

Today is Advent Sunday and we begin the season of Advent which will lead us up to Christmas. But what does this season really mean to us? It is meant to be a time of reflection and preparation during which we think of the promise of Jesus' return in glory to judge the quick and the dead as our Creed reminds us, but in practice it can pass us by all too quickly. Christmas and preparations for it are already under way. How many shopping days are there left? What presents will we buy and for whom? What will we say to those who ask us what we want to receive? When are we going to write the Christmas cards? Where will we be spending the day and with whom? These are important questions and need time and thought. In the church we are already planning Christmas services, organising rehearsals for carol concerts and the vital tasks of making mince pies and mulled wine. Not a lot of time left to ponder on what traditionally has been a time to reflect on the Coming of Christ in glory and the last judgement.

But even if we make time what does it mean to us? In our comfortable western world with its increasing secularisation the answer may be – not much.

I think it was Jacques Brel who sang, *Notre pere, qui es aux cieux, reste-y. Et nous resterons sur la terre qui est parfois si jolie.* If God exists at all the singer says, let him mind his own business, stay in heaven where he belongs and leave us alone to have fun on earth. Though I suspect many would still want him to be there to call upon and answer their prayers when things go pear shaped and they aren't having fun any longer.

How different it was for the early church. Often they lived in fear. Persecution and death were real risks for Christians then. They didn't know what might happen to them from day to day. For long periods during the Roman empire Christians were convenient scapegoats. Whenever anything went wrong they got the blame and the solution was to throw them to the lions, or in the case of emperor Nero, after the fire in Rome, to burn them alive as human torches. Christ was their only hope. Small wonder they prayed fervently for His return in glory. Lord Jesus, save us. Maranatha - come, Lord Jesus, establish your kingdom of justice and peace.

There are many Christians today whose lives are very different from our own. They too know persecution for their faith. Did you know that there have been more Christian martyrs in the last century than during the whole of previous Christian history put together? As I speak to you the Pakistani Christians Gini and I visited in detention in Bangkok last year are still there in prison, twelve months on – and they have little hope of release. They have committed no crime other than fleeing in fear of their lives from their homes in the hope of building a new life in a safer place. The United Nations is overwhelmed by applications for asylum in Thailand and is taking up to 7 years to deal with individual cases. After a month anyone arriving with a tourist visa, even if they registered with the UN as seeking asylum, is regarded by the authorities as an illegal immigrant and liable to arrest and detention.

Their story could be repeated countless times around the world which is flooded with those fleeing the horrors of war and persecution. Those who are Christians also pray fervently for the coming of Christ in glory and those of us who pray for them, week by week are tempted to say, 'Lord, how long must this go on? Look with your mercy on your people and bring in your kingdom of justice and peace.

But there are others who take a perhaps unhealthy interest in the last days, seeing current events, the Brexit vote, the result of the American presidential election, natural disasters, global warming, or the international financial crisis, or any one of the many things people do not understand and are fearful of, as signs of the end. They flood the internet with information claiming to be a prophetic voice to the church and the world and use background biblical quotations – often from the book of Revelation – to illustrate and support their thinking.

Today's gospel reading states clearly that no one except the Father knows the time of Christ's return. People have been claiming to be living in the last days ever since Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians in which he expected Jesus to return within his lifetime. We do not and cannot know God's timing, but what matters is that we should be ready for it, and live lives which witness to God's love in Christ for us and for the world.

As Paul says in Romans 13 our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. I take him to mean that salvation is a process. It begins when we repent and believe in Jesus Christ, we are being saved as we grow in Christ throughout our lives and, when we die or meet with him if he returns before then, we will finally be saved. Until then we are to live in Christ, guided and empowered by His Holy Spirit. The Spirit helps us to become more like Jesus and to use the freedom of choice which God gives us positively, not seeking our own gratification or falling out with others but trying to follow His will for our lives and receiving His gifts, to enable us to show the love of Jesus to everyone we meet. Put simply to choose not to be self-centred, judging others on how they treat us or whether they agree with our thinking, but Christ-centred seeking to see with His eyes, think with His mind, feel with His heart and reach out to the world with His love.

So how will we spend this Advent season?

I cannot and have no right to answer that question for you, but let me share what I hope, by the grace of God, to do myself.

I will try to make time in my prayers during Advent to remember and give thanks to God for the people and events in my life's journey that have helped reveal God's love and purpose to me; my parents who loved and provided a secure environment for me to grow up in as a child; the Gideons who gave me my first copy of the New Testament and Psalms that I began to read regularly in my early teens; my dear friend Marcel, a sick man but full of God's love and the desire to share it with everyone he met; my wife Gini who has kept me company on the journey these last 44 years, vicars and brothers and sisters in Christ in the many different churches we have attended and the countless people I have tried to serve in Jesus' name who have taught and given me so much, perhaps especially those with whom I have been privileged to be as they reached the end of their life here on earth..

These days it is a long list and it reminds me that, as Paul wrote, journey's end is nearer than when I first started. We are on our way and we are promised that one day, in God's appointed time, we will see Jesus for ourselves and finally know as we are known.

This is our Christian hope and in this, come what may, we rejoice. For we know that God loves us and promises that nothing, not even the most awful persecution or dreadful current events, can take His love from us.

It was this hope which enabled our Pakistani brothers and sisters in Christ to sing Christmas hymns and carols last year with a contagious joy and a smile on their faces, even in prison. I am sure they will do it again this year as they pray and wait for God's kingdom to come.

As we await our celebration of God's love in the birth of Jesus at Christmas, so let us rejoice in His victory over the powers of sin and death and the presence of His love within us each day as we journey through Advent, the greatest of the gifts of His Holy Spirit, enabling us to share the good news of our Christian hope, shining with the light of Jesus' love in a darkening world. Amen