

SERMON FOR ADVENT SUNDAY | 27.11.2022

Isaiah 2: 1-5, Romans 13: 11-end, St Matthew 24: 36-4

I am delighted to say that in 2022, Christmas will be on a Sunday. Hooray! That means Christmas Eve will be on a Saturday and Boxing Day on a Monday. Christmas is exactly four weeks today – and no messing around trying to put on additional services on Saturday and Monday as in so many years, trying to get the four weeks of Advent into place before the big day.

Overall we like things to be straightforward and simple like that. We generally prefer simplicity to complexity; why make things difficult when there is an easier way? We don't have time for endless variations. If I put the toast in to the toaster, I don't want 55 different ways of cooking the bread; I am prepared to wait for just long enough for the toast to pop up again... I know this is news to those who devise our mobile phones and TVs where it takes hours to work out all the permutations to prevent you having to watch subtitles in Korean but that is another story. Plug and play is our preference.

Isaiah in our first reading gives us a really strong symbol for this easier way of living. It is the sword. A sword has one clear purpose: to get the job done quickly and efficiently. It does not cope with argument and it cuts through Gordian knots. It is the tool of the powerful and the impatient. It is the weapon of choice for the Mullah's in Iran and the invading forces in Ukraine. It brooks no opposition. It has no patience and no room for discussion.

And what does Isaiah do with this? He looks to a new time, a time when those who were too busy for alternatives to slow down a bit and ask the question: is this really the best way of living, this frenetic chasing after short term goals and easy solutions? So instead Isaiah talks about the way people begin to look around for alternatives, coming to 'the mountain of the Lord', seeking a more balanced, more considerate and wiser way of living. And the new symbol is not the sword at all: *they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.* The sword becomes a spade.

And what is a spade if not a very slow, often demanding, heavy tool for digging: the slow, systematic exchange of one situation for another – the moving of the earth to reveal something new? That, Isaiah says, is the way of the Lord.

So this Advent, as in every other, we set up the Advent crown, the pattern of candles of different colours which encourages us to slow down, to take our breath, to mull things over and to seek for ways which may not be obvious but which take proper account of the situation in which we find ourselves; to take the time to breath in the wisdom of the Lord. And while the run up to Christmas may not seem the ideal time to do this as we are so busy, actually this isn't just about this next month but about our whole attitude to the ways of the Lord. We need to take time to think.

Because the challenges are not easy.

Just look at the hard sayings in today's Gospel. Many of our readings at this time of the year about the judgement of God so Jesus talks about the second coming of the Son of Man at the end of the world. And his story goes like this: in a field where two apparently similar people are a work, one will be taken and the other left alone. Or two people are working grinding flour: one will be taken and the other will stay where they are. It all seems so arbitrary – even unfair.

And if that is how it seems to you then you are right. So much of what we face in life is arbitrary and unfair. Why is it that some are so rich that the current rise in prices means nothing at all while others are making hard choices about whether they eat or whether they put on the fire; why is it that some are sloping off for skiing holidays while others are taking on additional work just to make ends meet. Why is it that some face terrible health problems and others seem to get through life with barely a scratch; some have everything and some are burgled and everything they own is taken away?

In such circumstances the sword is utterly useless. We can't defend ourselves against such sudden and terrible events because there is no quick and easy solution.

The only answer is symbolised by the spade. It is the way that requires we put all of our energies into finding the reserves to cope and to make things better – gradually, often painfully and not without a good number of mistakes along the way. It is the same kind of resilience that we see in the people of Kiev who are putting up with arbitrary air strikes where some people are killed in their homes and others escape.

But all are determined that whatever comes out of the sky, they will go on – and on – and on – supporting one another and making do until the day comes (whenever it comes) and this present crisis will finally come to an end.

Which, sadly for the people of Ukraine, won't be tomorrow or even this year. Yet they will not give in.

The humble spade. Advent. The patient waiting for God's righteousness to win out over those who think they can control and destroy by the sword '*because they just can*'. Arbitrary injustice will be overcome but we have to sit it out until that day comes *when the glory of the Lord will be revealed and no one learns war any more.*

Overall we like things plain and simple. We love it when the jigsaw pieces just fit into place – or the calendar just works for us! But for the majority of the time it is the hard work of the spade not the ease of the sword that will prove to be our best friend.

That is the light that will overcome the darkness. That is the light of the true Jesus.