

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

Produced by Rev Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church

The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

It will also be available to listen to for one week from Sunday 29th November 2020 via telephone. The number to dial is 01875 444 495. Sunday 29th November 2020 – “Advent (1) - Hope”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this time of worship. My name is Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

Today we come to that point in the Christian year when we begin to mark the season of Advent.

Now I don't know about you but when I get to this season of the year I always feel as if I have been taken by surprise.

It's not that I don't know when Advent happens. It is simply that every year, it seems to creep up behind me... often hitting me with the thoughts – “*So – it's nearly Christmas again!!!*” ...

Even saying the word *Christmas* sounds a bit odd – but there we are, folks - in a matter of weeks we'll be at Christmas Day, a day that is going to be very different for all us this year, I am quite sure.

Leaving that to one side just now, though... I often think that one of the problems with the way that we mark the season of Advent is our tendency to mix it up with Christmas itself... and if we do that, we'd be wrong...

You see, Advent runs all the way through the preceding 4 weeks of Christmas day and doesn't end until the stroke of midnight ushering in Christmas morning itself.

Until that point we are still in Advent... we are still in the season of preparation for the coming of the Christ Child... still reading the stories that tell us of that day when Christ is born... able to sing (or perhaps we should say hear) hymns like “*O Come all ye faithful*” but only if we leave out the final verse which says “*Yea Lord we greet thee – born this happy morning!*”

So, in that sense the season of Advent is to Christmas what the season of Lent is to Easter – it's a time, marked at least since the 16th Century, when Christians make themselves ready to receive Jesus on Christmas Day... a time to steady our hearts and minds... a time to gain inner peace and a real sense of expectation – an expectation that is made all the more meaningful in our waiting – for the birth of Jesus Christ.

Today, our Bible reading for Advent points us not – however – to Christ's birth at Bethlehem but rather to the promise and belief that Christ will come again... a challenging belief, to be sure, but one that – as I hope we'll come to see - is also a bringer of Hope in difficult days.

Let us pray

Opening Prayer

Gracious God,

At the beginning of this Advent Season we look to Your coming: Your coming to us in the birth of the Christ-child; Your coming amongst us offering hope; Your coming in Christ once more. Yet

we know that You are – in a very real sense – already here with us now, ready to bless us and bring to us the offer of Your forgiveness and the healing of Your presence.

Make us aware of the reality of Your presence.

Lift our eyes from the ordinary and mundane things which fill our lives and help us to see this day the glorious and the eternal.

Enable us to live by faith in You, for we would be Your people now and always.

Merciful God, at this time of waiting and seeking we confess that we have not prepared for your coming as we should. We know we are not ready.

As we look once more to our annual celebration of the birth of Your Son, we know that our faith is imperfect; our love inadequate; and our commitment lukewarm.

We have failed You by the things we have done, and the things we have left undone; by the words we have spoken, and by the words we have withheld; by the thoughts we have had, and the lack of thought that has been in us.

Yet you love us as we are, and long for us to be better. Today we know that, even in our weakness, you come to us in Jesus Christ Your Son.

Help us through our worship this day to keep searching for him... to keep waiting to experience your love and to know through it all how close you are to us.

This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour in whose name we further pray and say together saying:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading - Mark chapter 13 verses 24 to 37

24 'But in those days, (said Jesus), following that distress, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; 25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

26 'At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27 And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

28 'Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

32 *'But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. 34 It's like a man going away: he leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.*

35 *'Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. 36 If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. 37 What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"*

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to His name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

When I write sermons, my wife says that I tend to be a bit of a wanderer around the house. I always start writing them the same way – by actually reading the Bible passage that I want to preach on before trawling around the bookshelves in my study or looking for something on the internet... interspersed with some more wandering...

I'll phone folk... write an email... check out the BBC news website to see what's happening in the world... go back to a bit of reading... make a coffee... back to more reading and then, eventually, there comes that moment when – faced with the serious prospect that, if you don't actually sit down and type something up - that there may actually be no sermon to preach or no reflection to reflect upon.

In my first parish, I was fortunate to be good friends with the local Parish Priest at the Roman Catholic Church. We shared a common interest in curries and used to meet up often. Sometimes he'd turn up at the manse door, too, late afternoon, unannounced and myself, Julia and he would sit and natter for a while... sometimes he would even stay for tea!

He was actually a really good preacher despite the fact that he once told me that not that long before we spoke he announced to his congregation at Sunday Mass that there were three types of sermon – the one that he'd sat down to write a day or two before the service... the one he made up between his seat in the chancel and the lectern from where he preached it and finally the sermon that never got written and never got preached – *"which is what (he said) you're getting today!"* as he finished with a flourish of *"Amen!"*.

I commented to him that I would never get away with that... at some point sermons have to get written, even after a bit of good old fashioned procrastination!

So, yes, procrastinate, I did this week... as our Session Clerk could testify for she was one of the folk I phoned for a chat whilst I procrastinated...

And perhaps the reason is obvious enough, if you were following the Bible reading for this morning - the topic of which led me to finish my phone call to Mary with the words, *"Well, Mary – I had better go now and write something about the end of the world!"*

Well, of course, it's not so much that our reading is about the end of the world... it is of course about the second coming of Jesus, and we'll come to that in a moment...

But slice and dice it whatever way you like – it ain't an easy passage to read far less to preach on... and more to the point we seem to have been stuck in this sort of mode, or style of bible reading, for the last few weeks now.

After all in the last few weeks we've spent time in the company of the so called Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Sheep and the goats - both of which have pretty grim endings for certain characters in the story...

And so, sometimes, ending a reading with the ascription of praise – “*Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word*” – can seem just a little incongruous, a little jarring to say the least.

