

The season of Advent is traditionally a time of preparation for Christmas.

According to Celtic tradition it is said "that the door to the stable where the Christ-child has been born is very low – and only those who kneel find access. Being ready for Christmas therefore means that our thoughts are focused not just on cards, presents and parties but on repentance, humbling and interior 'housecleaning'.

John the Baptist warned his hearers to prepare a way for the Lord – to make a clear and level pathway. The Celtic Northumbria community suggests that this involves removing any boulders that stand in the way, and filling in any potholes.

The boulders are the things we have done that we know we should not have done; the potholes are the things we have failed to do which we obviously should have done. The more, as individuals, family or congregation, we are focused in this way, the better prepared we are for the coming of the Christ child and the less we will be overwhelmed by the commercialization of Christmas.

During Advent we remember especially Zacharias and Elizabeth, and the child John, who still in the womb, leapt in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. As we say in the memorial acclamation in the Great Thanksgiving, Christ has come; Christ has risen; Christ will come again."¹

The word Advent simply means "coming" and in the Christian sense refers to these past, present and future events. The first coming of Jesus Christ; the Christ living among us in the present time in the Holy spirit and the future event, what we call the Parousia, the second coming of Jesus Christ at the close of the age. The intricacies of the past, present and future events, we see in faith as the expression of God's love for the created.

In the reading from Isaiah we hear about the future house of God. Isaiah looks forward to "the days to come", to the time when God will finally establish his kingdom.

All the nations of the world will stream to it, to worship God in his temple, to know his ways and to walk in his paths. It will be a time of justice and peace, a time of total fulfilment for all. No swords, only ploughshares.

The psalm celebrates Jerusalem as the goal of this fulfilment. The goal of all pilgrimage.

Today's gospel reading from Chapter 24 in Matthew's gospel is an apocalyptic section in which Jesus teaches about the end of the age. In Matthew's day, numerous writers, Jewish and Christian alike, shared the belief that history was headed for some great transforming cataclysm. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD by the Romans was seen as the beginning of the end.

Matthew's gospel was written after this event in the uncertain period between the fall of the temple and the beginning of the emergence of rabbinic Judaism as the decisive force and

¹ *Celtic Daily Prayer: Inspirational prayers and readings from the Northumbria Community*. Collins, London: 2005. p236.

voice in the land between 135 and 220. The gospel writer largely appeals to the Jewish population not to forsake the reality of the Kingdom of God in the teachings and way of Jesus Christ.

In today's reading we glimpse something of how Matthew interprets the end time which, I believe, can either put the fear of God into us – or on a more positive note can result in our wanting to have a genuine desire to make real in the present time, the beauty of fulfilment.

The heart of Matthew's message today is to be ready, prepared and watchful - for the coming of the Son of Man will happen unannounced and it will be cataclysmic in the same way as in the days of Noah.

Things will seem normal - everything will be going along as usual when it takes place and some will be taken and others left. It will come in the same way as the thief in the night without warning.

In this age we are becoming more familiar with cataclysmic type of events. In recent times we have witnessed abnormally powerful cyclones that sweep through lands and leave swathes of death and destruction in their path; tsunamis that wash away populations, animals and crops, fires that blow across the land and reduce to ashes homes and peoples livelihoods as well as injure and kill people and animals and the droughts that leave the earth parched crisp and brown seem to last longer than ever before.

Yet with these events, as tragic as they are, there is usually some warning of what is to come some time to prepare -as short as it may be in some cases. The Parousia – the coming of the end of the age with the return of Christ however is different– there will be no warning at all - it will not be on any radar - for only God knows when it is to take place.

So our question might well be - how are we to prepare – to be ready for such an unknown. Well we could treat it like a coming cyclone and make a list of things to do in preparation. A sort of holy list of what is necessary to be ready. Something like; I say my prayers every night, I attend church and help out there, I give to the poor and smile at those around me.

Well as wonderful as this is – there is more to the calling that makes us ready. There is in our calling as Christ's beloved, an inbuilt call to respond to God's love for us by returning our love for God. We can do this in many ways as I'm sure we do –in the way we encounter and engage with God – intentionally taking time daily – when there is no time in our busy lives- but finding time and setting it aside anyway.

Being quiet, open and still with God– and during this time not expecting anything to happen - just simply being in the presence. – yet being ready and open when we are led by the shift that we notice in our hearts that gently opens our wounds and reveals the direction of our interior housekeeping, the boulders and pot holes.

In the way we encounter and engage with ourselves – how we respond to ourselves in love, understanding, honesty and patience - and not with un-forgiveness and judgement but with welcome and humility. In the way we encounter and engage with each other in love -

recognising and accepting differences without being threatened, or harbouring suspicion or resentment.

In the way we encounter and engage with the creation in wonder and delight at its beauty and diversity and in the same love and care in which it was and continues to be created by the God who is love.

I believe this is, in a nut shell, what Paul writes about in the epistle when he urges us to walk in the armour of the light of Christ – to live honourably as in the day, not as in the darkness of night in quarrelling and jealousy.

Paul is urging us to open ourselves to the one who reveals to us pure truth, in a way that feeds souls of every level and type, for wherever he comes, he brings the life-giving mystery of God with the holiness that weaves together both worlds of heaven and earth and the past, present and future.

Paul urges us to allow the Christ to be born in us and teach us about the way of being that is all encompassing and patient without all or nothing demands.

In advent we are preparing for a birth– an arrival of someone in our hearts who comes especially to embrace us, connect with us, engage with us, accompany us and lead us into a knowing of how to love God with our whole heart and how to love each other as ourselves. In faith we are waiting and preparing to be awakened from our slumber.

Advent is a time therefore of waiting and preparation to be awake and alert to Jesus Christ who is coming to birth in us in the here and now and in the end time.

The Lord be with you.