

First Sunday of Advent – 1 December 2024

Message – The life of a disciple, watch and pray

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, comfort and challenge us and help us to reflect your love. **Amen.**

Happy Liturgical New Year! As we start reading the gospel, again. This year we focus on the gospel of Luke. We will hear many much loved passages that are unique to Luke. We will hear Luke's strong emphasis on inclusivity. Luke accompanied Saint Paul on many of his journeys. He witnessed firsthand the struggles of the early church accepting the inclusion of gentiles and working out the extent to which they needed to obey the Hebrew laws.

Today, we do not start at the beginning, we keep that for Christmas. Rather, we prepare for hearing the beginning. The season of Advent is a season of preparation. It is a season which emphasises the penitential, as we prepare to receive the greatest gift, God revealed in human form.

We start that preparation with final account of Jesus' public ministry. Despite the varied order of parts of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have the 'Little Apocalypse', as it is known, as the final public teaching of Christ before his death, resurrection, and ascension.

This is the culmination of all the stories and parables that revealed God to the world. It is not the end of the revelation but it is the end of Jesus public teaching. It is the climactic conclusion, the final part of which we read today.

Apocalyptic literature has some issues. It might be

compared to the mirror, Erised, JK Rowling describes in the *Philosopher's Stone*. The mirror shows a reflection, often of a possible future, it is in fact a reflection of the person's heart's desire. It may come to pass, it may have passed, it may be impossible. To focus only on our desires is to fail to live life, particularly, to live life in all its fullness.

So it is with apocalyptic writings, their interpretation while interesting should not be the primary focus of our lives. The next time someone tells you that they know the dates and events of the apocalypse, you may like to remind them that even Christ did not know (Mark 13.32).

There are points within the Little Apocalypse that have caused much discussion. The most obvious being *'this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.'* Biblical scholars have not been short of explanations.

One obvious possibility is that Jesus is using the common patterns of apocalyptic visions. Though the prophets prophesy to *'this generation'*, it is not uncommon for the events not to take place within the lifetime of the immediate audience. Another way of understanding this generation is that it is of a particular kind of person, perhaps in this case those who follow Christ. There are plenty of other options if neither of these fit for you.

Regardless of how we understand the details of the apocalypse, the final call is a call to living faithfully as a disciple of Christ. Whether, we await the second coming or we are embraced by death, we do not know the time.

Christ calls us to be ready. We should not be weighed down by either the fleeting pleasures or fleeting worries of

the world. As someone who specialises in anxiety that feels like a tall order. So how are we to respond. Be alert and pray. These are the fundamental callings of the season of advent. We are to be alert and pray.

One point that can easily be missed about apocalypses is that they are about hope. The biblical apocalypses tell us that despite all the terrible things going on around us, and as we trawl through history, it seems no age has been free of from deeply anxiety inducing events, despite these events, those who love God are never to be without hope.

When Christ returns, those who have faithfully followed the way of Christ are told to *'stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'* Ultimately, as followers of the way, we have nothing to worry about. Yet, most of us will agree, it doesn't feel like that at times!

So, our response, to hold on to this hope, is to watch and pray. One commentator (*Craddock, Fed B., Int*) put it as, *'The life of disciple, after all is said and done, is not one of speculation or of observation but of behaviour and relationships (34-36).'*

Ninety percent of that is correct. As disciples, we are not called to speculate, we know we cannot know the future; we are not called, to passively observe; we are called to reflect the behaviour of Christ in our lives; we are called to build relationships, with God and with one another.

The slight error is that we are called to actively observe. Essential to the life of Christ is active observation. Jesus sees need and injustice and responds to both. We are likewise called to be active observers of life, of the world around us. We are called to watch and pray and the two

are intimately interwoven.

So, how is your prayer life, how is your pattern of behaviour, and how are your relationships with God and with others? This is the deep substance of Advent. We actively observe the world, both around us and around the globe, to see how we might love the world as God loves the world. We are moved from prayer, holding all that we have seen before God, to action.

The New Year is considered a time for doing new things. What one new thing might you do this liturgical year that will build either your prayer life or the way in which your prayer becomes action.

There is no right way to pray so long as we are having a conversation with God, both listening to and talking to God.

Some will find it easiest to hear God through creation but as Christians we must hold this with also listening to the scriptures. The tradition of the Anglican Church has been morning and evening prayer. Cranmer's vision was that it would not be just those in monasteries who prayed but all the people. Monasticism in the community.

Our diocese has a small group who meet online every weekday morning to pray one of the daily devotions, contained within our New Zealand prayer book, you might consider joining us for the coming year. There is even an app for it called Tuia, so that you don't have to struggle working out what the correct reading for the day are.

Or perhaps, you would rather pray alone. Again, our prayer book has plenty of resources for that. Perhaps you are not a morning person. I am not, but that is the benefit of a

prayer book, or app, it is all there for us. But if you'd prefer to pray in the evening, consider night prayer. Another form of prayer that was carried over from the monasteries into our prayer book to become prayer in the community.

Or perhaps you would like to be less structured and simply set aside time every day to be still in the presence of God. Meditation is a form of prayer that has long been a part of the Christian tradition from the desert fathers and mothers through John of the Cross and Teresa Avila to modern expression of Christian meditation. In January, there will be a retreat at the university chaplaincy focused on Christian meditation, if you are interested.

In meditation, it is important to anchor ourselves, so in this year, you might wish to work very slowly through the whole of Luke's gospel, perhaps changing the order to reflect the church seasons. Or, if you feel too familiar with Luke, reflect on the Gospel of John which doesn't have its own year.

How ever we pray, we bring with us our care for the world around us, for the people we love, for the people who touch our hearts, for the parts of creation that need our care. Holding these concerns as we pray, we start to see the actions that God would take, when God walked as one of us, and we pray for the courage to act as God would.

This year, how are you going to revitalise your prayer life? Take time to think on it and act to embrace fullness of life for yourself and for all around you. And, tell a friend or even one of the clergy, so that you are accountable and encouraged to watch and pray at all times. Amen. Amen.