

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ADVENT SUNDAY YEAR B 3 DECEMBER 2017

Advent has begun. It's the start of a new year in the Church's calendar. The world outside the church knows very little about the season of Advent. Advent calendars are popular, but they're misleading because they begin at 1 December rather than when Advent Sunday falls. The focus in our nominally Christian society is preparing for the festivities of Christmas, which customarily include time off work, parties, more food and drink than is wise, presents, and seasonal specials on television.

But it's not like this for everybody. Some people have to work. Some may not have any party to attend, or feel lonely even in company. Some may not be able to afford food, drink and presents. Christmas may be far from festive, far from being a time of celebration. One church in our deanery, All Saints on Branston Road, (email 13 Nov.) is hosting a Christmas Dinner for anyone who has nowhere else to go. If anyone would like to attend, or possibly help, I have contact details.

But let's not focus too much on Christmas just yet. What is distinctive about Advent? It is a time of waiting. Traditionally, as I'm sure you know, the Church gives us two ways in which we think about waiting. We think of people waiting for a saviour. And we think of the church waiting for Christ's second coming, not in humility but in glory, to establish his kingdom.

We do a great deal of waiting in our lives. It may be routine: waiting for the bus to arrive or the visitor to come. It may carry hopes and fears: waiting for exam results or that hospital appointment. It may bring the certainty of change: waiting for a birth in our close family, waiting to move house, waiting for retirement or whatever. Quite possibly we spend more time waiting than we do feeling we've arrived. We may have more 'Advent' time in our lives than 'Christmas' time. For this reason Advent speaks powerfully to our human condition. It is no accident that the texts and music associated with Advent are hauntingly beautiful, full of image and mystery. It is a huge loss if Advent gets swallowed up by Christmas. God is with us on the journey, not just at the journey's end.

This corresponds to S. Paul's assurance to the Christians at Corinth that they were 'not lacking in any spiritual gift' as they waited 'for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Waiting does not have to be a passive experience. It can be a time of hope, expectation and yearning. The prophet in today's first reading implored God to 'tear open the heavens and come

down,' and recognised him as a God 'who works for those who wait for him.' God's mighty deeds in the past gave the prophet confidence that God would act despite the sins of his people.

Prophets wrote for their own times, but the Church, growing from a Jewish background, sees Jesus as the fulfilment of their writings. It's not just in specific matters like Bethlehem being the birthplace of the Messiah, but in fulfilment of their great themes like judgement and salvation. As God was to his historical people of Israel, so he is in Christ, the saviour of the world. We rejoice in the coming birth of the saviour – but we must not forget that in his earthly life Jesus wept over and warned those who turned their backs on God's offer of salvation. They would face the judgement they brought on themselves. Judgement and salvation are two sides of the same coin.

Judgement and salvation are implied by Jesus in his words from today's gospel reading about the coming of the Son of Man in glory and the gathering of his elect. Although no one other than the Father knows when that will happen, the feeling is that it will be soon. We get the same impression from S. Paul's remarks to the Corinthians. Should we, nearly 2,000 years on, disregard such expectations? I think not – but we need to get away from timetables and pictorial language, and think of the message: that judgement is certain and it should affect how we live in the present. "Look for the signs," says Jesus, and "Keep awake."

So this season of Advent speaks to our present condition: enjoying God's gifts but waiting for the fulfilment of his purposes. In a world where instant results and immediate gratification are expected, the long term hope of Advent needs to be heard.