**Sermon 03 December 2023 – Malcolm Brookbanks**

I was in a hotel recently and fixed on the mirror was an advert which posed the question.’ Are you ready for that day’?

Although I had read the readings for today, in my worldly thinking I immediately had a cold sweat as I thought, no I’m not ready for my next sermon. I don’t like being last minute and that’s one of the messages from our gospel reading this morning. In it Jesus speaks of his return but warns us not to leave it too late to make sure we’re in a right relationship with him because he will know whether or not we’ve been his servants to one another in the world. When he comes, he says, angels will gather his elect from everywhere. In other words he’ll sort the sheep from the goats and Phil explained the consequences of that last week.

So as we enter this season of Advent we have the opportunity to consider where we are in our relationship with the Lord. Advent is of course a time when we look forward to the celebration of Christ’s birth but the liturgical calendar setting out the readings for the various church seasons also specifies the colour of stoles for ordained ministers and today, as you may have noticed, the specified colour is purple. But you may well ask why purple? Why not something bright and glitzy as we look forward to Christmas? Well purple is a colour associated with mourning and penitence, and in Church tradition, the season of Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas, is a penitential season, a period of mourning in the sense of regretting, mourning our sins just like the six weeks of Lent, in the run-up to Easter. Our OT reading provides a good starting point to consider our position. In it Isaiah recaps the Israelites fickle relationship with God. One minute they are with God and trying to obey his commands and the next minute they turn to worldly gods and act as they please. Are we sometimes like that I wonder? Isaiah points out that through all their coming and goings God has always been there for them. God is constant and faithful and they, like us, can always trust in Him.

So it’s not surprising that our readings this morning don’t seem to have much Christmas joy about them. In fact Jesus words sound apocalyptic. We need to bear in mind that the conversation our gospel reading comes from is Jesus farewell talk to his disciples at the time when he was about to be arrested and will be supremely tested, as will the disciples. A time of crisis is looming.

A time of crisis for us can be a sudden wake-up call, opening our eyes to painful realities we hadn’t particularly noticed before. The diagnosis of serious illness can challenge us to reassess our lifestyle. During the lockdown, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, our abuse of the environment was brought into clear focus. Then there was the murder of a black man, George Floyd, in police custody which shone a searing light on the scandalous treatment of black people and the ways of many who sit back comfortably with their slave-trading past and the racist present. More recently we’ve witnessed the injustices being perpetrated in the Ukraine, Israel and Palestine and at such moments we can have the impression of being pushed to the edge of events, longing for something new to break in.

Jesus disciples also had the impression of standing on the edge of change. The structures of the Temple institution were corrupt, while state power was compromised by allegiance to the occupying Roman Empire. Surely, such wickedness could not go on for ever. Surely God must be going to act!

Yes, affirms Jesus, God’s new time is coming. Quoting words from a vision of the prophet Daniel, Jesus offers a powerful poetic image of the coming of God. He describes how the sun, moon and stars, the lights by which people habitually live, will appear to grow dark in comparison to the dazzling brightness of the Son of Man, who will emerge not from the earth, but from heaven.

So, no red carpet or champagne reception for Jesus unlike the welcomes given to our earthly King Charles as he meets dignitaries at home and abroad. His trips aren’t usually last minute and are sometimes years in the planning with all parts of them being carefully choreographed.

Don’t leave it to the last minute be ready for that day.

Just as one day all will see the Son of Man coming in glory and will view the world in the light of God’s truth, so we are invited to be numbered amongst the faithful who anticipate that future by the way we see things today. As Isaiah indicated patience and perseverance will bring their own reward and through them our faith will be strengthened. Jesus doesn’t suggest that we just sit watching events as passive spectators. On the contrary: he is calling us to an active, attentive seeing, a way of looking which searches as hopefully and carefully for the signs of God’s coming as we look for the first signs of spring after the cold dark days of winter. As we see in this kind of way we are brought to the place of protest where we become as out raged to witness injustice as Jesus was to seethe at the money-changers in the Temple. How we view the world affects the way we live.

‘Be on your guard,’ says Jesus. The word he uses here simply means ‘see’: beware! It’s the same word he has used to warn the disciples against the unjust practices of the Pharisees, against false Christ’s, and against the hypocrisy of the scribes who appear righteous in public while fleecing the poor behind the scenes. Today we have to be on our guard against being anaesthetised by the manner in which the news is presented to us in the media.

We have Jesus command to be on guard. To be alert. To be watchful! This command, emphasised by the use of three different words in Greek, bridges the prophecies of the end times and the impending dangers of the coming night for Peter, James and John to stay awake. We too are to keep our eyes open, and not allow ourselves to be lulled into sluggish apathy by the pressures of the secular world like shop early for Christmas. Don’t leave it until the last minute we might be urged. Well yes it makes sense but do we need to buy Christmas cards in July? That’s when I first saw them for sale this year. Jesus utters the same warning to be alert to his disciples in Gethsemane when he begs them to ‘stay awake’ while he goes away to pray but while Jesus wrestled with temptation in Gethsemane, the disciples did fall asleep – three times. Their failure to watch with Jesus was the precursor to their deserting him. For Peter it led to his disastrous failure when he denied the Lord he so dearly loved. Part of the disciple’s problem was that they were blind to the danger that surrounded them. That can be the same for us.

Inevitably like children on a journey we want to know when will we get there, when will it happen? But Jesus says all in Gods time be patient. Instead of trying to unravel the time table of the end times, we are to use his prophecy as a compass for our lives. To ensure that our hearts and minds are in sync, that is not outwardly being obedient and inwardly rebellious. Our OT passage gives us a prayerful model through which we can review our standing with the Lord, to be penitent and to seek a godly way of seeing and acting in the world through love, compassion, generosity, being a good friend and lending a caring ear. One of Advent’s great themes is that our celebration of Christ’s first coming helps us to anticipate his coming again. Advent draws us in to a great story whose author is God. Christmas is just part of God’s great purposes for the whole world. We are invited, with joy and wonder, to step into God’s never-ending story, actively looking forward with hope to Christ’s return and all that lies beyond. Amen.