

Advent Sunday 29 November 2020

Mark 13:24-37

Today is Advent Sunday. Advent means 'coming', or 'the arrival of a notable person or thing.' Well, in our Christian context it doesn't take rocket science to work out who that notable person is. Today marks the beginning of the four weeks leading up to Christmas when we herald the birth of Christ; when we celebrate the arrival of someone more than notable, someone who changed the world.

It is a time when we prepare ourselves for this momentous celebration. The point I want to focus on is that it is not only the coming of Christ into the world that we celebrate, but equally so, we should be celebrating the coming of Christ into our lives, and that calls for some degree of preparation. I will come back to that in a minute.

This passage has shades of the Book of Revelation; in other words, it is quite apocalyptic. Jesus talks about horrible days ahead but they will end and, in fact, they herald the coming of the Son of Man. At first glance, this could well be about the Second Coming, but in actual fact the popular viewpoint is that it is really about two things – his death and also the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, an event in itself which in many ways marked the end of the Jewish way of life, as they knew it.

It is what happens next that is important. Jesus makes his appearance, not as a man living amongst his fellow human beings, but as the Son of God in all his glory and majesty; not as an earthly being but as a heavenly power working with God. And he tells us that we need to be prepared because one day we will come face to face with them both, and at that point we will have to answer to them both. Can we be confident that we can hold our heads up high, knowing that we deserve to be welcomed with open arms into their company?

So how do we prepare? Well, it begins here and now. It begins firstly, by welcoming Christ into our lives here and now, and most importantly, conducting ourselves in a Christ-like manner. In other words, living a life of kindness and generosity. Let me tell you a true story.

One stormy night many years ago, an elderly man and his wife entered the lobby of a small hotel in Philadelphia, USA. Trying to get out of the rain, the couple approached the front desk hoping to get some shelter for the night. 'Could you possibly give us a room here?' the husband asked.

The clerk, a friendly young man with a winning smile, looked at the couple and explained that there were three conventions in town. 'All of our rooms are taken,' he said, 'but I can't send a nice couple like you out into the rain at this late hour. Would you perhaps be willing to sleep in my room? It's not exactly a suite, but it will be good enough to make you folks comfortable for the night.'

When the couple declined, the young man pressed on. 'Don't worry about me, I'll make our just fine,' he said. So the couple agreed.

As he paid the bill the next morning, the elderly man said the clerk, 'You are the kind of manager who should be the boss of the best hotel. Maybe one day I will build one for you.'

The clerk looked at them and smiled, and all three of them had a good laugh.

Two years passed. The clerk had almost forgotten the incident when he received a letter from the elderly man. It recalled the stormy night and enclosed a round-trip ticket to New York, asking the young man to pay them a visit.

The man met him in New York, and led him to the corner of Fifth Avenue and 34th Street. He pointed to a great new building there, a pale reddish stone, with turrets thrusting up into the sky. 'That,' said the elderly man, 'is the hotel I have just built and I would like you to manage it.'

'You must be joking,' the young man said. With a big smile, the older man replied, "I can assure you I'm not.' His name was William Waldorf-Aster, and that magnificent structure was the original Waldorf-Aster Hotel. The young clerk who became its first manager was George C. Boldt.

Jesus said, 'You never know when the time will come, so you need to be prepared.' Today we begin preparation for the celebration of Christ's coming into our world. May that also be a celebration of Christ coming into our lives. We do that through living, as much as possible, a life that embraces the values of Christ and a faith in Christ.

Rev Warner Wilder