

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 28th November 2021
The First Sunday of Advent

Collect

Almighty God,
as your kingdom dawns,
turn us from the darkness of sin to the
light of holiness,
that we may be ready to meet you
in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Luke 21:25-36

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.’

‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

Sermon by John Richardson

There have been two things this week that have been on my mind. The first was a report I heard on the radio on Monday from Afghanistan. It was about the desperate plight of people faced with an unprecedented disaster: the prospect of twenty three million people facing starvation. It is not something you can easily forget or erase from your mind. It stays with you. It haunts you. It reminds you that inhumanity and cruelty and injustice are ever present with us.

The second thing that sticks in my mind is what I have been reading about Edward King, who was Bishop of Lincoln from 1885 until his death in 1910. Edward King was a pastor, teacher, bishop and finally declared a saint. He was largely responsible for the introduction of pastoral theology into the life of the Church - at a time when many clergy did little to care for the pastoral needs of their people. He spent his life as a bishop caring for the poor and underprivileged. And yet he was also vilified by his fellow churchmen. He was hauled before an ecclesiastical court for carrying out such dreadful practices as having lighted candles during worship, making the sign of the cross at the absolution and blessing, and facing east at the altar to celebrate the eucharist.

What have these two things got in common? At first sight, nothing. And then I read today's Gospel and realised that they do have something in common. People in Afghanistan might read these words and apply them to themselves: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations - people will faint from fear and foreboding at what is coming upon the world." You can see that people facing starvation and death would think that the end of the world was near.

For very different reasons, Christians living in the time of Edward King might have thought the same thing. Their world was being turned upside down by those who wanted to change things beyond recognition to make the Church and their world unrecognisable. During King's time the future of the Church of England revolved around the relationship between belief and worship, and how one had a profound influence upon the other.

"The Church of England as it now stands, no human power can save." No, that's not a prophecy from some rebel bishop in the twenty-first century Church of England. Those words were spoken in 1833 by Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby School. That gives us some idea as to the state of the Church of England in the nineteenth century. It also tells us why people might well have recalled those words of Jesus in today's Gospel and thought it was all about to happen.

Today we begin the season of Advent. When we hear today's Gospel, we might think we are about to embark upon a period of doom and gloom. Why do we have to sound so pessimistic and negative? We can all think of reasons why we should see the present age in that way. You have only to think of the recent COP 26 conference to see how the words of Jesus can so easily be applied to our world confronted by global warming and devastating climate change. Or to go back a little in time - think of the First or Second World Wars, the Cold War, the nuclear threat, or even the present times and Covid 19.

At first sight, today's Gospel makes Advent sound like a death sentence - until we read further and come across the words "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

So it's not a death sentence after all. It's more like a promise of something to come. And not just something to come, but something that can be experienced here and now. Advent may well be about the future. It is also about the present. And the present is where we are and where God wants us to be.

How do we see all this in relation to the Gospel - especially in relation to Jesus' words about the end times? What does it say to us about what we do here and now by way of a response to the words of Jesus?

Edward King believed passionately that religion and education are two sides of the same coin. He believed that Christian teaching should be the basis of the education system. We have come a long way from that, to the extent that nowadays religion has a very small part to play in the education system - at least as far as King would recognise it.

And yet it is education which largely determines how we see life and its meaning. We may be influenced by those around us. We may take on ideas and attitudes, as well as prejudices, of our parents and peers. But education and those who provide it play a large part in who we are and what we become. Perhaps we should listen more to people like Edward King for whom Christian belief was central to his life and to everything he said and did. Maybe we have lost something in pushing religion to the periphery.

Which brings me back to Advent.

What seems to be missing today in many people's lives is hope.

And that's what Advent is all about.

It's about hope.

It's about promise.

Yes, it's about the future.

But it's also about the present.

And that's where we come in. We are called to live in hope and promise. Not in the future, but in the here and now.

We are called to pass on that hope and promise to others by the way we live our lives. Maybe education is not the place where that is most likely to happen. But it can and does happen through the lives and example of ordinary people. That's not an easy thing to do, especially when faced with things like the climate crisis or the situation in Afghanistan or the worrying signs of Covid 19.

But that's what we are called to do. To live in hope. And hope is not some wishful thinking about impossible dreams. It is a genuine and firm belief in God as our present and our future.

That is what our faith and our belief is all about.

Not just loving our neighbour.

Not just living good lives.

Not just doing what we believe to be the right thing.

It is those things, but it is so much more.

It's about the belief in the power of love and the centrality of that love in our lives.

It's about the belief that no matter what life brings us or where it takes us, there is at the end only God.

So with confidence we can do what the Gospel tells us to do:

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

As St Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: “ Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

Amen.