

Advent Sunday

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Advent Sunday, 28 November 2021

Readings: Jeremiah 33 vv 14-16 and Luke 21 vv 25-36

'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.'

Joseph Williamson was born in Liverpool, the city from which my family comes, in 1769 and made his fortune as a tobacco merchant. He was a well-known, if eccentric, figure in social circles. He had a keen social conscience and was involved in many charitable enterprises. The grandest of these was a scheme to provide employment to poor, unemployed labourers. Under his direction long tunnels and chambers were quarried out of stone beneath districts of the city. He lived partly underground himself, his bedroom was a cave adjoining his house.

Williamson once invited some of the gentry of Liverpool to dine with him in one of his excavated chambers. No doubt curious and relishing the novelty many accepted the invitation and were welcomed by Williamson into a bare rock chamber. The only furnishings were a long trestle table and chairs. To the dismay of the guests the meal was simple – porridge and hard ship's biscuits. Some guests showed their disgust by leaving immediately and were seen out. Then for those who remained Williamson opened a further chamber, richly decorated and containing a lavish banquet. Amused and greatly heartened the guests ate and drank to their heart's content.

Jesus' description of the tribulations to come can hardly have appealed to his disciples. He did not promise an easy time, he offered little comfort and the future seemed full of temptations and danger. The disciples could not have been blamed if they had decided to leave Jesus, as some of the guests of Joseph Williamson had done. In fact, it is certain that many did. His invitation to the heavenly banquet was not a conventional one, seeking to entice. It was, rather, a bold challenge to discipleship and to perseverance.

Throughout his ministry Jesus warned that only those who could share his suffering would share his glorious new life. Why should the disciples have remained when there were so few signs of comfort or reward? Why stay when the explicitly stated dangers were followed by additional warnings of temptations and dissipation which would accompany their beloved Lord's return and risk their future security if they were found wanting? They stayed because they trusted the integrity of the one who invited them.

Jesus presented them honestly with the truth of what they might expect when the time came for judgement. Jesus promised them liberation and liberation can only be achieved after a struggle with whatever or whoever is oppressing us. But they also understood that while Jesus sometimes asked the difficult or improbable, he never expected the impossible.

His invitation to the feast of life may have required a period in the ante-room of struggle but he never removed from them the hope of achieving heaven. He simply asked them to remain alert to the possibility of dangers and temptations which might divert them after he had gone. Jesus never wants to lose a single soul. He issues us with warnings so that we shall stand firm in our resolve and be prepared for whenever we must account for ourselves.

The beginning of Advent prepares us for the birth of Christ, but even more, it forces us to face the reality of that phrase we say each week from the Nicene Creed: 'And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end.' The beauty, even - in a strange way - the romance, of the Advent season does not protect us from all the pains and temptations of being human. But it does remind us of the urgency of the task of ensuring that we remain alert and awake for the coming of the Lord.

In this season we look forward to our Lord coming as a child, but we are also reminded of Jesus' second coming – the focus of the traditional Advent themes of heaven, hell, death and judgement. So, we need to remember that we may also be called to account for ourselves sooner than we think. Jesus calls us to be strong and resolute in living in the way that he shows us. We will be celebrating his birth but, at the same time, sharing in the struggle for liberation from sin, from death and disease, from ignorance and despair, our own and that of others. This is the work he left us to do, remaining faithful through tribulations and aiding others in theirs.

Christ foresaw this. So hold fast and have confidence. When you stand before Christ, he will know your sacrifices. Your liberation and that of the world is at hand, Christ's hand, in which we will be safe.