Sermon

Advent I Yr A

1/12/19

Eltham

**Readings**

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:9-14

Matthew 24:36-44

+FSHS

So it’s four weeks until Christmas. One of the more unfortunate and less likely imports from the USA are the Black Friday sales. Doncaster shopping centre was open til midnight, the Friday night news proudly proclaimed, and Chadstone was open til 11pm to facilitate the massive spending… and all before the “Christmas sales” which start this week… And after we’ve all spent millions, there will still be the Boxing Day sales four weeks from now. While we might scoff at the rampant capitalist materialism, and wonder about what empty spaces of longing people are mistakenly trying to fill with stuff, we too are caught up in the preparations for Christmas: planning what’s happening with which family and friends on Christmas Day, buying presents and wrapping them, putting up trees and nativity sets. This week I’ve spent a good deal of time in nursing homes and hospitals visiting some of our dying friends, and I noticed all the tinsel used to brighten the corridors. It’s interesting, because people are applied to these preparations with such zeal as if it were the end of the world come December 25th. Everything as William Blake once said in his famous poem, like a rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born.

Perhaps Christmas Day is the end of the world – the end of the world as we know it or knew it. For Advent is not so much a time of preparation and lead up to Christmas as it is a wake up call, a great cry of “Watch!”. It’s a reminder that we do believe in a Second Coming: that this babe born in the manger will come again to judge the living and the dead, there will be a final reckoning, a final making of justice, and the world renewed and set to right. Today’s readings are full of images and visions of what may yet be in this coming of God. They also firmly plant us in the twilight before dawn: the now and the not yet, a time of promise as well as the identity the promise offers already being present in us.

Matthew’s gospel was written we think in the last quarter of the first century CE. These words the writer places on Jesus’ lips are addressed to people who either were very young when Jesus walked the hills of Palestine, or who only knew him through the stories and in the breaking of bread. In those early years after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, there was an imminent expectancy of his return in the same way; the early letters of Paul are full of that expectation. By the time Matthew’s gospel is written, people had been waiting and watching for about 50 years for Jesus’ return. We have been waiting 2000 years. How do we make sense of this watching and waiting?

Well, you’ll probably tell me (because I’ve been preaching this pretty consistently, and I hope it’s something you’re all absorbing) that it’s about looking for the coming of Jesus in all the little and unexpected things that happen each day, welcoming him in the face of the stranger, the refugee, the prisoner, the child, the little, the lost, and the least. The Second Coming in that sense is every single day, just as the First Coming is every single day: we’re invited both to treat with reverence the face of the judge and the face of the newborn child who is the Saviour who saves us each and every moment. All of that’s true and I believe it: part of being prepared, being ready, is being open and aware to what God is doing in the world, in us, through us.

We on the more… generously orthodox end of things shy away from notions of judgment. We don’t proclaim as more conservative folk do: repent or be damned, for a time is coming when you won’t be able to repent, but will be burned in fire for all eternity. No. That’s not a message we identify with, find desirable, and nor does it speak of the God we have experienced who creates, loves, and nurtures all. What I would usually say about judgment (and again you might be able to repeat this back to me, because I have preached this consistently too) is: the sum of our actions judges us; we are the ones who judge ourselves – and the point of Jesus being the divinely appointed judge is precisely to draw us away from judging ourselves and others. For his judgment is merciful and just, and takes into consideration the big picture, including God’s mercy and forgiveness which he offers for our taking, with the encouragement to forgive ourselves, and to forgive those who have hurt us. And I believe that, too.

There’s more to it than this, though. We believe he is coming again to judge the living and the dead, and in a realm without end with life everlasting. That’s what we say in the creed. That’s what the gospel reading points towards: a time of krisis of cataclysmic change in the world, where life as we knew it before is changed beyond recognition, where swords are hammered into plowshares, and violence done away with for good; where nations will instead of making war, will say to one another, “let’s go and worship God together and learn God’s ways of peace”. This is the vision of Isaiah, a vision of renewal after the sweeping away of what was: of the coming of God’s time, kairos time.

In the gospel reading Jesus says something similar about no one knowing the hour or the day or the time of the coming of the human one, but only the Father – it’s God’s kairos time, which doesn’t run like kronos time, and therefore can’t be predicted in X minutes, days, hours, years. There’s an urgency in this, an immediacy which calls us to wake up from our slumbers, to shake off the dust of pretending that we’ve done all the philosophy and so know this second coming nonsense is bunkum that won’t happen historically. I’m not prepared to say whether God’s time of krisis, of decision making and judgment, God’s kairos time, is going to break into our time in a particular way or time. While we can point to the fact that the earth has a firey end as its destiny when the sun runs out of hydrogen in about 4 billion years’ time, I’m not sure even that catastrophe could be understood as the second coming. It’s more than that.

What this belief in the second coming prompts in us is an urgency to do God’s work, to participate in the prayer that God’s kingdom may come, and God’s will be done on earth as in heaven. To finish the work God gives each of us to do before such time as we come to our life’s end and are faced with the time of trial, looking back on the sum of our lives in God’s presence. Paul points to this in the second reading. He encourages the Roman Christians to live as people of the day, even though the sun hasn’t yet risen. To live as those who have, in baptism, been clothed with Christ, the Lord of Light. This has practical implications for how we live: to put off those things done under cover of darkness – drunkenness and revelry, debauchery and licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy. Now, we might think, well I’m never drunk and I don’t revel; what even is debauchery and licentiousness? But I’ll bet none of us is immune from quarrelling and jealousy. In point of fact, this little list of vices Paul gives is a summary, a “for example”. He’s talking about all those things which we do, which humans do to each other in community, and which take us into places of death and destruction: anger, rage, bitterness, gossip and slander, backbiting and complaining, fake news and lying, thoughtlessness, failure to listen, conflict, and all our failures to communicate because we must have our own way all the time. (All of these tend to come up in family gatherings, under the pressures and stresses of Christmas.) These are the deeds of night; instead he says, let’s lay them aside and instead put on the armour of light – which is both protective as well as defining. Imagine that: armour of light, shining so brightly the light lives in us and is part of us, clothed with Christ. If we are clothed with Christ the Light, then it will be as if the sun has risen already before the day breaks – living in the now, and the not yet of God’s realm fully realized.

As we prepare in these weeks, as the year wraps up, as we put up our trees and tinsel, let’s commit ourselves to be watchful, to Watch! Commit ourselves anew to living lives clothed in Christ’s light, our white baptismal robes. To look eagerly for Jesus’ coming in our lives each and every moment, and to live in expectation that there will be a time of reckoning – God’s time; that every time of krisis, every point of decision presents an opportunity to live as people of the day, to live into the vision Isaiah speaks of: the coming of the realm of God. Yes, that means engaging in our own lives with action and reflection, bringing to God those things that are works of darkness again and again and seeking forgiveness, donning afresh the clothing of Christ’s light. Yes, it means doing what we do with conscious intention around living God’s way: how do we prepare for Christmas in a way that builds the realm of God, rather than temples of mammon and idols of wealth? How can we look for ways to honour Christ’s coming: in those we meet, in the needs of those we see around us, in the needs of our environment?

Let us watch eagerly and expectantly this Advent, with our whole lives.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**