

Today is Advent Sunday

Advent – a time when we look forward to Jesus's birth.

Advent, a time when we get ready for Christmas. And there is certainly a lot to do...

Advent is a time of waiting, waiting for the arrival of someone who changed the course of history.

The season of Advent is one of the most important seasons in the Christian calendar.

It's much more than just getting ready to celebrate Jesus coming as a baby.

It's a time when we are called to take stock, to spend time in the busyness of the Christmas rush and to grapple with our faith.

Are you ready to grapple with your faith this morning?

You see, although the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah is a prophesy of the first coming of Jesus, the gospel passage that the Church of England sets for today, Advent Sunday, is not about Jesus coming as a baby, it's not even about John the Baptist heralding Jesus' first coming.

This is almost certainly a passage about his second coming. Yes, Jesus IS coming back. He will return.

For us, today, Jesus has already come as a baby 2000 years ago – Praise the Lord! And so, for us, Advent is a time to prepare for the day when Jesus returns.

This time he won't return as a vulnerable child, but as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And each one of us **will** stand before him. We **will** meet Jesus face to face.

I'm not going to say much about the day itself, about exactly what will happen because, well, that's not the focus of this particular passage,

but rather I would like to spend a few minutes reminding each one of us here, that that day will happen, it is promised, and so, consider how we prepare for that day.

And as Christians we need not be afraid. After all it is a day that people have been looking forward to, for generations.

We have just sung:

When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation

And take me home; what joy shall fill my heart!

Then I shall bow in humble adoration

And there proclaim, "My God, how great Thou art!"

For those who know Jesus, this is a day to look forward to. Praise the Lord!

So, let's focus on God's word to us, from the book of Luke.

We'll consider the **context**

We'll consider the **language**

And then we'll **apply it** to our lives today...

First let's look at the context.

To understand this passage from Luke

we need to look at the circumstances that Jesus was speaking into and

also consider **when** it was written down and the circumstances surrounding the first reader of this gospel.

Our reading records the last major speech by Jesus, before the week of his death and resurrection.

Just before this reading, Jesus had prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

And, Forty years after Jesus spoke the words of prophesy and less than 10 years after Luke wrote them down, and they were shared with the believers...the temple was indeed destroyed by the Romans.

Luke's version seems to speak about the apocalypse, the terror of the end times, as if they were going to happen in the near future.

But this was one of the many times of trouble that Christians would encounter.

In both Mark 13 and in Matthew 24, we hear about the disciples asking Jesus 'when?' when are the end times coming? and Jesus replies, '*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven or the Son of man, but only the Father.*'

And so, we are still waiting for the end times and Jesus. But, my friend, that day will come.

It's worth noting that Jesus is teaching his disciples here. He is talking calmly and objectively and compassionately. He's not trying to scare them or provoke them. He is just telling them what is coming. He's telling them their future holds. Jesus knows what is coming. He is utterly confident, there is no doubt. For those among you who live, thinking it will never happen, hear his words.

You see, what he foresees is chaos.

For those who first read the message, 40 years after Jesus spoke them, they were in the middle of the Jewish/Roman War, which was a time of unprecedented chaos in Palestine. It was a time of enormous stress. No wonder they thought the end was coming. And those who heeded Jesus's warning about getting out of Jerusalem, as recorded in the verses just before our passage, were saved. Many fled and were saved.

So, this teaching from Jesus here, yes was a warning about end times but also is reminding us all about the importance of listening to him and being obedient. The issue that Jesus is addressing is whether they can persevere in hard times and still be found to be faithful to God.

This is, I believe, the central message of this passage –

When hard times come, which they will, will they, will we, will you, be faithful to God?

We continue to reflect on the chaos of our world and Jesus is saying ... are you ready? are you faithful?

So that's the context – what about the language?

Jesus spoke in a language that those, at the time, would have easily understand. He used visual illustrations that would have been well known by the readers.

And so, I wondered, what visual illustrations, we have today that could seem a little strange if you didn't understand them....

Here's a few to make the point...

A rough diamond – If we say someone is a rough diamond...it doesn't mean they are a stone that hasn't been cut very well – but rather someone of good character even though they may not be so well mannered or sophisticated...

Or what about the phrase 'bite the bullet' – it really doesn't mean to literally put a bullet between your teeth

Or a kettle of fish.... – doesn't literally mean you put fish in a kettle....

You get the point....

The important thing, in our scripture reading, is to recognise that this picture language and we should not take the words literally.

If I said it was raining cats and dogs – you wouldn't take that literally, now would you?

So, we need to be careful in our interpretation.

In verse 25 it says There will be signs in sun, moon, and stars... and in verse 26 - heavenly bodies will be shaken....it's even more descriptive in the Matthew version, which says 'the stars will fall from the skies' – it doesn't necessarily mean there is going to be a complete break-up of the universe.

This is picture language. Picture language taken from Isaiah 13 which everyone would have known. For the readers of Luke, these words would evoke a memory of the promise ...of the coming wrath and judgement of God

So those who try and predict Jesus' coming, because Haley's comet ...or look for other signs of disturbances in the skies to predict end times – haven't understood scripture correctly.

