, and hope, from the one who makes it a reality in the lives of all.

God of all love, come and muscle your way in: down the supermarket aisle, into the Christmas lunch gatherings, into the foodbank queue, gazing into the window of the toy shop. Come and stand beside us and whisper in our ear, "Keep watch". And, all the while, fit us for that very thing we find so hard: to wait: wait for your coming and your coming again, in all the least expected places, when we least expect you.

Amen.

Hymn 283: The voice of God goes out to all the world

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.