**29th November 2020**

**Advent Sunday**

Gospel: **Mark 13.24-37**

The lockdown finishes this week, but we all know it will end in tiers!

Tiers of rage and disbelief as 34 million people are worse off than before the lockdown!

The North in particular is seeing Red – most of it is swathed in tier three

But it’s all Wight for some – if you live in Cornwall or the Isle of Wight you are the only areas in tier one.

99% of the population are in tiers 2 AND 3 meaning 55 million people face tough restrictions on mixing.

However, there is some laxity at Christmas. But we are not sure of what to do at Christmas even though there is permission for three households to gather to celebrate Christmas. The Chief Medical Officer, Chris Whitty, was not very witty when he warned ‘Don’t hug your Gran this Christmas if you want her to see next Christmas’.

I asked people to send in videos of what they were hoping for Christmas. No one did! Either they were too embarrassed, or too busy and couldn’t be bothered. Or they weren’t entertaining any hopes for Christmas. Best not have any hopes in case they are taken away.

Bible passage from Mark, sounds like a Government safety notice: Be on guard! Be Alert! Keep watch!

All a bit jaded now with warnings and rules and regulations. Great fear that no one is listening anymore nine months on.

In this passage Jesus speaks of coming dark days when people will be close to losing hope. He urges them therefore to stay awake to signs that offer hope of the coming deliverance, which will certainly come, though at an unexpected time.

Scholars speculate that the background to Mark’s Gospel was the Judean revolt against Roman rule (AD 66–70).[[1]](#endnote-1) Rome responded with fury and destroyed the region. Thus, we get apocalyptic imagery that is reminiscent of Isaiah 34.4.

‘“the sun will be darkened,
    and the moon will not give its light;
**25**the stars will fall from the sky,
    and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

For many people living in Judea at that time, the sky literally fell in (vv.24-25). It is unimaginably difficult to maintain hope for the future in such circumstances. Knowing that Caesar was also known as both Son of God and Son of Man means that the darkness is deepened in a dramatic way. Who is it that is coming in the clouds? Is it our Saviour? Or our Destroyer? In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus uses this kind of imagery several times: When at his trial the High Priest ask him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’

**62**‘I am,’ said Jesus. ‘And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’

(; 14.62, and see 8.38–9.1).

It seems strange to be reading such a dark text at the beginning of Advent, but these have been dark times. There is still anxiety about the illness and anxiety about the future and the economic wellbeing of many. The Chancellor said this week that we stare into an economic abyss. That the pandemic is not yet over but the economic crisis is about to begin. It is not cheery stuff.

And yet even at the darkest time of the year there is hope to be discerned – if we are attentive says Jesus. Jesus turns to the symbol of the fig tree again, perhaps the same tree he had earlier cursed (see Mark 11.12-14, 20-21) and which had withered. He holds out the possibility of it putting out shoots that would signal the end of the darkness of winter and the coming of summer. However, if one is not paying attention, these signs are easy to miss. Therefore, be alert and stay awake (13.33,34b,35,37).

For people in the midst of a war, the tender shoots of a fig tree and the promise of summer may offer little comfort. Jesus seems to emphasize this by saying the shoots are not the rescue, only the promise of rescue. It is near, it is at the very gates, but it has not passed through those gates yet (v.29). But if one can be sure of the imminence of release, perhaps one can hold on for just a minute more. This is the importance of the signs; they enable us to hold on, even when things are really difficult, and we feel we are about to be overrun.

The vaccines are coming! We hope! We woke on Monday to [positive results for Oxford/AstraZeneca’s vaccine](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55040635) – if less staggeringly effective than the first two, it brings its own advantages. But vaccines alone won’t end our ‘suffering’ (v.24). nor should they enable us to relax, there is still the need to be alert, be on guard, keep watch.

In the UK the long-term loss of an open society will also demand our continuing vigilance. Will we manage to sustain the good effects, and shake off the bad ones? How will the government respond when the hardest hit areas and communities [appeal for extra help](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-55043908)? How sensitive and imaginative will the [prioritising of groups for vaccination](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55045639) be? Will wealthy western governments remain true to their [commitments to the fair distribution](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-54961045) of the vaccines when they come on stream? Will governments of the world [fulfil ‘green’ promises](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-55066576) despite financial perils? When we are again allowed public meetings, and demonstrations, will we recover our appetite for such events and for the important causes of social justice? Will we all retain the strength of mind to keep pressing for these things, even against our understandable instincts to protect first ourselves, our livelihoods, and our families?

