

## Advent Sunday

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Romans 13: 11-14

Matthew 24: 36-44

Have you ever been burgled? Markie and I have been burgled twice and, even though both happened a good 35-40 years ago when we were living in London, the sense of shock and outrage at the invasion of our privacy remains almost as strong today as it did then even if I now can't remember any of the details of what was stolen.

And yet here in our Gospel reading for this first Sunday of Advent, when we start thinking about the Incarnation, about an innocent Jesus, about Jesus as a baby we have Jesus describing himself as a thief in the night breaking into our home when we least expect it, as he tells us to keep on our toes for the Second Coming. And it's not as if the readings from Mark and Luke for this Sunday are any more comforting. They're not. They're equally apocalyptic in tone.

So what's going on? I don't know about you, but I can't say I find the language Jesus uses at all comforting or helpful. At this time of year, I want to think of baby Jesus. I might even think of the Cross because after all you can't have the Cross without the manger. But none of that applies here; instead, we are pointed towards Jesus the intruder, Jesus the disrupter, Jesus the criminal even.

What are we to make of a Jesus who effectively promises to take away from us some of the very things we value most? Well, first that perhaps we had better stay awake. Noah was awake at the time of the flood, but who else was? No-one else – they were all too busy eating, drinking, getting married, making plans for the future. When we are too focused on the everyday realities of life, let alone our plans that so rarely come to fruition exactly as we want, we can lose sight of the spiritual truths, we pretend that business as usual is good enough, pretend that Christianity isn't costly.

We also need to remember that Jesus won't necessarily turn up in the way we expect. Thinking we have got life, or worse still Jesus, all sorted out is a recipe for disaster. Rather we need to get ourselves into a mindset of expecting the unexpected, and that will help us spot Jesus where we wouldn't normally be looking.

Perhaps Jesus wants to rob us of those things that rob us from time with God. In Advent we have to make time for the long-awaited arrival of Jesus, but how can we if our lives are clogged up with too much stuff. We have to make sure those things that are valuable to us don't become liabilities. Perhaps we need an intruder to take away those things it would be better for us not to keep and that we are unwilling to give up.

It may not be things that Jesus wants us to give up, it may be attitudes such as self-righteousness, pride, unforgiveness, even apathy. Advent can be a good time to think about such things.

Some of you may have heard this story, but my journey to ordination started in my sleep. I won't bore you with all the details, but from time to time I had previously laughed off suggestions that I should be ordained. How else was God going to rob me of my stubbornness except in my sleep? At least I was awake enough after that to follow it through.

If you are still watching the TV news or reading newspapers, have you noticed how there are fewer hard facts and more analysis about what events mean and how they will probably play out? We get predictions about the weather, the economy, the war in Ukraine, energy bills, climate change etc etc.

But actually, what's the point of all that speculation? It's as if we like to kid ourselves that by speculating we can somehow prepare ourselves for the future. Just by knowing a catastrophe is coming, we think can insulate ourselves from the worst effects of it and perhaps even understand it. But all we are doing is running away from the basic vulnerability of what it is to be human

Of course, we know that the Incarnation is coming, but it doesn't make it any easier to understand, the reality is we will never comprehend it fully.

Frederick Buechner, one of my favourite Christian writers, once described the Incarnation as a scandal, something that forces us to think about just how unpredictable God is.

“If holiness and the awful power and majesty of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound, but that holiness can be present there too.”

Our limitless God chose limits, a peasant girl gave birth to the world's Saviour in a backwater, a Saviour who lived a short life and died a cruel and agonising death.

Perhaps it's not surprising that we have turned Advent into something rather cuddly, because actually that's how we would prefer life to be, that salvation could come without cost, that we could sail through life without any problems, even if we know that's not really reality.

The reality is Advent starts as the days get darker, it's not an easy time. So, it's probably a good thing that the Gospel on this first Sunday of Advent brings us up with a jolt by telling us that Jesus is a thief, that Jesus is relentless is seeking my soul.

As a novelist once said – to the almost deaf you shout, to the almost blind you draw large, startling figures. Well, that's exactly what Jesus is doing here, he's shouting, he's drawing huge, vivid pictures to grab our attention. Be on guard, stay awake, look and look again.

Advent's invitations to pay attention, to look again, are essential, are life giving, above all they help us to see and receive Jesus in all the various and shocking ways he chooses to appear. Because what Jesus seems to be saying is that the

people in first century Israel hadn't really learned much from the time of Noah. I'm not sure we have either.

The point is, God is not safe, he could surprise us at any time, just like a thief can. Precisely because no-one, not even Jesus, knows when the Lord is coming again, we have to learn to live with uncertainty – and that means living with vulnerability even as we try to be alert, to be awake, to be ready, not sheltering behind plans designed to protect us against uncertainty.

Advent reminds us that we need to be ready to welcome God at each and every moment, being aware of the possibilities of each moment as we climb out from behind our defences and wake up to the grace of the every day.

And that's why we need to be on the alert, properly awake, ready for the thief that is Jesus. Because God doesn't really operate in calendar time, he operates in the now and not yet. When we think of Advent we think of the coming of Jesus as a baby, yet the compilers of the lectionary remind us that Advent is also about the Second Coming as well. Whatever year of the lectionary cycle we are in, the reading for the first Sunday of Advent is always about the Second Coming, not the First.

What are we to draw from that, apart from the fact that the work of the First Coming is not yet complete? Well perhaps that we the church need to be operating in the 'not yet' parts of the world, in places where injustice has not yet been eliminated, in places where hunger and thirst still have not

yet been eradicated, in places at particular risk from climate change that have not yet been protected. It is just because no-one knows the precise time of the Second Coming that we have to behave as if it could be at any time, because we can't wait until it is almost time to prepare because by then it may be too late.

Whether or not we believe the Second Coming is imminent or thousands of years in the future, the point is there is nothing to stop us faithfully witnessing now and at every opportunity to God's eternal purposes of love, justice and human flourishing. Indeed that is exactly what Jesus came to model and what he is continually encouraging us to emulate.

There are certain types of Christians, (rather similar to those who ask in a rather superior way "Are you Saved" – with the implication that you are not whereas they are) who ask, "Are you ready", with the same unspoken implication.

Unfortunately for them Matthew rather spoils the party because he gives us not a single clue about how to decide who is ready and who isn't.

In other words, it's not for us to judge who gets the best seat in the house, because after all we might be the one getting a seat in the church hall rather than the seat on the front row of the pews that we thought we were going to get – but which has been mysteriously allocated to someone completely unexpected!

So perhaps what being ready is about is sorting ourselves out so that we are in right relationship with God, because if God

is about anything, God is about love and love is about relationship. Jesus talks about Noah's ark, where the animals went on two by two. Being ready, really ready, may therefore mean us walking two by two in relationship with people we'd prefer for whatever reason not to be in relationship with – and be truly thankful as we do so that God is really aching to be in relationship with us and for us to be in relationship with him.