

## Sermon 2 December 2018 Advent

### Sunday

#### Luke 21:25-36

The word *Advent* is derived from the Latin word *Adventus*, meaning ‘coming’. In everyday English, advent means the impending arrival of someone or something important. Many, many years ago, the Advent season in the Christian calendar referred to the coming of Christ, not the first coming in the manger at Bethlehem, but his second coming, arriving on clouds in great glory. Hence the reference in our gospel reading, ‘Then everyone will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds with power and great glory.’

Today, however, the season of Advent lasts for four Sundays leading up to Christmas and looks ahead to the arrival of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. It is not so much a time of celebration as a time of preparation. In that sense, there are similarities with the season of Lent. In Lent we prepare ourselves for the death and resurrection of Jesus, the season of Easter. It is a time of repentance, a time when we take stock of our spiritual well-being.

Advent is quite similar in that it is a time when we need to draw our attention away from the distractions of the so-called silly season in order to focus on something far more meaningful and important. In our gospel reading Jesus puts it like this, *‘Watch out! Don’t let me find you living in careless ease and drunkenness, and filled with the worries of this life.’* Luke 21:34. There is a circus coming to town! It is a circus – the shopping accompanied by the constant coaxing to spend, spend, spend, the social hurly-burly, the over-indulgence, and all this exacerbated by the need to have everything wrapped up by Christmas in preparation for the summer break. I will say more on the circus theme shortly.

The idea of reviewing where we are in our relationship with God, of looking for direction, is very much part of Advent. Underpinning any regeneration of a relationship has to be repentance, in this case, ‘I am sorry, God.’ In the Psalm set down for today, Psalm 25, the psalmist says, *‘Turn to me and have mercy on me, for I am alone and in distress.’* Lent is also a time for repentance, which is why purple is the liturgical colour for both seasons. Purple represents, amongst other

things, repentance.

I find it interesting that Jesus uses the analogy of the fig tree in this instance. Israel is well-known for its figs and this is not the first time the fig tree makes an appearance as an illustration. In this case, Jesus makes the point that the arrival of leaves on the fig tree is a sign that summer is on its way, and that in the same way, people were to look out for signs that the Son of God was about to appear again. This is why Advent was previously used to refer to the Second Coming. But in today's context we are to look for signs of the initial advent of the Son of Man, the birth of Christ. As Christmas is the name given to this season, you could say the signs are impossible not to see. You just have to walk into your local shopping centre.

But these are actually not the signs we should be looking for, believe it or not. Firstly, referring to the fig tree. Right now, the first figs are just making their appearance on the fig trees. How appropriate they should be appearing right now. It's almost as though Jesus used this analogy with us in mind. So if you have a fig tree, check out the little figs and think of Advent!

But we can do more than check out the fig trees. We can begin by checking out ourselves in terms of our spiritual well-being. Is there sign of life there? I do hope so. But if we are to really benefit from this time of Advent, followed by Christmas, then we need to follow the advice of Jesus, to turn our focus away from the hurly-burly of this time of the year, the festivities and the stress, and focus on our relationships. By that, I mean our relationships with those around us, our relationship with ourselves, and most importantly of all, our relationship with God and his Son, Jesus. I want to put it into the context of a circus, as I referred to earlier, and I want to frame it with a story.

Many, many years ago a little boy lived far out in the country. He had reached the age of twelve and had never seen a circus. You could imagine his excitement when one day a poster went up at school announcing that on the next Saturday a circus was coming to town. He ran home and asked his dad, 'Dad, can I go?' Although the family was poor, the father sensed how important this was to the boy. "If you do your Saturday chores ahead of time, I will see that you have the money to go", he said.

Come Saturday morning, the chores were done and the little boy stood looking up expectantly at his father. His father reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill, gave it to him and sent him on his way.

The boy ran all the way to the town. As he neared the outskirts of the town he noticed people lining the streets and he worked his way through the crowd until he could see what was happening. Lo and behold, it was the approaching spectacle of a circus parade.

The parade was the grandest thing the boy had ever seen. Caged animals snarled as they passed by, bands played rousing music, acrobats performed while flags and ribbons swirled overhead. Finally, after everything had passed, the traditional circus clown, with floppy shoes, baggy pants and a brightly painted face brought up the rear. As the clown passed by the little boy, he reached into his pocket and took out the dollar bill. Handing the money to the clown, the boy then turned around and went home.

What had happened? The boy thought he had seen the circus when he had only seen the parade.

The hurly-burly of the next three weeks is just the parade. The main event is celebrated at Christmas. If we focus on the parade, we miss out on the main event. We are not prepared. If we focus on the hurly-burly, we are not in a position to get our monies worth at Christmas. Use these next three weeks appropriately and we will be in a position to derive the maximum benefit from the real Christmas message. When we come to celebrate the arrival of Jesus, let's make it personal. Let's make sure we are ready to receive him into our hearts and our lives. Then and only then, can we say that we have observed Advent in the way it should be observed.