This is picture language and so, next time you read about signs in the sun, moon and stars in the Bible – you know what is being referred to, right? It symbolises God's judgement.

A time is coming, we don't know when, but a time is coming when Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead.

First picture...

Next, we have the image of Jesus returning on the clouds – another pictural illustration not to be taken literally. Jesus will not be using a cloud as a cosmic skateboard to get back to earth! Just saying!

As those of the time would have known only too well, It refers to the fulfilment of the prophecy in the book of Daniel Ch 7

Let me read Daniel 7 verse 13 & 14

¹³ "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one, like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Coming on the clouds... Would have evoked a memory, would have conjured up an image of someone coming with power, authority and glory.

So, coming on the clouds... think majesty, think glory, think the grand entrance of the king of kings.

The third and final image in our passage is – the fig tree –

Again, picture language - a visual illustration of promised goodness to come.

Just as, when the fig tree produces leaves... it's a sign that summer is coming, Jesus is saying

When we live through dreadful times, actually, those challenges and dangers are a sign of hope, ... hope that the coming of God's kingdom is near.

The fig tree, would have been a sign of hope...

Know you understand all the imagery, what does all this mean for us now, here today?

It says that there will be trouble ahead – there is no doubt about that.

BUT – there is a promise of a new age to come – so hold on. Stand firm, lift your head.

And actually the new age is already breaking through. If we remain faithful, we will see signs of renewal and rebuilding....now while we wait for that final recreation.

The final day will come, but God doesn't leave us on our own until that day.

A couple of weeks ago our housegroup finished off our study of Amos and we considered the promises prophesied by Amos, a humble shepherd, about how God will restore, repair and rebuild. The promises that there will be recreation and we were challenged to consider, where we see signs of this recreation, today.

I'm going to ask Karen to come and say a few words now just to give another voice and to illustrate this and what it means to be faithfulness in adversity.

Karen, come and tell us what you shared with us at our last session.

Thank you,

Perseverance in the in hard times and yet faithful to God and seeing his kingdom breaking in.

So, Advent is about waiting.....if it was only about Christmas that would be easy, it's only 27 days away...just saying...and we know when it's coming – yes, that's easy – it comes on 25th December.... every year.

Jesus' second coming, however, well that's different, we'll just have to wait.

And this passage tells us the how. How to get ready for that final glorious day. For it will be glorious for those who believe.

So, very briefly, in our waiting, our passage tells us of five things we need to do.

Firstly – we are to be discerning

We have this prophecy about **what** will happen as we wait – so we can see the plot line of his kingdom unfurling before our eyes. Chaos and difficulty are guaranteed and it all points to a truth that Jesus will come again. The second coming is coming, and we need to be ready.

Second - We are to be jubilant - - 'when we see these things taking place, v 28 reads – stand up, lift up your heads because redemption is drawing near.

The 'now and not yet' of our current world will become the now. And what a glorious day that will be for those who remain faithful.

So, rejoice, worship and praise God. Let's change our long faces to faces of joy, knowing that the pain and suffering will come to an end.

Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king... we'll sing that later.

Thirdly, we are to be confident.

God has everything in control – verse 33 promises that his word will never pass away.

So, Be bold. Live a confident life, knowing that God's kingdom is breaking in – he is at work and he will bring peace and perfection.

Fourthly, We are to be **watchful**, We are to make sure that we don't get caught up in the things of this earth. The passage says, be careful not to let your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and anxieties of life.

Be open to nudges from the Holy Spirit about unhelpful habits that keep us from being the best we can for God. Keep coming to Jesus and let go of those things that chain you down to this temporary earth. Guard your hearts, for soon and very soon, there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

And finally, We are to be **prayerful**. Pray that God will protect us and help us to stand before Jesus as faithful servants, and to receive our reward as we stand before the Son of Man. Be prayerful.

I know many of you are prayerful people, but sometimes prayer can be hard and so this Advent, I have produced a very small Advent reflection sheet. Giving you 3 short verses a week during Advent to ponder on – Will you make it a priority to spend a bit more time with Jesus during this busy time? Tracey copied them on bright yellow paper – Jesus is the light of the world – and hopefully they will stand out and not be lost under piles of our busyness.

So, in conclusion...
discern the signs of this age,
be joyful – as the passage says – lift your heads,
be confident – God is in control
be watchful about being pulled away by the world
and be prayerful.

If we do this, what a glorious Advent we will have.
And when Jesus finally returns in power and majesty and glory and authority. We will not be afraid of his judgement because although he will judge us he will see our faithfulness – he will know you and say to you
...

‘Well done, good and faithful servant’.

Let us spend a moment – coming before Jesus, our saviour and our redeemer,
knowing that came as a baby, he lived, he died, and rose for you... **and** he will be coming back to put all things right.

Silence...

Let's stand and sing that wonderful old Wesleyan Advent Hymn – Come thou long expected Jesus...