

Sunday 3rd December – Advent Sunday

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-end

It can be pretty depressing watching the news or reading the papers these days. Wars and fighting in Ukraine, Israel & Gaza; warnings of climate change getting out of control and threatening people's homes and livelihoods; poverty all around us – nearby and far away. Children being abused; people fleeing their homes; earthquakes, floods and so on.

And sometimes I want to cry out to God – why don't you do something? Or maybe to use those words which opened today's reading from Isaiah :

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—*

But it often seems that God doesn't do anything and our experience can be like Isaiah's as he cries out

*for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.*

But one message that comes through loud and clear in scripture, and especially in the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, is that things won't always be like this. There will be a time when God will intervene; when good will finally triumph over evil; when all things will be put right. It is often called the Day of the Lord; and sometimes referred to as the end times. The time when God will come and restore the world to what it should always have been.

Jesus often talks about this. He may refer to it as judgement; it may be in parables where he talks of a king going away to a far off country and then returning or it may be as today in straight teaching. But the important thing is that whenever he does talk about it, it is always in the context of how we live as we wait for the day of the Lord to come, rather than when it might actually take place. Christians through the ages, though, have all too often got hung up on dates and times; they have tried to interpret the signs (wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines and more) and have tried in vain to predict the time when this Day of the Lord would come – despite Jesus saying quite plainly that no one knows the time except the father.

When we look around us at the moment it seems that everywhere people are preparing to celebrate Christmas - Christmas trees are being purchased and decorated, people are beginning the annual Christmas present buying trips, supermarkets are laden with seasonal foods and we are hearing Christmas songs and carols being played in shops and on the radio.

Today is Advent Sunday and the readings and collect are not, as we might think from what's going on all around us, about getting ready for Christmas. Rather they are about us preparing for the Day of the Lord. In fact they follow on from the gospel readings from Matthew chapter 25 that we

have heard over the past few weeks which have all been about how we live as we wait for this Day of the Lord.

Lets just recap over those stories we have heard - The parable of the bridesmaids is about staying awake and being prepared for the bridegroom – a story that refers to being ready for the king; Kate suggested a few weeks ago that we could understand the parable of the talents as being about the abundant grace of God and how that changes the way we live as we wait for the Day of the Lord; we may recall the more traditional understanding which is about whether we use our gifts and abilities to the full as we wait. Last week the parable of the sheep and the goats talked about the way we view other people, particularly those in need – do we see Christ the King in them – do we treat people in need as though they were Christ himself. All three parables then are about the way we live our lives as we wait for God to act decisively.

And today's gospel reading from Mark's gospel has one overall message for us to take to heart as we wait for the Day of the Lord. Stay awake! In other words, don't just waste the time. Don't let the waiting time become wasted time. Use it well. It is essentially the same message as each of the Matthew parables and echoes what Jesus says elsewhere in scripture when he talks about him bringing abundant life, life in its fullness. Fullness of life which begins now, not in the future.

So what does that mean for us? How does what we do and who we are show that we are really awake, that we are responding to the love we have received from God by sharing that love with the world around us, that we are living life to the full. How can we use the time we have for the best – and what effect will that have.

This week we have welcomed over 500 children into this building to hear and experience the wonderful story of Jesus being born. It needed more than 20 of our church members from all 3 of our churches to make this happen – some giving up the whole week; some just one or two mornings – but each essential. Just one way we can get involved; one way we can share the love of God in the community. We worked out that since the Journey to the Stable started more than 15,000 children have come through this building hearing the Christmas story.

Every Tuesday morning Church House becomes a place of welcome where anyone can come and enjoy a cup of coffee, a piece of cake and a good conversation. Again it requires a team of committed people to make this happen. Some are there every week; some just once a month; some can't actually get to the café at all but bake cakes at home. Each one an important cog to make the café run well and to welcome people in.

On Fridays at Jimmy Tots Church House is transformed into a place where mums, dads, grandmas and grandads can come with their children or grandchildren and enjoy fun, games, hospitality and good company. Children can play with other children; parents get a chance to meet new friends. Once more it can only be done because church members volunteer their time. Some playing with the children, some talking to mums and dads, others making teas and coffees. Each one needed to make it happen – to help us share the wonderful love of God to the community.

A couple of weeks ago there were over 100 people at our Messy Church. Children and their parents and grandparents creating things, singing God's praise - hearing about his love for them and seeing it demonstrated by the care shown by those on the team. Once more it can only happen because members of our churches give up their time and energies. Helping with the crafts;

making toast and coffee, washing up or moving furniture. Every contribution important; every team member living out the love they have experienced.

We could go on – The Christmas Tree festival; Friends of St James activities; Sunday lunch club, Ploughmans lunch; craft club ; Mothers Union; fairs, fetes and coffee mornings. People using their time and energies to share God's love in the community. Using the waiting time, not wasting the time.

But we could do more. Things on my heart at the moment are being able to offer more support and care for older people either in their homes or in care homes; giving encouragement to families who bring their children for baptism – at present Richard or I have a conversation with them and invite them to various activities but we could do much more; following up the funerals we take – bringing people, not just inviting them, to the café and other activities. All about sharing and showing God's abundant love. Could you be the person who could help us do more? Can you offer some time or some help in sharing God's love in these ways?

It doesn't take long to see that what's going on in and through the churches in this Parish – and in and through countless churches across the world – is actually God at work in the world. Bringing love, bringing hope, meeting needs and changing lives. The things that we do as we wait for the decisive acts of God to finally bring the triumph of good over evil all point towards that; all point towards the love of God growing and spreading.

We began by wondering where God is in the world and asking why he doesn't do something. The response we can give is that through people like you and me he is doing things, he is acting, he has not hidden his face. When we live life to the full by sharing God's love, we act as the channels for God showing how much he loves and cares for the world, how much he wants it to be as he created it to be.