

Sermon Advent Sunday 2023

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 Gospel 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. *'For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or the evil we have done.'* 2 Corinthians 5:10. 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. It's very difficult to get away from this theme, isn't it? As I said last week, it lies at the heart of what it means to be a follower, a disciple of Christ, and if we are to reap the rewards of dwelling in the presence of God, this is precisely what we have to do. 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 be just fine.' So the couple agreed.

The next morning, the elderly man said to 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.

How does this story relate to Advent? Whether it is a case of Christ literally reappearing in our lives or celebrating his initial coming into our world all those years ago, we need to be prepared, and the most effective way to prepare is to ensure that our lives are, as much as possible, Christ-like. As I said, that means living a life of kindness and generosity. As a young man, George C. Boldt did just that and look what happened. His life was transformed.

There are certain things in life that we should never put off until tomorrow, because we don't know for sure whether tomorrow will come for us. The big question that the Church puts before us on this First Sunday of Advent is: How prepared are we to welcome Christ?

There is the story of an elderly woman who used to sweep and clean her house each night before she went to bed. One night her husband said to her, 'Honey, you're very tired tonight. Why don't you sweep and clean the house in the morning? No one's going to visit us in the middle of the night.'

His wife replied, 'My dear, Jesus may come in the middle of the night. He may come for you or he may come for me. In any event, I don't want him to enter a dirty house.'

The elderly woman's point is in keeping with the spirit of Advent, especially this First Sunday of Advent.

I finish by quoting from our first reading: *'So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time.'* Galatians 6:9

What could be more of a blessing than a firm relationship with Christ, and as I said last week, we meet him when we care for others. In following his commandment to love one another, in putting into practice everything he stood for and teaches us, we encounter Christ.

Christmas, along with Easter, one of the two great festivals of our Christian year, is a time, or should I say, an opportunity to strengthen that relationship. So, as we look ahead, as we prepare for that special occasion, let us make sure we prepare properly and appropriately, and we do that through what we do for others, not ourselves. In a sense, that is quite ironic. In the normal course of events, preparing for a major occasion would involve focussing on our own personal physical and mental well-being. Think of an All Black preparing/training for the World Cup! Or a pianist preparing/training for a concert. But in our Christian world, that preparation is consummated, not through focussing on our own needs, but rather the needs of others.

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