This has been a pandemic. Europe, America, all the countries of the globe, are faced with comparable problems. Climate change is still there and threatening. There has never been a time when it was more important to lift our eyes from our immediate concerns, pressing as they may be, to look for, recognize, and promote the signs of God’s presence in every instance of concern for justice, truthfulness, and the peaceful co-existence of different communities.

We all need patience now.[[2]](#endnote-2) But not a passive sort of patience. We need to be active, sifting the non-essential from the essential. We need to be searching our hearts to distinguish real injustice from the cruel results of a novel virus, that has no mind, no priorities, no sense of fair or unfair. We need generosity towards those we perceive to have suffered little, for the sheltered retired folk and the carefree, young as they are.

We need compassion on those who have suffered greatly, and are still suffering, especially those who may have been forgotten as we rightly think first of the front-line staff in the NHS. There is probably no walk of life at present that doesn’t have its special burdens to bear. We need understanding too for all those who now face the challenge of rolling out huge vaccination programmes here and across the world, for the demands that will be made on their expertise, their time, their sheer physical stamina.

May God grant us that special kind of watchful patience. May God remind us that in anger we lose sight of the claims of compassion, of justice, even of truth. So may God keep us in God’s ways, alert to the signs of God’s presence, forgiving of the failures of others, and ready to do God’s will.

The gospel is full of signs. Signs of God’s love. Yet in the passage from Mark’s gospel Jesus tells us to be awake and alert to read the signs which tell us when he is coming to earth again. This time he won’t be coming as a tiny baby, but full of God’s glory an in great power, riding on the clouds of heaven. It will be such an amazing sight that it will rock the heavens. The whole cosmos will be shaken. Everyone will notice. There will be no doubt who is Lord after that. But Jesus tells us that even he doesn’t know the date or time but warns us all to be ready.

So how can we make sure we are ready? How can we read the signs?

There was a sign on the escalator in a railway station. It said dogs must be carried on this escalator, always. Which if you read it again, kind of implies that everyone who uses the escalator has to carry a dog! Likewise, a fridge in a supermarket said ‘this fridge is not working due to a technical fault’. Good to clarify that – because maybe the fridge wasn’t working because it was on holiday, or on strike, or was upset and in a grievance procedure.

We need to read signs well. The best way of making sure we stay ready is by keeping our eyes open – our spiritual eyes. Which means keeping in touch with God on a daily basis through reading the scriptures through prayer through worship. Sensible sailors or hill walkers will check the weather every time they set out, so they are prepared. We need to check God’s will and guidance as we set out in life and the decisions we make. See God’s providence, God’s provision for us through the small acts of kindness from others, the pointers to reconciliation and forgiveness, the signs of hope and a better future. ‘*Cultivate that attitude of gratitude’* as they saying goes. Then our faith will be living and active, growing as we grow, keeping us alert and ready for the day when the Lord will come again in whatever form.

The gospel passage closes with a strong ethical appeal to Jesus’ followers. “Be on guard” and “be alert” call for an attitude of readiness in the midst of chaotic times. Such vigilance in behaviour grows out of an outlook of hopeful expectation and trust in God, in whose hands

the future rests secure. In the hands of God. Diego Maradona, Rest in Peace, knew all about the Hand of God. Or was that hand ball? The true hand of God empowers us to risk living the ways of Jesus now. God’s promises provide the way for us to stand firm and act with hope now.

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives:   On May 19th, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought." Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to be lights as we watch and wait.

It is into this situation of waiting and longing for God to act decisively in history and in our lives that Christ comes. At the right time, in the right place, God acts in Christ Jesus. When God speaks words of salvation and release to the waiting people, the word is Jesus.

My friends, each one of us lives in the shadow of the apocalypse - the dark reality of the end of our time and the end of the world's time. That is the warning of Advent. But there is also good news. There is also the promise of Advent - the promise that in the darkness, in the shadows, in the unpredictable anxiety of our unfinished lives, God is present. God is in control, and God will come again. With each candle we light, the shadows recede a bit, and the promise comes closer. With each candle we light, we are proclaiming that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. The promise is that wherever there is darkness and dread in our lives, wherever there is darkness and dread in the world around us, God is present to help us endure. God is in charge, and hope is alive. And as long and as interminable as the night seems, morning will come - in God's good time and God's good way.

This advent, as we await the coming of Christ, amidst the frustration and despair of the world, may you find hope in God and that we are in God’s care.

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/110-november-december-2020-ab/advent-sunday/bible-notes> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brenda Vance, <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/110-november-december-2020-ab/advent-sunday/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)