

Sermon Sunday 10th Dec 2023

Be Prepared

2 Peter 3 v 8-15a

Mark 1 v 1-8

Today for our sermon we continue with the Bible readings selected for this second week of Advent. I must say I can often find Advent a bit of a confusing part of the Christian year. On the one hand we see it as preparation for celebrating Christ's birth, the coming of God to earth in human form, the great Christmas emphasis on peace and goodwill, that the light of the world has come to lead us on the right way. Something so joyful.

On the other hand, there are the promises and destructions involved in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ – or the 'Day of the Lord', an event that is both terrifying in its context but also glorious, and frankly at times mysterious and often difficult to comprehend in worldly terms.

So, what are we to make of these two things being considered side by side during Advent? I suspect sometimes we may be inclined to opt out of the second coming as it's difficult to get our heads around.

So today I want to look at three things to help us in consider the implications of the second coming during Advent – alongside preparing for Christmas.

Firstly, to realise that that the Second Coming of Christ (or the day of the Lord) is precisely that. It follows after the first. You may say that's pretty obvious, but we need to understand they are inextricably linked.

Second, that the Second Coming is about judgement - but God's Judgment and not ours. It is the time when God's perfect Kingdom is totally fulfilled in a new heaven and earth, where there is no pain or suffering, hunger or fighting, hate or harm. The perfection of heaven.

Thirdly, in advance of the Second Coming we need to prepare our lives ready for it, building on what Christ taught us in his first coming, but also in the knowledge that we can actually hasten its coming.

So why is it important that as Christians we see the Second Coming as a consequence of the first.

Two reasons perhaps – firstly as Jesus himself said 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him **John 3 v 16**.

God has a total love for the world he has created; he desperately wants it to be perfect, but sees throughout history that humankind will mess it and themselves up.

Second reason - through Jesus' birth and life on earth he lays out the perfect blueprint of how we should be living our lives in a God-inspired way. That birth is a historical act of such importance that we celebrate it still to this day.

But more, In Christ's death and resurrection on the cross we know that, even when we his people fall short of that blueprint, God will forgive us and still see us perfect. So that when his judgement comes at the Second Coming, we will be part of the eternal life of the new heaven and earth.

Which is not to say Christ's promise is an insurance card to keep us out of hell and we can do whatever we like in the meantime. In our first reading at the start of Mark's Gospel we are introduced to John preaching the baptism of repentance and preparing the way for Jesus, but being very clear that Christ will baptise us with the Holy Spirit. So as Christians we not only repent for our shortfall, but we are equipped with the Holy Spirit, by God himself to live lives worthy of his calling and judgement.

Which brings us to my second point - that whilst we don't hear too many sermons these days on the subject of judgement, we should never forget that Christ himself made it clear that he will come again and there will be a day of judgement, or a day of the Lord.

The nature of the Second Coming as described in Scripture has led to more secular minds concentrating on the dramatics of what will happen when it comes and often on when it will come – rather than on its meaning in more spiritual terms for humankind. All the talk of earthquakes, dark skies, thunder and lightning, cataclysmic wars as precursors makes for the sensational. But for me, much of this speculative interpretation of Scripture falls into the category of endless chatter and disputes of genealogies that St Paul warns us against in his letters to Timothy and Titus.

A sentiment picked up in the hymn after this sermon which starts each verse with the statement, I cannot tell why or how....and then answers each mystery with the answer...But this I know....and concentrates on the wonderful living attributes of Jesus Christ

This I know... is that God loves Humankind and wants to give everyone across the generations the chance to follow his righteous way and acknowledge his authorityand that he is patient as in our second reading from 2 Peter...**He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**

And we are also reminded these things are in God's time, not ours.... **With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and thousand years like a day.**

But at some unexpected time the day of the lord will eventually come, with those who decided to reject God and his ways not being part of the new heaven and earth. In preparation for that day, we should never forget the promises of eternal life made by Jesus to us, his believers. And we are told**you (we) ought to live holy and godly lives as you (we) look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.** A sobering thought that the better we do at living God's way, the sooner his Kingdom will be established in full. That's what comes with being empowered by his Holy Spirit. A point linked of course to the great commission to us at the end of Mathew's Gospel

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

And so this brings me to a third and final point - our readings today have a common message of 'Be Prepared'.

