

First Sunday of Advent

Sermon Text: Luke 21:25-36

Theme: “*Advent Encouragement*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Something powerful and extraordinary is coming – it is of course the kingdom of God. As we look around us, it seems as though things could hardly be further from a godly kingdom. You know the tragedy and hardships that we face, whether it be on a global level, at the community level or especially a personal level. And yet the kingdom of God actually came among us when Jesus broke into our world. The problem is that we live in the ‘in-between’ times.

It is in the midst of these difficult times that Jesus encourages us this Advent season to watch and pray that we may stand before the Son of Man.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

The last day is coming

Advent means coming but the message about waiting for what is yet to come can quickly lose its shine. A bit like ‘living out your faith’ becomes a worn phrase, so too waiting for Jesus to come again in glory can become hollow words as our faith is challenged. The world doesn’t want to hear, nothing seems to change whether we are faithful or not, it all becomes a bit of a drag.

When challenges fall before us we sometimes need encouragement, we may also need a warning. Jesus provides this warning, “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and care of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap” (Lk 21:34). Yes the full realisation of the kingdom of God is coming and it will be truly wonderful but the way it will come, the wait for it, and the days that lead up to it will be difficult and they will need divine help and God-given strength to watch and pray for God’s kingdom to come.

For the past weeks our readings have been pointing towards the coming of the last day. I wish I could give you the date, but God hasn’t revealed it to me, any more than he has revealed it to anyone else, let alone the Hollywood movie makers. He simply tells us that it is going to come, and that when it comes it will be truly awesome! There will be signs and we have considered some of the earthly signs over the past weeks. Today’s gospel reading also tells us that even the stars and moon will reveal the signs of the last day. These might be something that only astronomers might see, or they could be huge spectacles that everyone with notice?

As for the earthly signs, Jesus again describes the “distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world” (v25-26). It wouldn’t take a great leap of imagination to think this is describing ‘climate change’ and its impact on sea levels and changing weather patterns. Whatever may or may not be causing the climate to change, it is certain that people are being herding towards a sense of doom and destruction that will see the end of life as we know it unless humanity does something to reverse the effects. Whether you are a fervent believer in humanities influence on the world’s climate or whether you are a sceptic, what remains is but one more sign that we live in a fallen world and the last *is coming* when Jesus will return in glory and restore all things to himself. To prepare ourselves for this great day, Jesus encourages us to watch and pray.

Lift up your heads

When we see these signs, and others, God’s Word calls us to “straighten up and raise your heads, because *your redemption is drawing near*” (v28). The nature reaction to danger and fear is to curl up into a little ball and hide from the threat. By curling up, we protect our vital organs or if we are with loved ones, we wrap them up into our arms in order to give them the greatest protection. As Christians we are called to watch and pray. Keep our heads up and look for the signs that herald the coming of our Lord. We are to know what is happening, to stand up straight, without fear and look towards the heavens and to confidently expect our Lord Jesus to come and rescue us. In other words, we aren’t to allow the world to frighten us with all of its fears and uncertainties but to trust in God alone. What a witness to the hope and trust we have in God, not to hide, but to bring the good news of Jesus and his salvation to those who are crushed with fear and the troubles of these end-of-time days. This is our mission field.

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable which describes the natural course of things in nature. Just as spring brings new leaves and growth, we know that summer is just around the corner. Here in Far North Queensland we might recognise it in the build up of heat and humidity. You don't have to live long in Cairns to know that the oppressive conditions will be broken by the drenching rains of the wet season when once more the Cape comes alive. Jesus' point is if we can interpret these signs, lets keep our heads lifted up to see the signs of the coming of Christ in glory for what they are – signs that point to the coming of our Lord to judge the world according to God's Word. Let's prepare for this coming in confidence and faith.

Be on your guard

Today the Christian Church is pretty comfortable in this world. Very few who call themselves 'Christian' actually expect Jesus to return at *just any moment* now. We make our plans for the future, whether they be for the next year, five years, or many years into the future without ever seeming to think "God willing". Maybe this is just one more reason we should be thankful for the experience of the older members of our congregation and community. The reality is as we age, we begin to realise that life doesn't stretch out before us indefinitely but will indeed come to an end one day. Those who are physically approaching the end of their lives value each day for what it is because it may be their last day. But isn't that the reality for all of us? Isn't that the message we should be sharing as Christians?

It is hard not to be lulled into the false belief that life just keeps on going. The problem is that if we never watch and pray for the coming of the last day, we may well become trapped into the troubles, pleasures and desires of this world. Even in our churches we can become quick to try and force our own agendas, sometimes at the expense of others, and in doing so we can easily forget God's command to 1) love him and 2) love our neighbour as ourselves. If we don't believe that the last day is coming and may come at any time we can argue over what forms our worship should take, we can delay coming to the Lord's Supper and we can consider Bible study as an optional extra for those with nothing better to do. It seems as though most Christians don't really expect Jesus to appear in the skies and to end the world, at least not in their lifetime.

Jesus knew this was going to happen which is why he said, "Be on guard, that your heart may not be weighed down with dissipation... and the worries of life... but keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." The word dissipation means to waste your life on things that have no significance or value. An example I can think of is the hours I have wasted sitting in front of the computer screen, not achieving anything of value, but just allowing life to slip through. This is different from a deliberate time of relaxation and rest but rather just wasted time. Perhaps you can think of examples in your life?

Jesus tells us to be on guard against this wastefulness and the worries of life. How do we do this when there is so much that keeps on pressing into our already busy lives? By watching and praying. Keep alert for the signs of the last days. When you see these signs around, thank God that you have seen the sign and pray for the coming of the Lord, pray for yourself and pray for those you love, those who are around you.

The temptation will be to curl up into a little ball, make like a small target but remember that the battle for your salvation has already been fought and won. Your sins have been forgiven. Jesus has poured out on you the gift of everlasting life and resurrection from the grave. He poured these gifts into you in your Baptism and he strengthens you with his body and blood.

So watch for the signs of the coming of the Lord and pray for his grace and mercy to be lived through your life so others may see your faith and that they may also put their hope in Jesus Christ.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.