

**Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**

Historically Advent has been a time for contemplation and self-evaluation, preparation for Jesus' birth and the beginning of a period of time when God actually walked on earth and conversed with people like us. So it is a time of great joy but also of great questioning. The readings for Advent this year sound a more joyous note than last year, when we began Advent by crying to God to rend the heavens and come among us. This year, the tone is set by the opening words from Jeremiah, "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will perform that good thing which I have promised". The initiative lies with God, and salvation and safety are promised when God acts. Even amid the sombre Gospel words from Jesus, there is still the encouragement to lift up our heads because our redemption is drawing near. It's also a time that has inspired some of the greatest music created by people of faith.

One of the best-known and one of my favourite Christmas carols is 'Joy to the World'. It flows at a spirited tempo; it's hard not to smile while singing it. It rejoices in the birth of Jesus and his effect on the world, promising hope and justice. One of my favourite lines is "Let every heart prepare him room." I think of advent as a time for watching and preparing, for looking for the signs which Jesus speaks of in the Gospel.

When my children were younger one of the signs that they looked for was their Advent calendar. Every year about this time my son and daughter were given a new Advent calendar. It was usually a beautiful nativity picture with little numbered doors, one for each day of Advent. Each day they would open a door on the calendar. Behind the door was a Bible verse, part of the Christmas story, or a picture. Some years there were chocolates too. Each door they opened was a sign Christmas was getting closer. They were counting down the days. That's what Advent was about.

I sometimes wish Advent was as simple and easy as opening a door on the calendar, eating a piece of chocolate, and knowing that Christmas is one day closer. But it's not. You and I both know the world is not that simple and life is not that easy. Maybe that's why every year on this day, the First Sunday of Advent, we always hear a gospel text that seems to describe the end of the world and the signs that will accompany that ending. This is not just a story about Jesus and his disciples. This is your story and my story. We experience it in our lives.

We see it in our world. And today the Church declares it to be the good news of Christ.

“There shall be signs,” Jesus said. More than ever our world needs to see the signs. The longer we live, the more we see and experience, the more we realise how necessary those signs are. We want to be reminded that the signs are there.

Jesus says if we look we’ll see the signs everywhere; in the sun, the moon, the stars; in the distress among earth’s nations; and in the roaring of the sea and its waves. We can see them today in the pictures of refugees and in the world’s violence. They’re everywhere and they are not hard to spot. They are, however, too easily and quickly misunderstood and misused.

“There shall be signs” are words of hope and reassurance but far too often they are heard as words of warning and threat. And when they are, the signs are used to predict a future of impending doom and loss. They become indicators that the world will end and you better shape up or God is going to get you. Our misunderstanding of the signs pushes us further into the darkness and deeper into fear. Our misuse of the signs blinds us to the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory and perhaps prevent us preparing room in hearts for him.

“There will be signs” are not Jesus’ words of warning and threats. He never says these are the signs that the end of the world has come. Instead, he says that when we see the signs we are to stand up, raise our heads, and know that help is on the way; our redemption, our healing, our Saviour have drawn near.

The signs are not a reason to hang our heads in despair or shrink from life. That we can see the signs in our lives and world means that the circumstances we face and the events that happen contain and reveal the promise of Christ’s coming. The signs are our hope and reassurance that God has not abandoned us, that God notices us, that God cares, comes to, and participates in our life’s circumstances.

Jesus’ parable of the fig tree teaches us how to read the signs. The Advent signs are as ordinary and common as a fig tree sprouting leaves. We see the leaves and we know something is happening. Summer is already near. It’s a new season, with new life, new growth, new fruit. That is the promise and good news of the Advent signs. And yet that promise, that good news, is fulfilled not apart from but in and through the reality of our life’s circumstances and our world’s events, no matter how difficult or tragic they may be. In Advent, we are waiting

for God's arrival, so our task is to make sure we will recognise him when he comes.

In advent we rejoice and we question ourselves. In advent, these feelings mix together and push the envelope of our spiritual hearts. We make room for the Saviour of all people. And as Christians, we know that what seems uncomfortable or worrisome always transforms to joy in the sure knowledge that through Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, we shall experience eternal life and joy beyond measure.

The birth of any child is a miracle; it's God's blessing in our lives, and our response to it makes it the eternal miracle that speaks of a greater love than we can know. The birth of Jesus Christ, however, was one of the most powerful moments in all of time, transcending time as we measure it, transforming love for all eternity, and expanding our hearts beyond human measure to meet the necessity of experiencing God on earth. So, we return to my favourite Carol,

Let all the earth rejoice!  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing!  
And heaven and nature sing!  
And heaven and nature sing!

Let us pray: Heavenly Father as we watch and wait this Advent help us to prepare anew room in our hearts for the coming of the Christ child so that we may experience fully the joy and peace of knowing your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.