

The Slaves left in charge ...

... Watch and Wait

A sermon given on the 1st Sunday of Advent, 29th November 2020, by Mrs Catherine Drake, in the Online Communion Service.

Mark 13:24-end

On Tuesday, a countdown that's usually marked by eating chocolates will begin, as children and some lucky adults start opening doors on their Advent calendar. When I was a little girl, the only Advent calendars we got was the nativity scene, a piece of card: you opened each door and pushed the flap back and you only got chocolate on the very last day on Christmas Eve, the 24th. Each year now, of course, there's a wider and wider variety that you can buy. You can even buy them for your pets. But what's the point of Advent? It must be more than a frantic countdown to the big day.

Well, here on the first Sunday of Advent, and as our thoughts turn to Christmas, we're possibly not expecting the text that we have from Mark's gospel today. It starts with verses talking about the darkening of the sun, the dimming of the moon's light and the stars falling from heaven, the end of the world as we know it, and Jesus returning. So why this reading, why now? Well, we know that the season of Advent, the run up to Christmas, serves as a time of anticipation for Jesus's birth. But that's only part of the story. Because the word advent is derived from the Latin word 'adventus', meaning 'coming' or 'arrival' and is meant to be a time of waiting and preparation, not only for the celebration of Jesus's birth the first time he came, but for the anticipated time when he will come again.

Even though we're probably all familiar with one of the acclamations that we use each Sunday - 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again' - there can be a problem once we actually start talking about the second coming. People are apt to either completely disregard it or to be so completely unbalanced about it that it's all they think or talk about. Equally, some may think, 'Well, since the time's unknown, it could be hundreds or thousands or millions of years from now.'

The writer of our gospel today, Mark, draws a very different conclusion: since the timings are unknown, it could be today - he clearly wants this to be part of the faith that informs our daily lives.

Jesus said that even he doesn't know the hour all the day when he'll come again, and so he helps us by telling the parable about the slaves left in charge while the master's away, making the point simply and clearly to us that we must be awake to the possibility that it could happen any day; and we have the great task of making every day fit for him to see by being the people of God.

And as to how to do this, Jesus gave us a very simple formula when he said, "A new command I give you: love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this. Everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." So Advent is a time when we remind ourselves that we have to be prepared; to be fulfilling the command to love one another day in and day out, regardless of how we feel, whether we feel like it or not. Loving as Jesus commands is not a feeling. It's more than that: it's action; it's a will; a decision to make. So living watchful rather than superficial lives, we are to guard against complacency and to be ready no matter when the second coming may take place, ready to meet him face to face.

So let's for a moment think about the waiting aspect to Advent. Many of us, COVID aside, lead busy lives and the run up to Christmas can feel like one great big crazy whirlwind of activity, sometimes fun, often stressful. I know many of us have all known Advent seasons in the past where work, family, church commitments and a million things to do have made it hard for us to sit still, let alone wait on God. And that's why it helps that Advent is a period of time when we're reminded and encouraged to sit and wait; a time traditionally in the church when we prepare ourselves spiritually for Christmas. Of course, when we meet together for public services of worship, usually even more often at this time of the year with things like Carol Services, Christingle Services, lighting the Advent Candle, all these events and things help us to prepare ourselves spiritually.

But this year is very different. And I wonder if I dare to suggest that lockdown, and not being able to come into the building for services, has actually made it easier for us to observe this aspect of Advent this year, of waiting on God. After all, we've all had to slow down. You see, while I would be the first to acknowledge that we encounter God in the ordinary, busy ordinariness of life, I also know that nothing compares to sitting still in the presence of God waiting expectantly on Him.

There's no set formula to this, no set time. I personally like my quiet time first thing in the morning, but I can remember a time when I was busy, especially at this time of year, working full time, I just had to find, set-aside, carve out a tiny piece of time wherever I

could in the day. But adding to our daily prayers and Bible reading, even just a very short time of silence, of waiting on God, of listening to God, I really believe helps us to fulfil that great task that we have of being the people of God He wants us to be; living as he wants us to; loving as he wants us to; making every day as if he would come again and fit for him to see.

So I hope as we enter this season of Advent, as we prepare and wait expectantly, that it enables us to anticipate Christmas in a deeper way. In a world so desperately in need of God's love, I hope that it gives each one of us the confidence and courage to share the good news of the Christmas story that Jesus is the very real evidence of the incredible unbounded love of God.

Reading Text

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. ²⁸ "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³² "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."