

Advent Sunday

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 2 December 2018

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 3 vv 9-end and Luke 21 vv 25-36

St Andrew is inconvenient. The day set aside for remembering him in both the Western and Eastern Churches is the last day of November, although there is no obvious reason why this day should have been chosen. It is not unusual for St Andrew's feast day to be overshadowed by Advent Sunday – a day which has priority in the liturgical calendar, even for churches dedicated to St Andrew.

But Andrew's response to Jesus' call also leaves questions. Matthew's account of the call of Andrew, with his brother Simon Peter, leaves us in no doubt of the suddenness of Jesus' call and the hasty response by the two brothers: 'Immediately they left their nets and followed [Jesus]'. This is rightly seen as single-minded response to Jesus' call – but one is left with questions about the apparent lack of both human courtesy and, frankly, who was left to clear up the mess. And this is even more pointed as Jesus moves along to invite James and John to join him. 'Immediately [note that word again] they left the boat and their father, and followed him.' What was Zebedee's reaction? Supportive and pleased that Jesus had recognised his sons, or feeling left in the lurch, or somewhere in between? At a human level, it all feels ever so slightly messy and inconvenient.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not for one moment criticising Andrew, Peter, James and John for following Jesus. Nor am I suggesting that there is any discourtesy in what Jesus did. There is no question about the priority of the Kingdom of God over human arrangements. But, in purely human terms, it all seems a little inconvenient.

And Advent is inconvenient, because of the twin focus of this season.

In this season of Advent, we have our annual reminder of the way in which God prepared for the coming of Jesus into the world. This was the conclusion, the climax indeed, of the work of the prophets and the patriarchs before them. More immediately, there was careful preparation for Jesus' birth through Mary and Joseph, and Elizabeth and Zechariah; through the key players in the gospel narrative and the people we will meet at the end of this phase of the annual cycle of the Church year – Simeon and Anna, waiting patiently in the Temple for the coming of the Messiah.

But Advent has another message, one that is clearly stated in the gospel reading today, with Jesus' stern warnings about are called 'the end times'. If Jesus' first coming is quiet and domestic, everyone will know about the second coming. In the words of Wesley's great Advent hymn, 'Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty.' We are called in this season to face up to the great themes of heaven, hell, death and judgement. In other words, to be looking towards the day of judgement, the second coming of Jesus, the culmination of all things. And we do not know when that will be. That's also inconvenient for Western society which puts so much emphasis on planning and strategy.

So let's turn this on its head. Rather than focussing on the inconvenience and uncertainty, we can see things differently. Andrew, Peter, James and John were open and receptive to Jesus' call – which was a natural progression in their lives and the result of their new and developing knowledge of who Jesus was. As we await Jesus' second coming, whenever and however that may be, we are called to be receptive, to 'be

on our guard'. Jesus' message in the gospel reading is something like this: 'Do not be distracted. Be ready and prepared to respond to whatever we face.'

St Paul is more measured in what he writes in the letters to the Thessalonians, although he has no doubt that the second coming of Jesus is a reality for which we must prepare. For Paul, the Church is a community waiting for the Son of God. And this is an important message for us to hear in the frantic preparations for a British Christmas. Advent is simply waiting for the return of Jesus – and so the season of Advent is an important reminder that we are, somehow, always in Advent, watching and waiting. This does not mean that we cut ourselves off from human society, as some of the Thessalonian Christians were tempted to do. Rather, we are called, in that spirit of receptivity, to engage effectively with the whole of life and the whole of human need. The more firmly we believe that one day Jesus will return to wind up this world and lead us into a better one, the more important it is for us to seek to make this world a better place.

And what will mark such a community of expectant and receptive people? Paul give us two clear hints.

Firstly, 'May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.' In other words, a community that demonstrates overflowing and generous love.

And secondly, '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.' If we have a strong and disciplined life as disciples, we will have no reason to be ashamed or embarrassed when Jesus comes.

This kind of Advent is a clear demonstration that God is already at work, bringing in his Kingdom. When Christians are working in love for each other and for those around them, in committed discipleship and holy living, the Kingdom is already a reality in their lives and a sign of hope for the world.