On the basis of what we know from the First Coming, Christ's time on earth - how do we prepare our lives and souls for the Second Coming?

And for this I have my usual illustrative prop.

Does anyone know which organisation has 'Be Prepared' as its motto?

Scout movement....

Growing up I loved my scouting - from early days in the cubs through to what then were known as the Venture Scouts as we became adults. I loved it so much that I still embarrassingly have my 55 years old Venture Scout shirt. Embarrassing... can't get into it. Just can't quite throw it away bit like my last pair of rugby boots.

So is being prepared for the Second Coming having a cupboard full of things and experiences from a past life that are good and meaningful and covering every aspect of what the challenges of the Second Coming might be? A bit like the cubs used to be with all their badges covering tea making, using the phone or whatever, have we 'ticked the boxes' of being 'good people' in current terminology?

I want to extend the scouting metaphor a bit further with a second item: the neckerchief. I've still got mine - got my Cash's name tape on it if you are old enough to remember such things. This must be 60 years old, but I think illustrates more closely what Being Prepared for the Second Coming is actually about. That is being equipped or empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The neckerchief was not just a bit of colourful material to say we belonged to a particular group or troop, or to keep our neck warm, both of which it did. But it could also be used as a sling for a broken arm, as a tourniquet to stop bleeding, to tie a broken leg to a splint, to flick at your fellow scouts in a bit of good natured rough and tumble. to replace a tent guy rope that had snapped. It was something useful in the flexible ways it could be applied. It could of course also be misused - mine still shows the stains of using it to polish my shoes when I couldn't be bothered to go and find a proper cloth. All that scouting was not an end in itself. It was not a box-ticking exercise on things achieved, but a preparation for being resilient and resourceful in whatever was to be thrown at us in life (and good fun too). Scouting was and I understand is still like that, albeit much updated in life skills.

However, this is not an advert for scouting, but an illustration to help us understand how WE prepare for the Second Coming.

In some ways the Christian faith is pretty unique, in that our place in heaven is not secured by earning it through good deeds, as in other religions. It's not how many good badges we have won.

In the Christian faith, our place in heaven is through GRACE OF God and not something we have earned. That Grace is through our belief in Christ Jesus, HIS cross and resurrection. From that faith we are expected to live lives worthy of him but can and will be forgiven for doing things wrong and we are expected to likewise forgive and not hold everybody to perfection. In this we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to be encouraged to be wise about our own lives and how, practically, to serve and honour others.

Life is complex and, to 'be prepared', I suggest our lives have to be sort of 'neckerchief lives' wearing God;s Holy Spirit at all times.

- Yes, we can be clearly identified as being of Christ's church and faith, wearing it openly for others to see.
- Yes, we do train and study to be able to serve ourselves and others, but this is for the purpose of better helping others and looking after ourselves and not accumulating badges, ticking boxes or the adulation of others as worthy people.
- Yes, we are here to serve and help others, we apply and actually are the splint for the broken and stem the flow when lives are bleeding out.
- Yes, we can have a bit of fun along the way.
- Yes, we can get things wrong and the neckerchief may pick up a stain or a rip along the way of our lives – but we remain God's people and in the final inspection it won't be counted against us.

As the world changes around us, the Holy Spirit equips us to be relevant and distinct. Be prepared, carry and be a neckerchief.

So to conclude, this Advent let us not just concentrate on the coming of Christ at Bethlehem, but also on the promise of Him coming again.

Let us realise that in the Second Coming God really does not want to condemn and punish, but rather to save all people - and we are called to do our part in that through witness and service.

And finally, that our preparation for the fulfilment of his Kingdom is to live lives that to the best of our ability are spotless, blameless and of service. To be a Christian neckerchief in his world.

In the words of the next hymn, there are many things I do not yet understand in full ... but this I know ,,,,, That at the last, the Saviour, Saviour of the world is King.