

Sermon Advent Sunday 2024

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 Luke 21:25-36

Today is Advent Sunday which marks the beginning of the countdown to Christmas. It is a time when we start to prepare ourselves for this extremely important time, important in more ways than one. The focus of this preparation will vary for all of us. For some, and hopefully for the majority of you gathered here in this church, that focus will be on the birth of the most influential, controversial, celebrated and remarkable person who has ever lived, Jesus Christ. It is a time when we honour and commemorate God's arrival on earth in human form.

But for many the focus of this preparation will be on other matters, namely holidays and also the buying of gifts, an exercise which has developed into a huge industry. Thousands and thousands of dollars are spent, not just on the buying of goods themselves, but also on the promotion and encouragement to buy.

It is admirable to buy presents, just as it is enjoyable to receive them, but I wonder if it doesn't get a tad out of hand, if we actually lose sight of what giving is all about. It is good to be generous, it is part of the Christian ethic. But I want to make three points. Firstly, let's make sure we practise this Christian ethic of giving all year round and not just at Christmas when we get caught up in the festive spirit.

Secondly, let's remember that as we spend countless dollars on friends and family, that there are many others who desperately need money spent on them but who are invariably forgotten in the orgy of spending that takes place.

And thirdly, that when we talk about giving, it doesn't have to be in dollar terms. There are some channels of giving on which a monetary value cannot be put, but their value is immeasurable. I am talking about the giving of time, of giving consideration and thoughtfulness, of giving of ourselves. These are priceless gifts. They are meaningful, they carry an explicit message of love and care. If you want to effect the true spirit of Advent, make a point of giving your time to others.

There's the story of a missionary teaching in Africa who had been telling his African students how Christians, as an expression of their joy, gave each other presents on Christ's birthday. On Christmas morning, one of the locals brought the missionary a seashell of lustrous beauty. When asked where he had discovered such an extraordinary shell, the man told how he had walked many miles to a certain bay, the only spot where such shells could be found. 'I think it is wonderful of you to travel so far to get this lovely gift for me,' the teacher said. With a big smile, the man replied, 'Long walk part of gift.'

In the end, giving should be part of our DNA as Christians, or simply as good people. Conrad Hilton, American hotel tycoon and himself a philanthropist, said, '*Charity is a supreme virtue, and the great channel through which the mercy of God is passed on to mankind.*' Mahatma Ghandi made an interesting observation when he said, '*The simplest acts of kindness are by far more powerful than a thousand heads bowing in prayer.*' Food for thought.

I now want to move on to the 'being prepared' aspect of Advent, which I alluded to at beginning of my sermon. The word *Advent* means 'coming.' The word underscores Advent's purpose. It's to make ready for the coming of Jesus. Now, this can be taken in two ways. Firstly, it can be taken as being prepared for the second coming of Christ, a time which is widely predicted will be pre-empted by widespread apocalyptic upheavals. I quote from our gospel reading: '*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*' There has been speculation over the years in some quarters that the Second Coming will take place in the Middle East, which makes

sense for two reasons. Firstly, because that is where Jesus, of course, lived and ministered, and secondly, because with relation to an apocalyptic upheaval, the Middle East is something of a powder keg with the potential to explode at any time.

However, the odds are that this won't happen in the next four weeks, and so how is Advent relevant and pertinent to us today as we look ahead to Christmas? Firstly, let us remind ourselves that we are preparing to celebrate a momentous occasion, a birth of someone who impacted on the world in a way that no other person has managed to, not to mention the lives of millions of people who associate themselves with his name, Jesus Christ. So how do we prepare?

Perhaps the ancient Roman god, Janus, for whom the month of January is named, can give us a pointer. He is depicted as having two faces. One face looks backward into the past and one face looks forward to the future.

So we begin by looking back to the past year and we ask ourselves a few searching questions. Has my prayer life been what it should have been? Has my reading, Bible or otherwise spiritual, been what it should have been? Have I tended to the needs of others sufficiently? Have I harboured resentments? Have I attended church religiously? The list could go on.

Now, it is my guess that for the majority of us, the answer to many of those questions would tend towards the negative. Certainly would for me. And so we ask ourselves, 'So, what am I going to do about that?' Well, now the second face of Janus come into play. As we look ahead, we determine to adjust our priorities. As we look ahead to this highly significant celebration, we prepare; we make sure that amidst the busyness of these next few weeks, it doesn't just creep on us and we find ourselves not in an appropriate space or frame of mind to absorb and honour this pivotal occasion.

I have had sitting on a table in my office at home, a book on prayer I bought many weeks ago. I have been putting off reading it because I am supposedly too busy. In other words, I have had other priorities, because that's what 'being too busy' means. Yesterday, I picked it up and started reading it, and my initial reaction was, 'Why on earth didn't I begin reading this before now? This is tremendous stuff!' Then I thought, 'Well, what better time to be reading it than Advent!'

Many years ago, the Dallas Morning News ran a story about a house that burned down and five people perished. What made the story especially tragic is that Sonny Simpson, the owner, had been planning for four weeks to install a smoke alarm. He told reporters that it was something he kept putting off because he was too busy with other things. In other words, he had other priorities.

Let us all ensure that over the next four weeks we have our priorities right so that when the time comes, we can be in the right frame of mind to do justice to the spiritual significance of Christmas. Let us make sure we prepare so that we can absorb and be consumed with the valid spirit of Christmas; so that we can digest and enjoy the valid meaning of Christmas.

I close with Paul's words from our first reading: *'And 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.'*