

Sunday 27 November 2022 – Zoom Reflection by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Gospel Reading: Matthew 24:36-44)

Happy New Year

Good morning. Or should I say: Happy New Year!

Before you think I've gone mad, I had better point out that today is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the season of Advent, which marks the beginning, also, of the Liturgical Year or, to put it another way, it is the Church's New Year. So, once again, Happy New Year, everyone!

Advent also means that the countdown to Christmas has officially started. The nights are drawing in; the street decorations are going up and the supermarket chains have launched their eagerly awaited seasonal TV advertisements (a little more restrained this year, I think). And around Hertford, the congregations of St Andrew's and St Mary's have been distributing Christmas cards to homes in the area with the times of the Christmas church services. Posters for our Beer & Carols event on 17 December have been printed.

Traditionally, Advent is a time of preparation and penitence. Like lent. As Lent is a period of preparation for Easter, Advent is a time of preparing for Christmas. Not just shopping, ordering things online, baking and partying but preparing ourselves spiritually.

We are approaching a time of celebration because God loves us so much that he was prepared to send his only son to live a human life so that we could be forgiven for our sins. By becoming what we are, Jesus enables us to

become what he is. If you find this quite mysterious, don't worry. Accepting and living with mystery is part of the Christian Faith.

It's also mysterious that the Church of England prescribes today's gospel reading on Advent Sunday. In today's passage from Matthew, we hear what seems to be a warning: stay awake, keep alert, unexpected things are going to happen. In a modern context, this is not about Father Christmas popping down the chimney. Instead, it suggests that Advent is more about spiritual preparation for the big future than just preparation for Christmas alone. There is a bigger picture. It's called the return of Christ, or the Second Coming.

Matthew's gospel was written around 30 years after the life of Christ. It was a tumultuous period of history and Jesus could also be incorporating into his story a foretelling of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans in AD70. Neither Jews or Christians at the time were expecting this and, being a closet historian, I sometimes take this event as symbolic, like us coming up against something in our lives that seems, and maybe is, more powerful than us. In the case of Jerusalem, the people were up against the Roman Empire. In our lives it could be something quite small-scale by comparison but also very threatening and a distraction that pulls us away from God.

So, today's reading is a reminder that Christ is returning. We don't know when exactly but we had better be on our best behaviour – we had better be good Christians – all the time so that we don't get caught unawares.

It may be a warning, but this passage shouldn't take away any of the hope of Advent or the joy that we feel in the run-up to Christmas. In fact, maybe it's an invitation to merge our fears with our hopes.

When our children were young, I remember visiting their primary school for the annual Nativity play. In one of the classrooms was a Christmas tree on which the children of the class had hung cardboard baubles where they had written their Christmas wishes. Most were for the usual presents – bikes,

pets, dolls, that sort of thing, but one was different. One little girl had written: *I hope my Daddy gets better again*. Obviously, she was combining her joy of Christmas with her fear.



If Advent applies to God's promise of sending Jesus, to live with us and die for us, then it will apply to all his other promises, too. What promises has God whispered to you as you are praying? What personal promises has he put in your hearts? What are you longing for, what are you waiting to see born? It could be small or big – to have a sense of peace, to know more love, for someone's healing, for friends and family.

God is faithful to us. So, let's keep awake, hanging on to his promises, and trust him this Advent. He is, after all, our hope.

Heavenly Father, we long to feel your peace this Advent; to be a voice of hope to our family, friends and communities. Please come to us, Holy Spirit, and fill our hearts with your Advent hope. Amen

(With inspiration from Jane Ward-Hall, 2016)