

***Signs and Cycles: Jeremiah 33: 14-16 & Luke 21: 25-36***  
**Advent Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> November 2021 (Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton)**

So, one church year ended, another begins. Round the cycle we go. You may have learnt to chant the seasons in Sunday school: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent; Eastertide, Ascensiontide, Whitsuntide, Trinity. One or two seasons have been re-branded (as is the way in the modern world) but essentially we keep going the same way, year-in, year-out. And where has the last year gone? As December looms, we go through it all again – the round of Christmas services, Christingle, Carols, Crib, Midnight and so on, just like the preparations at home: shopping, wrapping, posting, cooking, shopping, decorating, shopping ... shopping. I may sound resigned to it, but actually such a pattern for the year gives a sense of order and coherence: continual innovation and re-invention is confusing and exhausting. So we can begin the cycle again: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent....

But hang on a minute! Advent isn't about cycles and circles. It means 'coming'. It's about the One who comes. It's a one-off event – or you might say a two-off event. We look back to God in Jesus entering history, decisively, uniquely, once and for all – an event prepared for over millennia, anticipated for centuries, and missed by almost everyone to whom he came. And we look forward to God's coming again in Jesus, the return of the world's true King, the judgement of the world, and the bringing in of the kingdom in all its fulness. History, Advent proclaims, does not go round in circles. History is linear, punctuated by these two great events.

However, to us, Jesus' first coming belongs to the distant past and, we tend to assume, his second coming belongs to the distant future, and is really beyond our imagining and so for some of us beyond belief. In any case, what do we do in the in between times? We go round in circles: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent... But wait again! Last year, 2020, the cycle was suddenly curtailed. Halfway through the Lent course, in the middle of Lent lunch, everything had to stop. Only a few months earlier, this was totally implausible. We had our plans for the year, our holidays booked, our habits set in stone, but all came to an abrupt halt. Jesus warned that when his day comes, everyone will be going about their normal business, their jobs, their family lives and so on, and then it will be upon you, like a thief on the night. It's unimaginable until it happens. The arrival of the Covid-19 was not, of course, the Day of the Lord, but in one sense at least, it makes the implausible plausible – the idea that the cycle of the years we take for granted can actually be broken. Look for the signs of the times!

Jesus told us about the signs of the times. He spoke of 'wars and rumours of wars,' of anguish, perplexity, fainting and shaking at calamity. When we watch or listen to the news, we recognise not much has changed; there's still plenty of war, famine and disease. Can we see these as signs to remind us Christ has not yet returned? – signs that he will one day return and break the cycle of injustice and oppression, of war and hatred, of poverty and disease? And can we be inspired by his first coming, born in poverty away from home and soon to be a refugee? Is this sign powerful enough to get us praying and working for a world that truly honours him?

Jesus pointed to another sort of sign. He said to consider the fig tree, and all the other trees. When I was a child, we had in our garden an elm tree. It was tall and strong, and, to me, looked very old. Then Dutch elm disease struck, and the tree had to come down. All that remained of that beautiful tree was its stump, and as you looked at that stump you could count the tree rings, one for each of the years it had lived, and think about all those cycles and circles of growth. But now it was quite dead... except ... the next summer, tiny shoots started to spring up around that stump, which in time became a shrub-sized elm bush around the stump. And years later, a single shoot grew tall, a branch, or new trunk, perhaps a tree revitalised.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord said, 'I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line.' The royal house of Israel was dead and buried, all the splendour of David and Solomon, Josiah and Hezekiah, chopped down to the ground by Babylonian invasion and captivity. But, says the prophet, just like the elm tree that sprouted again, God will make the line of David sprout again. According to Jeremiah, the monarchy had been brought down less by strategic weakness or the power of enemies than by their moral failings, by turning away from the God of their ancestors, and by failing to trust in him. God's new King will be righteous: He will follow God's ways, He will trust God purposes, He will display the truth and justice that are part of God's character. We know this Righteous Branch as King Jesus.

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent; Eastertide, Ascensiontide, Whitsuntide, Trinity. We need all the seasons to build up our strength like a mighty tree – while we stay alert to spiritual weevils that get under the bark and threaten to bring us down. While we focus on the seasons that mean so much, we must not be seduced into thinking it all goes on for ever. Through the cycle of the seasons we must also look out for the signs of the times – signs that require of us urgent action, for the axe is always ready to fall (as John the Baptist warned). We will all one day (and who knows when?) stand before the Son of Man to give account. The urgent Advent question is this: will we be ready?