

ADVENT

Last Sunday was Advent Sunday, the beginning of the church year, when we look forward to Christmas and celebrating the birth of Jesus our saviour. The word 'advent' derives from the Latin *Ad ventus* which means arrival – it was often used of the arrival of a king or high official, so you can see why it's an appropriate word for us to use to refer to the coming of Jesus.

In this season of advent we do remember the birth of Jesus just over 2,000 years ago when he took on human form and was born as a helpless babe to suffer and die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and secure our salvation. But, we also look forward to the second coming of Jesus when he'll return in power and glory – let me just read you a few verses from Mark's gospel:

“because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equalled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no-one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time. "But in those days, following that distress, "‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ "At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.” (Mr 13:19-27 NIV)

Jesus spoke these words when he was teaching his disciples on the Mount of Olives, preparing them for his coming passion – his death and resurrection. He's been speaking about the coming destruction of Jerusalem – which the Romans carried out in 70AD, but now he's speaking of the end times.

He's saying that there will be false prophets and people pretending to be the Messiah who'll try and deceive everyone including Christians. Believers are warned to be on their guard or pay attention, to keep watch, in what is quite a strong statement in the original Greek. Here Jesus is warning the church and individual believers – us – not to be diverted or distracted from obedience to Christ.

Set against the false hopes which will mislead many people in the critical moment is the assurance that the period of suffering and distress often referred to as the tribulation will be followed by final redemption when the Son of Man will be manifested in power and glory. This is not a vain hope but a certain statement by Christ of what will come.

These days were predicted by the prophet Isaiah:

“The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.” (Isaiah 13:10 NIV)

It's just like it was before the beginning of creation in Genesis chapter I.

But all doesn't end in chaos, Christ not only returns but he sends his angels to gather up all those chosen and called by God – the elect – and they are His. Tribulation, suffering and death are not to be the end point of history. No, the triumphant return of Christ will mark the

end of the world as we know it and everything will be remade as the book of revelation tells us.

Jesus knew that he was the fulfilment of Israel's history and that his mission was already recorded in the Jewish scriptures. His coming is a promise and the gathering of all believers to him is our sure hope. But Christ will not only return to gather his people to him, he will return as the judge of the whole world, as Paul writes:

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead,”
(2 Timothy 4:1 NIV)

At his first coming Jesus came in human form, born as a helpless babe, to live among us, to train and teach a small band of disciples and then die on a Roman cross, crucified to pay the death penalty that every human being deserved to suffer on account of their sins. We're all sinners each and every one of us, including me and all of us here today. As the apostle John wrote:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8 NIV)

After his crucifixion Christ was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven to return to the Father. But that's by no means the end of the story. As we've seen today, at the end of this age, Christ will return. Not this time as a helpless babe, but in power and glory as the judge of the whole world at which time he'll correct all injustice and avenge all sin and wrongdoing. But, if we've turned to Christ in faith, we have nothing to fear from that judgement; for Christ has already paid the penalty we deserve to suffer. Christians who have a true faith and belief will be gathered up by Christ from the four corners of the world in preparation for spending eternity with God in glorious resurrection bodies.

But, remember, no one knows the day or the time of Christ's second coming; so let's not be caught out. Jesus told us to be ready:

“Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:36 NIV)

Here the watching focus is inward not outward, we need to watch ourselves. We need to fill ourselves with the only unchanging thing in the universe which will survive the last day – God's word. Jesus said a little further on in the teaching we read from today:

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Mark 13:31 NIV)

We all need to make sure that we've prepared ourselves for Christ's return. We need to be sure that we've repented of our sins and turned to Christ in genuine faith so that we shall not be judged and found wanting on that last day but rather be safely gathered up into Christ's loving presence. As the apostle John wrote:

“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:12-13 NIV)

Father as we wait patiently for the return of Your Son on that last day, I pray that you will give all of us here a true saving faith so that we may enter into your salvation, into eternal life with you. Let us all keep watch in these last days and not be distracted or turned aside from Christ by anything happening in this world or in our lives and help us in this by keeping us in your word, the only and unchanging and eternal thing which will survive that second advent.