

'Stay Alert'. Sarah Penfold

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13>24-end

Sometimes it can be hard to see that there is any immediate relevance of the day's Gospel passage to our own situation. Today's in contrast is up there and in your face. 'Stay alert'. We have seen it on government news briefings, posters, in the news and much ridiculed in satire. I'm not sure that the Prime Minister will appreciate my thanks for his help with my sermon. But 'thank you anyway Mr Johnson'.

The relevance extends beyond that slogan. We read in verse 24 of unprecedented times:

'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from the sky,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken'.

Our present times are not that extreme but the idea that things we had taken for granted may not be so any more is certainly topical. In times of trouble it is human nature to cling to each other – but that is contrary to social distancing. For some the idea that it is possible to celebrate Christmas without the company of other family members is impossible – but this year it may be illegal. For many people it feels as though the sun has darkened. Jesus told his listeners of changes to come – almost certainly a prediction of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem that happened about 40 years later. But it can also be read as a prediction of the second coming of Christ – at a time and in a manner that no one knows.

We are at the start of Advent. The season in which we prepare ourselves to celebrate the first coming of Christ. Predicted by the prophets, watched out for by the Jews. But still Christ slipped into the world unnoticed by anyone apart from his parents and a group of incredulous shepherds. Stay alert.

'Watch for the signs', we are told. But do we know what the signs are that we should be looking for? The Gospel passage alludes to watching for the buds on the fig tree as a sign that summer is coming. What should we be looking for the signs of? It is unlikely that we will ever see signs quite so blatant as the star that the wise men followed, but then it is unlikely that any of us will be part of

the story of the second coming of Christ. Or are we? Perhaps we are already part of that story.

The parable at the end of the passage is about the household of a man who has gone away. In his absence they all have their duties to perform. We are made especially aware of the duty of the gatekeeper to keep watch – for the master's return, and for undesirable people trying to enter the property. But any one of the servants, failing to fulfil their duties could be caught out by the master returning unexpectedly. For them the signs that they should watch for may not be a cloud of dust on the horizon signifying the approach of horses, but weeds in the courtyard, an empty shelf in a storeroom, or a fellow servant who appears unwell.

The household can be compared to the disciples left behind to continue and grow the church after Christ's ascension. To continue the Church up to the time of Christ's second coming. We aspire to be part of that household every bit as much as the first disciples and therefore each have a role to play. So what should we be alert to?

There are signs everywhere to lead us to act in God's ways. Perhaps not as clear as the sign of the dove with an olive branch in its beak that God gave to Noah as the flood retreated, but news of the development of an effective covid vaccine has parallels. We can be alert to the signs of people's needs. Perhaps in the middle of a conversation an odd word that indicates the fragility of the person we are talking to – not a cry for help, just a whisper, but equally demonstrating a need that we may be able to fulfil. And the most effective form of fulfilment may be just to be there, to listen and to support. Or a sign to alert us to injustice, to our own innate prejudices, to situations nearby or far away.

Signs can come from other places as well. Last Sunday the collect for Christ the King included:

'Hear the call of Christ the King and follow in his service'.

So different but so similar to words from the song Fandabidozzie that we sang at Messy Church the day before which describes God as the 'boss of our lives'.

As well as the signs we are looking and listening for there are signs that we can give. Please join in with the Shirley Churches Together initiative and put a star in your window as a sign of hope during Advent. It doesn't need to be wildly artistic. Just the back of a cereal box covered in cooking foil is perfect. And join

the parish prayer chain to encourage each other as we pray for other households in the congregation and the people in the roads that they live in.

We can all be alert to the need for hope at this time and share a sign of it. To end I can find no better reminder of the need to remain alert, to the will of God, to the needs of our neighbours and to our duty as citizens than to quote one of the Government's medical advisors on one of the daily briefings. 'I said to my Mum, "You must be ready and when they call you to be vaccinated you must go"'. Jesus tells us, 'You must be ready and when you are called to serve you must go'.

And last week's sermon from Bishop Anne

It would have been great to be with you in person this Sunday, but I'm glad at least to have this opportunity to share with you.

This year my husband Steve and I have done a lot of walking – about the one activity that thankfully we're still able to do as the Covid-19 restrictions continue. We've explored lots of local destinations, including the wonderful Clent Hills noted as an area of outstanding natural beauty. The first time we went was in the summer but the day turned out to be one of thick low cloud. As we reached one of the vantage points from which we were told on a clear day you can see right across to the Malvern Hills, the Long Mynd, and further beyond to the Black Mountains of Wales, all we could see was a grey misty landscape below us. The other weekend we decided to return. This time it was a crisp, bright, Autumn day. The views from the top were exhilarating! A vast and beautiful expanse of horizon opened before us - an horizon full of promise.

Today is Christ the King Sunday and the last Sunday of the church's liturgical year. It's a day on which we're invited to lift up our eyes to the glorious horizon of our faith, to catch a vision of what it means for Christ to be King. It's an horizon that will come to mean ever more to us as we enter the darkness and waiting of Advent, and as we hear again through scripture the longings of patriarchs and prophets who peering through the gloom of distant centuries saw ahead to the promise of the Christ child.

