

## **Advent Sunday 27 November 2022**

### **Isaiah 2. 1-5; Matthew 24. 36-44**

Listening to the well-known reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning I find myself almost choking in bewilderment: “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”. What do we find in our world at the moment ? Two predominantly Christian nations have indeed lifted up their swords against other neighbouring Christian nations, and in one of them the official church is applauding it and even encouraging the slaughter. Isaiah would be horrified and so are we, and therefore we ask ourselves if we have indeed reached the end of the age, with persecutions and desolations, as Jesus describes it in the earlier part of Matthew 24.

Following on from these warnings from Jesus, he advertises the fact that they portend the Coming of the Son of Man: “when you see all these things you know that he is near, at the very gates”. Thus we arrive at the start of a new Christian year, the season of Advent, and we must fervently hope that what we have seen and heard just in the past year will indeed pass away, or at least result in co-operation. However we have been warned in today’s Gospel reading to be watchful and alert.

This necessity to be watchful does of course apply to the whole of human society, so that it can be prepared for things to come, and we now see that some areas of our common life do not currently meet this test. I am talking in universal terms, not just within our own country. Climate change is a good example of this, where rich countries have blithely ignored the desolation being wreaked on poorer ones, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh and countries in other parts of the world. In a recent book (The Human Odyssey: the search for universal values) by Stephen Green, previously Chairman of HSBC Bank and now a self-supporting C of E priest, he talks about the two polarities in the world: unity v. diversity, and

individualism v. individuality. But he sees many points of common interest which can help us all to navigate today's problems, without antagonising one another.

But the advice to be watchful and alert also applies to all of us individually – not perhaps to the extent of staying awake all night in order to intercept a thief, but in general terms to cooperate and take sensible precautions.

In a similar way this applies to our faith. We hear today that we do not know when the Son of Man will appear to summon us to account, but we can make preparations. We can try and live up to the high standards set by Jesus and to pray to him to help us if we do not understand things or we feel we are failing him and our families and friends.

Needless to say, 2000 years have elapsed between the time of Jesus and now. We have inherited the Christian church, which has undergone many forms and external changes. But we have the extraordinary gift of the four Gospels, as well as the Letter to the Hebrews, and the letters from Paul and other apostles. We also have the example of all the saints down the ages, who have shown how powerful the Christian message is, for example most recently Desmond Tutu, and we have the example of those who have taught us what it means to be a Christian.

In Hebrews 11 we have the famous phrase: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible".

Above all we have a responsibility to God and Jesus Christ to make him known wherever and whenever possible, to be prepared for enquiries and questions, and because we are all made in his image, to see that image in everyone we meet, and to reflect that image in our own lives. To help us in this Jesus bequeathed his disciples the Holy Spirit just after his resurrection, and this bequest, this wonderful gift, is with us and within us

today to enable us to see the signs of his kingdom in the world and in our daily lives. The former Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, used to use the phrase “expect the unexpected”, which for me is a warning and an indication that I must be alert to everyone and everything going on around me.

This is the gift the disciples did not receive until the first Pentecost, but we do have it and we have a duty to use it carefully and wisely. It cannot always be seen physically, but its effects are everlasting.