

**CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL  
ADVENT SUNDAY 2018  
CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST**

St. Luke 21 v 36 Jesus said 'Be alert at all times'.

Such is surely the fond hope of all who preach from this or any pulpit – that those to whom we speak will be awake! 'Be alert' is our Lord's clarion call to His followers in this season of Advent with its dual theme – preparation, spiritual as well as material, for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas and also due preparation for that final moment when He will come with great power and glory to judge the world and claim His kingdom of love and justice for which we so regularly pray 'Thy kingdom come'.

Advent with its stirring theme and call to repentance may be the beginning of the Church's liturgical year but we could be forgiven for thinking that it comes at just the wrong time of the year for us to bestir ourselves. The days are short. Much of the animal kingdom is sensibly in hibernation and many older people simply wish to stay in the warmth and security of their homes. Yet the 25<sup>th</sup> of December is the date fixed in the Western Church to mark Christ's coming into the world. That celebration seems to have got out of hand, creating a frenzy of activity for many people so that Christmas Day can bring both exhaustion and a sense of anti-climax. It is a scandal that the festival which marks God's amazing love, now, not only serves to make the poor, poorer, the sad and the lonely more so, sees an increase in the number of suicides and the break-up of marriages but tends to overwhelm the solemn message of Advent. Today's Advent Calendars are increasingly secularised or seem to have more to do with chocolate than the wonder of Jesus' birth. That context, as Advent begins, should at least cause us to pause, to take stock of our values, priorities, our sense of why we are on this earth, how we relate to God who gives us life and whose love offers us new life, now and beyond the judgement.

We must not find excuses, allow the winter malaise or the frantic search to create Christmas happiness to blot out the essential Advent proclamation that Christ will come on a day and at an hour we do not know. We may not find the description of Christ's Second Coming offered in our Gospel reading quite to our taste. It may seem a little too explicit – too literal but we must not miss the crucial point, namely that in response to God's love and the trust He puts in us, we are called to live out that love. Yes, the loving God will no doubt make allowances for what we have had to endure. As Peter Ustinov once said 'I am sure the good Lord would not have expected us to love our neighbours, if He had met mine!'. Christ will be there for us, but it is for our life and what we do with it that we must one day answer, one day be judged. That is the Advent message, which we neglect at our peril.

When I was three years old, my father developed pneumonia. One of my earliest memories is hearing mother and others whispering the word 'crisis', Pneumonia remains a serious condition but in the days before antibiotics, those with pneumonia were said to come to the crisis, after which patients either recovered or they died. A crisis is an experience which involves suspense, risk and often danger. In Greek the word from which crisis is derived is close in its meaning to a moment of decision. Our lives are largely fashioned by the decisions we make. It is often through the decisions we make in times of crisis that new doors of opportunity may be opened or life in some way diminished. Jesus advises his followers to regard each day as a series of crises, moments of decision. We make major decisions, as when we ask someone to share our life in marriage or to accept the offer of a new post but there are also those everyday decisions, as when we choose what we eat and what that will do for our weight and health. Crisis - the underlying thought of Christ's coming – should be seen as offering an opportunity. Since the One who is coming is the one who died and rose Christians look in every situation for that ray of hope, the potential for loving and for

transformation from evil to good.

We are called to live for today. We do not know what tomorrow will bring. Most of us will not know the day or hour of our death. No one knows the time of Christ's coming. Trusting in God's love and committing ourselves to His safe keeping we go forward. Our worship, our being part of the life of the church helps to sustain that trust as in life crises come to individuals and to nations. We need such an understanding in these uncertain times as our nation presently struggles to find the right way forward.

The Advent message reminds us that each day matters. Each decision we make matters. They are signs of our love or our selfishness. We need to be alert, awake to the love of God. Awake to the fact that our lives can make a difference, bring hope or increase the despair of others. As we wait the Lord's coming what we think, say and do makes us the person we are. Today at the beginning of the Year of Vocation in the Diocese of Chichester, Bishop Martin launches 'The Way of Living Initiative' to help us through the seasons of the Christian year find a rule of life, a way of living in response God's call. Silence, prayer, Bible and other spiritual reading enable us to know our Lord and so fashion our lives in the light of His example.

Jesus instructed his followers to be alert at all times – ready to stand before the Son of Man. Before I moved south I spent 7 years as a member of the Chapter of Chester Cathedral. Among that cathedral's many treasures is an antique clock on which are inscribed these sobering words –  
'When as a child I laughed and wept, time crept,  
When as a youth I waxed more bold, time strolled, When I became a full grown man, time ran  
When older still I grew, time flew,  
Soon I shall find in passing on, time gone.  
O Christ wilt thou have saved me then'.

Now in this moment of time, in this Eucharist, once again we break bread and share the common cup – those timeless actions through which we relive Our Lord's saving death and Passion. Together we receive the grace, strength so that in the words of St. Paul to the Thessalonians growing in holiness we 'may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints'.

Amen.

+Alan Chesters