

Advent 1 2016: Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44 'Be ready'

Week of big events:

- Wed – Philip Hammond first forecast after Brexit
- Thursday – Thanksgiving, and Trump's plea for unity in a deeply divided nation
- Friday – Black Friday (anyone outside shops at 8am?)
- Really big news: Steven Gerrard turns down opportunity to manage MK Dons

Attention focused on all these things – Advent has crept in unawares. Partly earliest possible date with Christmas on a Sunday. Partly fact that preps for Christmas started in shops in October, even Christmas lights are up in many places. Partly that Advent itself now an almost completely unfamiliar concept in our culture.

Over next few weeks, all familiar traditions will creep in:

- Bible passages we never read otherwise: Isaiah 2, 7, 9, 11, Micah 5
- We'll use words 'angel' and 'shepherd' in more sentences than rest of year combined
- We'll sing the carols we all know and love, conjuring up romantic images of Palestine covered in snow with robins sitting on branches as chimney sweeps run home to get their orange and farthing in front of the blazing family hearth. Cause that's *exactly* how it happened.
- Even more bizarrely, our churches will actually be full to hear all this stuff, as this strange combination of Palestinian geo-politics and Victorian fantasy now constitutes the last remaining part of the Christian story which still captures the hearts, if not the minds, of our post-Christian world.

And into this heady mix of shopping, shepherds and sherry; of cards, crackers and canapés; of stables, stockings and stress; of mince pies, magi and – frankly – madness, we give our ourselves 4 weeks to hear again that simple voice that speaks through the ages: 'The King is coming! Are you ready?' (repeat) PAUSE

But what does it mean to be ready? If Advent is the season of preparation, what are we preparing for? Let's assume we all know it's not really about the shopping, mince pies, gaudy jumpers etc. And let's make a bolder assumption that Jesus doesn't actually stay a baby forever, so our preparation doesn't stop at the manger. What's it really all about?

Nothing less than a reversal and renewal of the whole social order. Kings have kingdoms – of course they do. And this king is in the business of winning *a new people* who would form *an entirely new society* living a radically *new kind of life*. The kingdom of God has arrived, and those who would be a part of that will be invited to live life in a totally new dimension. So if we're going to ask ourselves today: 'what does it mean to be ready for the king?', in fact we have to ask ourselves the deeper question: what does this new kind of life look like? How will the king's followers be known?

Here's where our passages give us some clues. The first is this: **BE PEACEFUL**. Isaiah gets most of the headlines in Advent, doesn't he: I can think of at least 6 passages which are bound to be quoted or used at some point in next month. But his prophetic vision starts here, near the beginning in ch2, where Isaiah sees a vision of the mountain of the Lord's temple triumphing and essentially creating a new social order. Now, the 'mountain of the Lord's temple' is code language for God's kingdom being finally established. What will life look like under this kingdom? There's a big clue in v4 READ.

To be ready for the king we need to live at peace. This time of year places great stresses on people, and stress leads to conflict. Sadly, the incidence of heart attacks spikes over Christmas, as do marriage break-ups. But the rule of the king is one of peace. May Advent this year be for us a time when we choose to live at peace – whatever everyone else is doing, may we resolve to live at peace.

Lovely phrase v5 – 'walk in the light of the Lord'. Idea of walking in light picked up in Romans 13. Contrasts idea of living in darkness and light, only this time, talks about life of kingdom as wearing 'the armour of light'. Leads to our second point. How can we be ready? Be peaceful and **BE PURE**. READ v12b-14.

Christmas is a season of serious gratification nowadays. Presents get bigger and bigger, the eating and drinking more and more lavish. Want to stress: this passage not meant to be a killjoy. Jesus wants us to enjoy God's good gifts. But we must be careful not to turn our celebrations into a shameless excuse to indulge what Paul calls in v14 'the desires of the flesh'. I sense a prophetic challenge and opportunity for Christians increasingly around Christmas to model a different way of enjoying this most special of seasons. To offer hospitality and hope rather than just drunkenness and debt; to offer creative gifts rather than consumer gluttony; to serve and bless, not swerve and stress. We could do *all this* a bit differently, couldn't we?

Many of the people I meet dread Christmas. There's no *proportion* to any of it anymore. Christmas is like a man in a glittery suit yelling with a megaphone into your ear for 2 months: 'enjoy yourself! Enjoy yourself!' Well I might enjoy myself if you stopped yelling in my ear in your glittery suit.

So maybe purity is underrated at Christmas, after all. Maybe if we can recover a counter-cultural Christmas of simple celebration, of understated joyful hospitality, a Christmas which invites others to walk in the light of God's son in the manger, we may have something better to offer our culture.

Finally, **BE PURPOSEFUL** – sting in the tail. Let's not forget, Jesus doesn't just come *once* in the bible, does he? Advent is a time of particular preparation, as is Lent, but there's more going on here. 10 weeks a year is nice, but it's a bit on the skinny side. To be truly prepared, true followers, we're not just preparing for a particular season. We know when Christmas arrives – 25th Dec every year. And, frankly, it can be hard just being ready for that.

But the King is coming again, and this time we won't know when he's coming. As Christians, we live in a permanent season of preparation.

As Paul says, every day we wake up knowing our salvation is nearer than it was yesterday. And yet we have no idea when it will be (if think do, going to be wrong – story every couple of years of ‘prophets’ EGs).

So what does it mean to be ready for this future event? Be peaceful, yes, be pure, certainly, but also be purposeful. In other words, *we live in a state of permanent preparedness*. We live as if Jesus might actually come back soon.

A lot of words get said, and ink, gets spilt analysing the decline in church and Christian faith in this country. Lots of reasons: point legitimately to cultural inflexibility of church, scandals, longer working hours and lack of fixed patterns of family life, questions of science and corresponding loss of confidence in what we really believe, impact of two World Wars. But I think there’s one bigger reason that sits underneath all of it. We now live in a society with no sense of accountability before God. Even if God exists, I don’t have to worry about old-fashioned concepts like sin or judgement: the idea that all of us will one day stand before our maker and personally have to give an account of our lives. But Jesus is very old-fashioned, very clear on this: he talks more about judgement than anyone else in the New Testament. We don’t like these passages very much, we much prefer the bits where Jesus heals people or tells stories about farmers and seeds: but it’s risky to assume that Jesus didn’t mean what he said when he said: READ v39b-41.

Sobering stuff isn’t it? And we as Christians have good news – at Christmas as at every other time of year. Jesus came precisely to take the judgement of God *in our place* on the cross. In his perfect faithfulness he set humanity free from the judgement hanging over us. God’s mercy and forgiveness triumphs over judgement! And it starts with that baby in the manger, the light coming into the darkness.

So as we begin this season of Advent again, let’s resolve to be ready. Let’s be peaceful, let’s be pure – let’s offer something better to our meaning-starved culture this Christmas. But let’s also be ready for his return, let’s live with purpose and patience, knowing our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. I’ve got news for you this morning:

The king is coming! Are you ready?