

Advent 1 10am

*Jeremiah 43.14-16; Luke 21.25-36*

Advent Sunday – day one of a new year! Last week we celebrated Christ as King, which brought the church's year to a close. This week the cycle begins again as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the coming of Christ and look towards his second coming. We can see signs around us to show that this is a new season.

Today Gareth lit the first of the candles on our Advent ring. It's purple and there are other signs – look around; the altar frontal, vestments and fall on the lectern are purple. For now, the flowers have gone. This helps to remind us that this is a time of preparation, a time of waiting as we look forward to the coming of Jesus as a baby and also to the time when he will come again in judgement. There are other ways to help us mark this season. An Advent Calendar for example or an Advent candle. I'm sure some of you will have one or other of these, maybe both, and some advent calendars may even contain chocolates!

Most of our gospel readings this year will be from Luke's gospel. Today we are starting towards the end of the gospel with Jesus' teaching shortly before his death and moving backwards to the beginning. The end precedes the beginning, just as the beginning points to the end in Luke's gospel. There is something of a paradox here. This is a season full of paradoxes.

God's time is not our time. God is not limited to the calendar and the clock. In God's time past present and future are woven together. God's time is now and not yet.

Our readings today seem to be full of a sense of foreboding. Yet if we look more closely, we see that this is not the case. We need to understand that the language used is symbolic; it's picture language similar to that which we find in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Stormy seas were a symbol of chaos to the Jewish people; they were not great lovers of the seaside. Though we have seen some dramatic pictures of stormy seas this weekend! Earlier in the week many people, desperate to reach the UK, have died seeking to cross the channel in unseaworthy boats, which some have described as not much more than paddling pools. A new variant of the coronavirus has caused havoc with some people's Christmas plans, leaving families feeling heartbroken because they will not be able to meet as they had planned. It has been a difficult and chaotic week for many.

But here we read the Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and great glory; yet we are about to celebrate the birth of a vulnerable baby. Paradoxically this is more than simply about the birth of Jesus; it is also about the coming of God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is near, but it is not yet here.

These are signs of hope. That is what the parable of the fig tree is about. The appearance of new leaves signals that summer is on the way. We have a similar metaphor from the plant world in the short passage from the prophecy of Jeremiah. The Branch, a descendant of David will restore justice and righteousness in Israel. Jeremiah, in prison for preaching that that kingdom of Israel would be handed over to Nebuchadnezzar, is now prophesying the rebuilding of the nation.

The plant world is a symbol of hope. In challenging times we need to look for signs of hope. Even now we can see those signs in nature: even as the leaves fall from the trees, we can see new buds forming; looking round the garden, somewhat hidden away, I noticed daffodil bulbs that are just revealing the tips of new leaves as they emerge from the ground, a promise of the flowers to come in the spring. Soon it will be the shortest day of the year and then the days will begin to lengthen, a minute at a time.

Where do we see signs of hope? We must watch and be alert for the signs around us. The last 18 months have brought many changes as a result of the pandemic; we have had to make many adjustments; we have had to learn new ways of socialising with other; we have had to wear face coverings to protect those around us as well as ourselves; we have experienced a changing sense of time during these months and it seems life will never be quite as it was.

In these days of Advent let us make a conscious effort to notice signs of hope around us, however small or insignificant they may seem and let us give thanks for them. A challenge for you: to notice one new sign of hope each day during Advent and this may not be easy, and we may struggle. It could be something you see in the natural world; it may be an unexpected kindness from a friend or stranger; it could be some words which encourage you.

In all that we are experiencing at the moment, let us not lose sight of the wider picture: of God's vision for the world – the coming of the kingdom which paradoxically is already here and not yet here.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas, may this season bring many blessings to each of us.

**The Revd Jackie Lock, Associate Priest**