

Shirehampton Methodist Church

Penpole Avenue, Shirehampton. BS11 0DY

11am Sunday 1 December 2024

Lectionary:

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalms 25:1-10

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

Sermon

As we enter the season of advent our readings remind us that this is a season to prepare, but that we should always be prepared for Jesus.

Our Jeremiah reading reminds us of the promise of God to their people, that the time is coming when a righteous branch will spring from the house of David and execute justice and righteousness. As we prepare for Christmas, we declare that it is our belief that this promise was fulfilled in the incarnation – through God becoming human in the person of Jesus and bringing God’s declaration of the need for Justice and Righteousness. Included in this is the restoration of the close relationship between God and people that was illustrated in God’s closeness to David, and which is possible for us through Jesus.

In the gospel reading, Luke recounts some of the direct teaching of Jesus.

There is something of the supernatural in the warning that there will be signs to warn us when the Son of Man is due to return. It is traditional to take this passage as Jesus warning about the end times – that time when it was hoped Jesus would return in power and glory – “coming in a cloud” reminding us of last week’s lectionary in Daniel where one comes “as a Son of Man”.

The early church believed that Jesus’ return was imminent, and this belief is reflected in Luke’s writing here.

The comparison with a fig tree suggests that just as we can recognise the seasons of the earth, and recognise that when the trees start to sprout leaves, we know the summer is coming, so it is that we can see the kingdom of God is near.

As we look at the state of our world, we see so many challenging things;

- While no one can condone the actions of Hamas in killing so many Israelis in their October bombing, there is similarly nothing to justify the reaction of the Israeli state indiscriminately killing those they have previously oppressed – freely acknowledging that their aim is to wipe out a specific group of people. Anyone may claim a right to self defence, but where does one group’s self defence become unjustified aggression to another? And it is vitally important to differentiate between the secular Israeli state (and the actions of their Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – who the International Criminal Court has issued

an arrest warrant on charges of war crimes) and the Jewish people as a whole. Despite what it claims the ICC's issuing of warrants, is NOT antisemitic. Netanyahu is not being criticised for being Jewish, rather it is for his actions – which would be wrong whoever committed them – and it is important to note that the ICC also condemned Mohammed Deif of Hamas (although Israel says he has already been killed by one of their air strikes on Gaze in July).

- The war in Ukraine, triggered by the unlawful actions of President Putin invading a sovereign state, is escalating. Russia, and much of the world, expected that Ukraine would fold quickly and easily when faced with the massive power of Russia – and yet somehow the passion of the Ukrainian people has stood up to this tyranny. But now they have had permission to use missiles provided by Britain and the US to directly attack targets within Russia's sovereign boundaries. An understandable reaction, but one that further provokes the nuclear power of Russia who are threatening world ending repercussions...
- Closer to home we have witnessed the arguably rare occurrence of a civilised debate in parliament as to whether or not someone with a limited life expectancy might be assisted to end their life at a time of their choosing. I listened to the debate, I don't think I heard any 'new' arguments on either side, but it was good to see respectful discussion without the usual antagonism and point scoring. Some may be pleased with the outcome, others will be distraught – had the vote gone the other way there would still have been some pleased and some distraught, just different groups. What is critical now is for all sides to work together to come to an outcome that all can live (or die!) with.
- On a lesser topic, in some ways, we've seen this week a TV presenter pilloried over behaviours which are reprehensible as they are cited, but the danger is that the individual has now been found guilty in the court of public opinion – without any consideration of the natural justice presumption of innocence. If the matter were to end up in court I doubt a safe conviction could now be achieved because the story is so tainted – with the result there can be little chance of *real* justice for those impacted by these alleged behaviours.
- Likewise the abuse of power by Mohamed Al Fayed is being portrayed as potentially greater than the alleged crimes of Jimmy Saville – but again the court of public opinion has found him guilty without due process of law – although it seems there may be others still living who might have to face legal action. The challenge, as with Greg Wallace, being that the defence already have good grounds to claim that a fair trial will be impossible – and therefore the cases could be dismissed before they start.

So what does all of this have to do with Advent?

Luke points out that we need to be on our guard not to focus too much on these trials and tribulations of life. We need to ensure that we are ready and fit to face the real trial when we stand before the Son of Man. This is the same advice we are given when Jesus advises we not look too closely at the speck in another's eye but miss the log in our own. This is supported by Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7 not to judge others, because we also will be judged. Lack of humility and grace in how we perceive others leads us to wrongly declare one person's righteousness worthy and another person unworthy merely based on our assumptions. To judge in this way is to assume authority over others that God has not given. In the end, God will judge those who judge in this way.

So what does all of this have to do with Advent?

Well Advent is preparation to mark and celebrate what God has already done, to mark and remember the wonder of Christmas, but the implication of this is that we must also be prepared to listen to the baby of Bethlehem when as the adult Jesus he tells us how we should live our lives – to bring Good News to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

One has to wonder if Mary really knew what she was bringing into the world...

PENTATONIX

AMEN