But then again, I read something about our reading today in which the writer, the preacher, actually suggests that passages – such as our reading from Mark chapter 13 and verses 24 to 37 – were actually designed to bring us a sense of hope, rather than a sense of desolation.

Read properly, passages like this one, she says, actually provide reassurance rather than leaving us feeling down in the dumps.

“Apocalyptic prophecies (she writes) were intended to bring hope to desperate people”.

In other words, one way that the people of the Bible had of understanding the meaning behind such passages as this was to see them as a way of putting the troubles of the world within a wider context.

Here’s how the prophet Isaiah reflects on the nature of God’s relationship with the world’s troubles...

Isaiah chapter 64 verses 3 and 4...

“For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him”.

Now, not all of Isaiah’s words in that chapter are as positive as that... Indeed, in Isaiah 64 there is a real sense of yearning for better days... a real sense of the desire to see God act... for him to make sense of the volatility of the world in which they lived.

They believed, implacably, that God would do something...

The only question they had was about when he would do that something... with the closing words of Isaiah 64 being, *“Will you keep silent (Lord) and punish us beyond measure?”*

It almost goes without saying, I suppose that the words of Isaiah resonate with the world and times in which we live at the moment.

Sometimes – oftentimes – we too look for something to bring us a sense of hope... something that tells us that there will come a day when we will not have to sit two metres apart from each other... that we will not have to put on masks... a day when we can open the doors of our homes as we did such a seemingly short time ago.

And, of course, the news this past week or so has been much more optimistic – hasn’t it? Not just one effective vaccine has been found but three – all announced within a matter of days of each other.

I chuckled to myself when I saw a recent headline in a newspaper which, if I remember rightly, had two old men sitting at a bus shelter... One comments to the other something like, *“Aah - amazing – you wait for one vaccine and then three come along at the same time...”* the comparison being made, obviously with buses that all seem to arrive at the same time... in threes like the old corporation buses!

You’d be happy with one bus... but three – well, that presents a whole different ball game...

We’d have been happy with one vaccine - so long as it worked and could be produced in enough quantities... but three – that sounds even better... and so it is.

And the accompanying message that comes with it from the scientists – *“Hang on in there because the next few months will see new possibilities and new freedoms emerge”*

Well, that’s something we really all need to hear in these days.

We will wait our turn... we will wait until we get that letter or that phone call saying that it’s now our turn... others need it first... they deserve it first... but there is a new path emerging... and thanks be to God, and the wisdom of scientists, for that.

This is perhaps the modern day equivalent of what these people of the Bible would have felt – this sense that something, somewhere along the line, will happen – has to happen - to change the way things are...

“Hope (writes the poet Emily Dickinson) is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all”

Even St Paul states clearly the value of hope – we all know the words, *“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love”*.

Wonderful words... reminding us to ask the question, now and again, of what the alternative to hope might actually be...?

What is the alternative to hope?

Another quote – this time from the old English Poet, Alexander Pope who once wrote - *“Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.”*

Let’s read that again – *“Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.”*

The people of Jesus day – and for a long time before that – believed that there would be answer... a divine response...

OK – maybe their picture of what God would do was not as accurate as they imagined.

Perhaps God’s answer to the world was not in a powerful army or a mighty King, as they thought it was going to be.

But we need not blame them for that...

Their belief was, at the very least, understandable.

Those who witness war, as they did, may very well come to see that as the only way out... the only way forward...

The Christian faith, however, has another way of answering the questions the world we live in poses... in its proposition (hard to understand as it is) that Christ will come again and as one preacher by the name of Scott Hoezee points out – and here I quote him directly - *“if the church cannot proclaim and look forward to the second advent of Christ, then in all honesty there is precious little sense in making much ado about his first advent in Bethlehem.*

Let me continue to read his words...

If Jesus is not coming back to make all things new and bring in the kingdom, he talked about all through his ministry, then any celebration of his birth really would be a (fantasy)... If Jesus is not the Lord of lords who can come back at the end of history, then “Silent Night” has (he concludes) all the charm — and all the meaning — of “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.”

Challenging words... a thought to ponder... a thought to wrestle with but, most importantly of all, a hope is hold fast to.

Closing Prayer (with responses)

Listening God, we thank You that You are God with us, that we can glimpse Your Kingdom around us, that we can see signs of You in our world, that we can be part of Your story.

God, we wait, and we listen.

We hope for what is not seen. Shine the light of Your kingdom into the darkness of our world

Listening God, will You come into the darkness of today's world?

To the places where once You walked among us but are now places of despair, conflict and occupation.

Be with those whose voices are silenced. Help us to be a voice of peace,

To speak out against oppression, to share the real stories of our world with others this Advent.

Bring Your wisdom to situations for which there seems no easy answer.

God, we wait, and we listen.

We hope for what is not seen. Shine the light of Your kingdom into the darkness of our world

Listening God, will You come into the darkness of our community?

To the people living with fear and worry, to the people whose Advent is not full of joy, to the people needing support

Open our eyes to the situations all around us that we do not see and open our minds to the ways we can respond.

God, we wait, and we listen

We hope for what is not seen. Shine the light of Your kingdom into the darkness of our world

Listening God, will You come into the darkness of our lives?

To our human doubts and failings, the times we do not live out our faith, the situations we have not used our power to change.

Help us to be as open to you as You were to us when You were as vulnerable as a baby trusting in the world for Your safety.

Show us glimpses of Your Kingdom. Help us to hear Your story. Reveal to us our part in Your Advent Hope.

God, we wait, and we listen

We hope for what is not seen. Shine the light of Your kingdom into the darkness of our world. Amen

Benediction

Now may *the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and forevermore, Amen.*