

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking: 'From a branch sprouting hope is coming. The heavens are shifting, hope is coming. A troubled world waits. Hope is coming. Lord, we, your people, wait patiently, hanging on with Advent hope. Lord, we bring you ourselves, we bring you, our worship.'

Hymn CH4 273 – O come, O come, Emmanuel

The Lighting of the First Advent Candle

The first of our candles, lit today, the first week of Advent on the way. Stories of old once more are retold as we gather to hear of signs made clear: Jesus is coming, light shines in the dark, stars in the night sky are leaving their mark.

Let us pray:

Tick tock, tick tock, Christmas is coming, Christmas is near. Tick tock, tick tock, Advent is passing, Advent is here. As we light the candles, and open the doors, may we remember the story of Jesus come to earth. Help us get ready and to see the signs of love coming to earth in this holy time.

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

God of the cosmos, of earth, moon, and sun, God of the distant, of galaxies and big bangs, God of the past, of history's story passed down to us, God of the future, still to be written, still to be cast, may we approach afresh the old, old story of incarnation: God with us.

Give us the enthusiasm and excitement of a child opening the first door of their new Advent calendar. May we see beyond the story to the timeless hope and expectation that you are with us, always, no matter what.

May we see in the signs around us glimmers of you at work, and may we never cease in anticipating that your kingdom will come, and your will be done. Where clouds darken the skies may we never give up hope but look to the coming of the Son, in this day and every day.

Lift our souls and spirits as we bring our praise to you. Check our hearts and minds as we acknowledge how much we still have to grow into your likeness: that day by day we have opportunities to reveal your care and love for all creation and yet we take advantage of it, abuse it, and treat what is precious and valuable as if it has no intrinsic worth. Forgive us, Creative One, and help us see the signs all around us calling us to do better, to be better.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

All-age Talk

Hymn CH4 279 – Make way, make way

Readings: Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16

¹⁴The LORD said, "The time is coming when I will fulfil the promise that I made to the people of Israel and Judah. ¹⁵At that time I will choose as king a righteous descendant of David. That king will do what is right and just throughout the land. ¹⁶The people of Judah and of Jerusalem will be rescued and will live in safety. The city will be called 'The LORD Our Salvation'.

Luke 21: 25 – 36

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁵“There will be strange things happening to the sun, the moon, and the stars. On earth whole countries will be in despair, afraid of the roar of the sea and the raging tides. ²⁶People will faint from fear as they wait for what is coming over the whole earth, for the powers in space will be driven from their courses. ²⁷Then the Son of Man will appear, coming in a cloud with great power and glory. ²⁸When these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near.”

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

²⁹Then Jesus told them this parable: “Think of the fig tree and all the other trees. ³⁰When you see their leaves beginning to appear, you know that summer is near. ³¹In the same way, when you see these things happening, you will know that the Kingdom of God is about to come.

³²“Remember that all these things will take place before the people now living have all died. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

The Need to Watch

³⁴“Be on your guard! Don't let yourselves become occupied with too much feasting and drinking and with the worries of this life, or that Day may suddenly catch you ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all people everywhere on earth. ³⁶Be on the alert and pray always that you will have the strength to go safely through all those things that will happen and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Hymn CH4 21 – Lord, teach me all your ways,

Sermon – ‘The Signs and the Time are Near’

The Advent Season, like no other season in the Church’s year, leads us into a waiting mode of living. I once overheard a child in a local supermarket say after bonfire night: “I just cannot wait for Christmas!” In his eyes you could glimpse how children can easily get caught up in the excitement of waiting. The experience of waiting is a common one and it shapes the rhythm of our lives. We wait for trains, for buses, for courier deliveries, and for pay day, to name just but a few.

When I think of my mind, I cannot help but immediately think of hospitals as places of waiting. Patients – waiting at the start of the day for breakfast and/or a shower. Or waiting for the doctor to pop in. Or waiting to be seen in accident and emergency. Waiting for test results, for surgery, for the day of discharge.

The late theologian, William Vanstone, in his book ‘The Stature of Waiting’, describes Jesus as a ‘waiting figure’ – most clearly seen in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus discloses in that waiting, the deepest dimension of the glory of God, as He waits in exposure and helplessness for what is to come.

Now, I do not know about you, but there have been times, especially when I was a child, where I just could not make Christmas come quickly enough. The weeks of Advent seemed like an eternity. Time appeared to drag between the Sundays of Advent and all those Advent hymns when little me only wanted to sing Christmas Carols. The days until the School Christmas Holidays seemed endless. I like many children throughout all of time wanted to hurry to the “good part”.

Advent, all the waiting, was certainly **not** the “good part”. Yet, as I have got older, as happens to most of us, I have a sense of time already passing faster and faster, it is not passing as slowly as it used to. Already, Christmas is less than a month away, and Advent is only just beginning! It goes too quickly, not too slowly. I want to savour this time. I want to enjoy the waiting and the longing for Christmas. However, I do not want it to be “Christmas” until it is Christmas.

I wonder today – are you in a hurry for Christmas to come? Or are you trying to slow things down, and savour the time? Hurrying and waiting. Rushing and slowing down. Anticipating and longing. This season, our theme, in the run up to Christmas is “Simply Christmas”. We will be looking at some of the Biblical accounts that run up to the Birth of Jesus and rethinking about what they mean for us and our own faith journey. Today we are thinking about who “time” is passing quickly and the “signs” that point to the Messiah.

As we turn to our reading from the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus in the middle of a conversation about the “signs of the times”. He is talking about signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. Distress on the earth, roaring seas, waves, shaken heavens, and then, the Son of Man coming with power and glory.

