



Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Rickmansworth

**Sermon preached by the Revd Deborah Snowball  
Advent Sunday – 29<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

A colleague in our local area went in to a school this week to take an assembly. Having primed the children that there was a very important event taking place in a few weeks time, the question was then asked, what are we waiting for, Christmas came the reply. Who are we waiting for was then asked, Father Christmas came the reply. When pushed a little further, Santa Claus was the next response with all manner of further possible people – none of which was Jesus.

Now if you are wondering if I have lost the plot and missed out a whole liturgical season by jumping to Christmas without even making mention of Advent, worry not! Today, in fact, I have a challenge for us all – which I will give as words of encouragement, bound closely to the closing sentences of both the New Testament and Gospel readings for today.

With the new Liturgical Year that begins today, we turn from the Gospel of Matthew from which we have heard excerpts most Sundays since Advent Sunday last year, to the Gospel of Luke. Gospel: good news: the good news that Jesus Christ has come into the world and won our salvation through his death and resurrection. This good news releases us from captivity: captivity to sin; captivity to fear; captivity to the demands and wiles of this world when our world and our place is in heaven.

Hearing the words of Jesus: *Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man*, with the words that we heard before them in the passage from today's gospel may make us wonder about this good news.

Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. He has wept over Jerusalem, bewailing the fact that they do not know what makes for peace, and here he alerts all who hear him to the truth that strange things are to happen, they must be watchful – they must be informed to understand all that is to come to pass – and through all this they must be alert.

Just as this call was for those who were the hearers of Christ, so they are for us also. My reason for telling the story of my colleague who had to work so hard to get any mention of Jesus into the Christmas story for the children with whom she was gathered, is to challenge us as to whether we have, firstly, any sense of Jesus being part of the Christmas story for us – and by being part of the story I mean Jesus being reason for the whole story at all, and secondly, how do we prepare ourselves for the reality that Jesus will come again as Lord and Judge – the main themes of Advent, and how do we stay alert, and pray at all times for the strength to escape all the things of which Jesus prophesied?

As today is the Church's New Year's Day, I thought I'd offer us some New Year's resolutions relating to these questions. Those who listen to sermons often switch off about half way through, or get taken off down a tangent by a word that they don't understand or a thought that captivates them... if you've switched off or gone down a different alley of thought, come back to me!

Advent is a time for preparation. Ministers often speak of spiritual clearouts – or de-cluttering – to use a modern idiom. We speak of renewing our hearts to renew our faith. Brave ministers will even dwell on themes to do with the 'end times' and might even encourage us to spend time dwelling on our own mortality. Well, as well as any of these that might take your fancy, I offer you the following:

Strengthen your hearts in holiness: by prayer and attending to the scriptures. In The Letter to the Thessalonians we read the prayer of Paul for the Thessalonians, *may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints*. Prayer attunes us to the mind of God. Prayer, conversation with God through which God speaks to us and we to God (notice the order in which I say that – God speaks to us and we speak to God), through prayer, our hearts may be 'strangely warmed' to quote Wesley, and we grow in holiness. This holiness allows us to turn aside from the captivity to sin; captivity to fear; captivity to the demands and wiles of this world of which spoke earlier.

Holiness does not mean holier than thou, or an avoidance of all that is good and lovely in our world. Holiness means recognising what we are and who we are: children of God set apart for his good purpose, his good love and his adoring gaze. Through prayer we come to know this more deeply: through immersing ourselves in the scriptures we are assured of this.

The first New Year's resolution is to pray: pray often, pray deep, pray fervently – for yourself and for the world, and if you don't know how to pray, ask. The second New Year's resolution is to read the Bible. Why do we say, you'll find it on page so and so of the New Testament part of the Bible each Sunday? Because many of us gathered here don't know – those new to faith and those who have been at it longer than others have been alive. Don't let us bury our heads in the sand if we feel less knowledgeable than others: we all have things to learn... yes, me included.

You should come along to Morning or Evening prayer sometime and hear the discussions we have there! The scriptures, alongside encounters in prayer, reveal to us the mind and purpose of God. Sometimes it may not feel to be all that clear I will own... but just because you don't always agree with someone or understand what they are talking about, does that mean that you ignore them? Get your Bibles down off the shelves, blow off the dust if necessary and try reading through the Gospel of Luke during Advent, or try a Psalm a day.

Get hold of a commentary or study notes – the latter of which I used to read each day in the bath before I went off to work. I don't do that now as I like to pretend I am a little more grown up! Jesus alerts his hearers to the truth that his words will not pass away, and we have these words in our Bibles. Jesus tells his hearers to be alert so that they may have strength to withstand all that is to come, we can discover a relationship that will keep us strong through prayer.

Practical help... I have spoken of prayer: set aside time each day to pray – five minutes a day to start with if you feel you have no time, consider meeting with others to pray if it will encourage you, perhaps use a book of prayers to start you off, or if you want to go all modern technology, visit our church website and click on the link to take you to a website that will lead you through a ten minute time of encounter with both scripture and prayer specifically designed for Advent. Let today be the start of something new...