This year the season of Advent will perhaps match our mood more than ever as we travel not just through the long dark days of winter but through the dark days of Coronavirus. The news of various vaccines may offer a glimmer of light

on the horizon, but in the meantime we may feel ourselves to be enveloped still in clouds of thick gloom. We may have a sense of horizons closing down upon us not opening up. As human beings we need more than food and water to live by, we need hope. And hope is a thing of horizons. If we ever needed the message of hope and a future that Christ the King Sunday brings us – it's this year!

So what is the great hope and future of which Christ the King Sunday speaks? It's a celebration of the risen, ascended Christ crowned amidst the assembly of the saints in heaven, and a celebration anticipating his return to earth as judge – one of the themes which Advent will continue. Is that something to celebrate? Christ crowned in heaven and coming as judge? Is that a theme to be comforted by in troubled times? And also how helpful in our day and age is the language of 'King' you may be wondering? We may still have a monarchy in this country but that isn't where real political power any longer lies. The monarchy in the shape of our present Queen continues to serve the nation faithfully and retains much devotion and loyalty. It's been interesting to see how she's played a unifying role in the midst of the current national crisis. But wonderful as our Queen is, she isn't able to bring the kind of hope or shaping of the future we might long for.

If we go back to ancient monarchs, including the biblical kings of Israel, we see they were rather different. They made wars, made decrees, often exercised absolute rule and sat on thrones making absolute judgements – sometimes wise, often harsh. Whilst understanding Christ as a king by the measure of modern-day royalty might rob him of *real* power, viewing him as one of these kings of old doesn't inspire hope either! Neither does it accord with the picture of Jesus that the Gospel writers give us. "Are you a king?" asks Pilate of Jesus as he looks upon a figure that is vulnerable, stripped, hands bound, head crowned – but not with gold, rather with a crown of thorns. It was no wonder that Pilate needed to ask the question.

At Christmas we'll be celebrating Christ the new-born king and recalling that he is a king of David's line. David was the celebrated shepherd-king whom God called from out the sheepfold to be a king after God's own heart. Jesus takes up this imagery. He takes on the mantle of the good shepherd that the prophet Ezekiel speaks of in our first reading. He is a shepherd who will seek out and rescue his sheep "from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness".

Ezekiel goes on to describe the horizon of hope to which God will lead his beloved flock: “I will bring them ... into their own land, ... I will feed them with good pasture, ... I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, ... I will feed them with justice”.

The prophet also has some straight-talking words for those who do not long for justice but have been like animals that pushed at others with flank and shoulder, who butted all the weak animals with their horns. These, he says, will be judged. It's clear that the judgement that the good shepherd-king brings, will be judgement on all that is wrong in our world and which sets itself against goodness and justice. Whether the expectation of that judgement is something to bring comfort or something to be feared, rather depends on which side you're on.

In our Gospel reading too Jesus says there is judgment to come – judgement of the nations. He describes how the Son of Man will sit on a throne like a king as all the nations gather before him, and then how like a shepherd he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Again, this is judgement in the favour of goodness and justice.

The Son of Man speaks first to those who have lived lives of compassion and mercy, those who fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, clothed the poor and naked, took care of the sick, who visited those in prison. When they did these things, unbeknown to them they were also tending to Christ. It is these who will inherit the kingdom over which God's justice rules. It is these who can look to the horizon of God's kingdom with hope. Turning next to those who did not live in this way of compassion and mercy, the Son of Man has stern words. They have rejected the goodness and justice of God's kingdom and so have no share in it.

When we speak of Christ the King, it is this kind of king of which we speak, the shepherd-king, and it is this kind of kingdom over which he rules – a kingdom proclaimed in the exultant cry of Mary's magnificat, which rejoices in the God who scatters the proud, who puts down the mighty from their thrones, who exalts the humble and meek; who feeds the hungry with good things, and shows no favouritism to the rich or powerful. Christ's kingdom is of a rather different nature to the kingdoms of the world, and yet we are to be in no doubt that there is no higher authority on earth than Christ's.

If as we look at our world right now we see rather too much darkness, danger, misuse of power, then this Sunday points us to Christ's ultimate reign, to a

kingdom where we are assured that justice, life, goodness have the last word, and that this is our future - no matter how dark the present. Christ the King Sunday is a horizon-changing moment. But if it all seems a bit distant and “pie in the sky”, let’s be reminded that this is not just about a *future* hope, it’s about hope alive amongst us now because Jesus is alive amongst us now, and as Jesus himself declares, the kingdom of God is already amongst us now.

How do we live more and more in the light and hope of this kingdom? An early Church Father of the 4th century, John Chrysostom, wrote - “find the door of your heart, you will discover it is the door of the Kingdom of God”. Christ’s domain is over hearts and minds. As we allow his rule into our hearts and minds, not only will we know the hope and horizon of his kingdom, but our own lives will become instruments of that kingdom. This is what Christ calls his church to at this time, to be those who through Christ’s transforming power at work in us, in turn bring hope and comfort to the communities we serve as we keep on doing good, living in Christ’s way of compassion and mercy

When we feel horizons are closing over us, we can lose hope. When we sense horizons opening up, hope is restored, life and joy are restored. And so my prayer for us all this coming Advent, is St Paul’s prayer for the church in Ephesians 1, which is also offered as a scripture for today: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you”. It is a hope that cannot be extinguished.