When these things happen, Jesus says, *‘raise your heads, because your salvation is near.’* He talks about knowing the summer is about to arrive when the fig trees sprout leaves. So, to, He says, you will know *‘that the Kingdom of God is about to come.’* Finally, Jesus concludes that we should be on our guard, so we are not taken by surprise, not caught out unexpectedly. *‘Be alert,’* Jesus says, *‘and pray always that you will have the strength to go safely through all those things that will happen and to stand before the Son of Man.’*

Why are we in such a hurry for Christmas to come? Or, perhaps, the real question we must ask ourselves is this: do we actually “want” this long-expected Jesus to come or not? Jesus talks about these signs happening to let us know that the Kingdom of God is near. Yet, it all sounds a little bit terrifying. Maybe, we want Baby Jesus to come again. To hurry to the birth of the precious Christ Child. The cute Baby Jesus we find in our Nativity plays. The Baby Jesus – who cannot talk and preach to us just yet.

So, I wonder, are we ready for this coming of Jesus that Luke describes for us today? We like to think of the Baby Jesus coming “meek and mild”. That is the Jesus we are ready to hurry here. Yet, what of the Jesus, Who Luke is describing today. Who cannot seem to arrive without turning the world upside down and creating chaos? Do we want and long for this Jesus to arrive? Is this the

Christmas that is drawing near? And if so, why are we in such a hurry for Christmas to come?

To answer that question, we must consider what exactly we believe is drawing near and I think it might come down to a decision between “judgement” and “salvation”. Do you believe that what is drawing near is judgement or salvation? Modern day culture certainly has an answer. We believe – and fear very much – that judgement is coming. Some people believed that the Mayan calendar was right and that the world would end in 2013, there was even a film made about it, but here we still are.

Thinking about the end of the world can also fill us with fear. Can you cast your mind back to 1999, when we stood on the verge of the year 2000, and many were stockpiling provisions for an anticipated “apocalypse”? We cannot read about the signs that Jesus speaks of today without feeling a sense of dread, fear, and anxiety.

So, although Jesus spoke these words more than two thousand years ago, people have looked around themselves for all this time and when certain things happen in the world, they will say: “surely these are the signs of the time.” Why? Well because they are afraid and the fear comes certainly in part from an end of what we know, but also of the link we place between the end of what we know and the beginning of judgement for the things we have messed up so badly.

As people of faith, though, I wonder, what has happened to us to make us think of Jesus’ drawing near to us an occasion for fear and panic. The idea of the Kingdom of God drawing close fills us with terror. Yet, Jesus does not speak about judgement in today’s reading. In fact, He even says that He wants us to be on guard so that we are not weighed down with the worries of this life.

Instead, Jesus talks about salvation. To be saved is to be rescued, delivered, redeemed, and set free. Jesus says, *‘When these things begin to happen, stand up and raise your heads, because your salvation is near.’* The coming of the Kingdom of God does not mean punishment and judgement that is meant to harm us. God drawing close to us is to redeem us, to rescue us, to save us from

the mess we have made. What is near is not our condemnation but our salvation.

This Advent Season, the Christmas Carols you will hear mostly focus on the Baby Jesus, asleep in the manger. Yet, our Advent hymns – they embrace this Jesus Who comes preaching salvation – our salvation, the salvation of all people. *‘Come thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.’*

The signs are prominent, the time is near. Not for our end. Not for our destruction. Not for our judgement. The signs and the time are near because God is *always* near to us. The signs and the time are near because the Kingdom of God is in our midst. A Saviour comes to us – a baby yes – but also the Prince of Peace. He is a precious child and a strong champion of the down-trodden and oppressed. He is a helpless new-born, and God with us. We do not have much longer to wait because the signs are visible, and the time is near.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn CH4 281 – People look East. The time is near

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Advent God, bringing hope and expectation into a world crying out for justice, for honesty, and for healing and restoration, we bring our prayers to you.

Save us from short-term thinking and short-term planning that never considers the full ramifications of decisions, but rather is driven by what is popular in the moment, by what will get a positive newspaper headline. Help us to see the world with a different perspective, to see the signs around us and to read them well, to be honest with ourselves about what is happening and why, and to seek solutions and choices that bring long-term benefits for all.

When the world is crying out to us may we hear the groans that climate change stirs, may we hear the anguish of those whose homes and livelihoods, whose present and future are threatened by the effects of climate change, and recommit ourselves to action.

When words are cheap, and real commitment is costly, may we hold our policy makers to account, ensuring that they share a vision that seeks the well-being of the planet, and the place of all creatures upon it.

In a time of darkness for many people threatened by rising inflation, their costs going up even as their wages stagnate, where choices from scant resources have to be made day to day: feeding the children, or heating the home, buying new clothes, or paying the council tax, we pray for all those people and families who live with the stress this brings: unable to plan for the long-term because today has more than enough worry.

In the season of Advent hope may we uphold all who strive to bring wellbeing to others, knowing that in so doing they also bring wellbeing to themselves. Encourage us to be your kingdom workers, bringing hope and joy, compassion, and care. For all this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn CH4 477 – Lo, he comes with clouds descending,

Benediction

In the sun and moon and stars we look for God. In the seasons and in the trees, we look for God. In the places where we live and work, we look for God. We look and long and hope. So as we go now may the blessing of God the Father, the love of God the Son and the fellowship of God the Spirit, rest upon you and all whom you love, this day and forevermore. Amen.

Recessional Song – May God's blessing surround you each day.