Isaiah 2.1-5, Matthew 24.36-44: Advent Sunday

This morning’s two readings are the perfect way into our keeping of Advent, complex and challenging though they are. They draw our attention to the world to come which is the true Kingdom, present and emerging, all around us.

Jesus warns his disciples to be ready, to be watching, to be attentive because time will be gathered together at a moment they do not know and cannot predict.

The prophet Isaiah prophesies a time when all the people of the earth, weary of injustice and oppression and doing things the way the world keeps doing them, will instead flock to the Holy Mountain of God.

Things for us are slightly different- as we start the Church’s year- Happy New Year everyone- as we start our Advent waiting. We have a lot more certainty than either the disciples or Isaiah and his hearers. We know that we are waiting for Jesus to be born because he has been. We know where it will happen. We know when it will happen. We know how to pace ourselves between now and that joyous day. We know so much which helps us to be ready, but which also robs us of urgency, of creative anxiety, of ambition and determination. Which stops us oftentimes from keeping Advent with the attention it requires.

Jesus does not allow that luxury to his disciples in Matthew. His warnings are stark and clear. Build your ark. Be alert and watchful and ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. If the houseowner had known when the thief would come he would have been waiting. Be ready. No excuses. No second chances.

And Isaiah is equally urgent- because he has such a sense of the beauty of what he is writing about that nothing will hold him back- “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” Let us walk, together, into this vision, this dream, this promise of another world where God reigns not only in our hearts but in practice, judging with equity, arbitrating with fairness, ending wars, repurposing weapons, ensuring that the art of the war becomes utterly forgotten. Come with me, he says, let’s walk together into this perfect light. His sense of what God will do is so pure and so strong that it adds urgency to his call.

These readings and their invitation to keep Advent are a Matrix moment. It might not be the trendiest film this decade- too few superheroes and too many big ideas for that- but its central idea- that there is a truer reality underneath the surface and once you have seen it everything is changed and you cannot just carry on as you were by going back to the old ways- that theme is Advent.

Here is the vision of what this baby will do, dare, deliver. Here is the vision of what this infant child will risk and achieve. Liberty. Healing. Inclusion. Welcome. Acceptance. Delight. The unconquerable love of God for God’s people proved for all time and all eternity, changing everything. We march to a different drum now. We sway to a different rhythm now.

We are walking with the people of Jacob to the holy mountain, where every weapon of war will be beaten into a means of giving food to the hungry and hope to the desperate, where peace and justice will be guaranteed.

Recap. Because we know that our Advent waiting and watching will end at Bethlehem we often lack focus. Our readings take that ease from our hands. Jesus tells his disciples to be ready at any moment for the Kingdom to come close. Isaiah writes of the holy mountain of God with such pure longing that nothing will stop him from drawing his people together and going. All of which calls us to calm urgency. Or urgent calmness. Or something like that- but however we word it and however we imagine it, it calls us to switch on, to be ready, to be so in love with the promised, coming Kingdom that we don’t let the moment pass by.

We are not just talking about the kingdom coming at the end of time- we are talking about the kingdom coming close every day, in small ways, in moments of grace and kindness, in moments which happen and are gone and are too rarely spotted. Jesus and Isaiah are calling us, urging us, to see the world through their eyes, to be so utterly besotted with God at work in the world that we want to capture every passing moment, and study it, and relish it, and glory in it, and then learn from that moment how to see the next one. And the next one. And the one after that.

And then, perhaps, wonderfully, to start to bring those moments to birth by being in the world with God on our heart and by being with God with the world on our heart.

Advent waiting is not something we can wait for. We can’t just hope it will fall into place, that somehow our diaries will open themselves up or strangely make space for us to think and listen. We have to commit here and now to keep Advent well, because we are as in love with the kingdom as Isaiah and because Jesus calls us, tells us, to be ready now so that we can glimpse and attend to every momentary sign of God’s grace at work in the world.

[And you know that it’s always said that the person who the preacher is preaching to is usually themself, so you know that this is something I need to listen to as much as you, if not more so.]

So how do we start to keep Advent? Let me suggest a question, one which will help us pause and listen- listen to the world, listen to our heart, listen to God- which will help us wait well, and wait deliberately, which will help us fall more and more in love with God and the promise of the Kingdom which is both here now and still to come in its fullness. Where have you seen God this week? A question for you in silence to toy with. Where have you seen God this week? A question for Coffee and Chat and choir practice and 5, 6, 7, 8s and the Mothers’ Union. Where have you seen God this week?

So, where have you seen God this week? Which moment, which action, which conversation, which gift, which sense of solidarity or beauty or truth or light? Where have you seen God this week?

It’s Advent, the season of calm urgency or urgent calmness. Where have you seen God this week? Because answering that question is the best way of learning to know who we wait for in Advent, and why.

Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

O house of Jacob come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Where have you seen God this week?