

Advent Sunday

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees;³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly,³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Today is the start of the new church year, and the beginning of the Church's Advent season, so we are beginning our journey towards Christmas. Our Advent banner reminds us that the Wise men have probably already been on their journey for some time, following the star and trusting that it will guide them towards the saviour that they are seeking.

With the world situation as it is, you might have begun to wonder if there is any point in celebrating peace and love as we see our world increasingly torn by hatred, division and violence. But our readings reassure us and remind us that the world has been in difficult situations before. It is those with a message of hope and love, those who trust God, who will make a difference to the world, even in these difficult situations.

In our reading from the Old Testament, Jeremiah has been imprisoned in the courtyard of King Zedekiah. He's an interesting prophet Jeremiah, he was born and grew up in the village of Anathoth, a few miles northeast of Jerusalem, in a priestly family. And, like Moses, he's a reluctant recruit to the band of prophets. At the beginning of chapter 32 in the book of Jeremiah we're told how Zedekiah has got fed up with the bad things that Jeremiah keeps prophesying, and so has imprisoned him. And the opening verse of the next chapter reminds us that he is still there, still held captive. Zedekiah has locked Jeremiah up in the hopes of also *shutting* him up.

Ironically, it's only after being imprisoned that Jeremiah's tone changes. In chapter 32 God has told him to buy a field as a symbol of future hope. At a time when all the real estate in Israel was at rock-bottom prices because everyone realises that the land will soon be over-run by Babylonians, Jeremiah buys a field as a way of saying that he believed that they'd be back some day, even though they were about to be taken into exile. Jeremiah is trying to convince other people of the hope he has in God. He is saying that there will be a day when God's people will return, and then holding property in the Promised Land would make sense again.

The reading we had from the book of Jeremiah this morning gives us the words of prophecy about the Lord our Righteousness restoring the

fortunes of God's people in fulfilment of the promises God has made. But they sound very different when we hear them delivered by Jeremiah from his own imprisonment, and at a time when Israel was on the brink of national disaster and a time of tremendous suffering and tragedy. But this is the time when the people most needed the message of restoration and salvation—and therefore of hope.

Our gospel reading from Luke 21 gives us Jesus' words of apocalypse that anticipate the end of history. Both old and new Testament passages look at cataclysms. They don't pull any punches about the severity of what will happen, but they both still proclaim words of hope.

As we begin to celebrate Advent and then Christmas once again, we know that all the forced Christmas "cheer" in the world can't cover up or compensate for the tragedies that the world has seen recently. Many families will be facing a situation of grief and loss that they would never have anticipated a year ago. This year we celebrate "peace on earth" and "joy to the world" under the shadow of ISIS and all the mayhem that is being unleashed on the world. Sometimes it really feels as though we are entering this end-time that Jesus has told us about. We can feel just as trapped as Jeremiah. And it's difficult to feel secure in our way of life when we have police with automatic weapons patrolling our major London stations

There are no easy answers to the complex situations that we face, and I just pray that the politicians will consider long and hard before taking any decisions about future actions. And yet Jeremiah reminds us that even in the midst of life's worst woes, even in a time of collapsing securities and disorientation, God has a plan. God has a set of promises that he will fulfill. God's ways will not be thwarted by our mistakes. Evil will never have the last word. I'm sure many of you were moved as I was by the video posted by a young man in the aftermath of the shootings at the Beclan theatre. Widowed and left with a very young son to bring up alone, he was determined not to hate those who had perpetuated this crime. And others also have spoken very movingly about the love and concern that were shared on that dreadful night in Paris. Evil will not have the last word. It will not win.

So, Advent Sunday is the start of the church year. We light our first Advent candle and remember the Patriarchs who were the forerunners of the Israelites. God called Abraham to move out from where he and his family were settled, he called them because he had a plan, a vocation for them. We too have a plan, a vocation as the church in Waddington, which we have prayerfully discerned this year, and as Christian people in this nation. We have been called to be Christ in this village, to enable the communities of Waddington to discover that God's love is for all. We believe that all people are important in God's sight, and welcome everyone to join our worship and church life. We will be a true centre of Christian spirituality, worship and practice, living the peace that Jesus preached and thus this Advent, more than ever, we will offer a message of Hope to this village, and to the world.