

Year B Advent 1

Watch the Fig Tree

[Mark 13: 24-37]

Mark 13.28 Let the fig tree teach you a lesson

Watching the Fig Tree

They passed it often without noticing

Which is the point of Jesus' observation - *Watch !*

Don't let things become too familiar.

Don't be too busy to see the signs of God's Kingdom and its growth

Don't miss the reminders that that Kingdom will one day be fulfilled - with the final coming of our Lord Jesus and God's great Judgement day

In sight of the Temple

Disciples once more overawed by the magnificence of Herod's Temple -

Jesus tells them - *It won't last !*

But its passing will be a sign of the kingdom of God in human lives - which cannot be destroyed

The same kingdom which comes in Jesus - and will defy destruction by a glorious resurrection

And similarly, at some time everything finite will come to an end

There will be a great and glorious day when Jesus will come again

Jesus' words describe for us an enormous cosmic cataclysm

AND then the son of man will appear coming in the clouds with great power and glory

when all his chosen people - who belong to him by faith, through the grace of God, will be gathered from every part of the world

And because we do not know when his coming will be - we have to watch - to be ready

Advent Sunday is a time for asking, *'How do we go about watching ?*

Watch for the sure signs

When you see the fig tree put out its first leaf buds - you know that the Spring and Summer are coming

In the same way there will be signs of the end - of the final coming of Jesus

The signs of the last times between Jesus' first and final advent - the wars, earthquakes, famines, disasters are a constant reminder of how fragile is our hold on this life

- how finely balanced are the laws of our universe which enable us to live at all on this planet

And there will be the signs of his Kingdom winning its way

every victory of love over hatred

every act of giving and receiving forgiveness

every moment of reconciliation

every deed of love in Christ's name

every person reclaimed from the stranglehold of sin

every word of truth in place of falsehood

every deed of justice

every longing for righteousness

remind us that Jesus who is with us

- is Christ who is coming to conclude his work; judge the nations; fulfil the Kingdom

Watch for the signs and take heart - no complacency

Remember the Unchanging things

Just as Spring and Summer - the seasons of the year are promised to last as long as the earth remains so there are things which will last eternally after the earth has reached its end

Watch for the signs of Spring
and remember to hold on to eternal values

Jesus says '*Heaven and earth will pass away but **my words** will never pass away*'

When the final Advent arrives - only eternal things will matter
Love Faith Hope which never end - the eternal relationships
The Word of God - the words of Jesus
Jesus himself!

Find him in his words - and discover he is THE WORD - the whole truth and being of God
We shall then know him in such a way, as will ensure that we do not miss him in his final coming.



[1 Corinthians 1: 3-9]

Advent Road

[1 Corinthians 1.7](#) As you wait for the Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed

Advent is a journey

- journey to Christmas - remembering Jesus Christ's coming into the world
- journey to Jesus - meeting him at any and every point in life
- journey to the end of the road - the Day of the Lord - with him for ever

The further we travel the Advent Road the clearer we picture our destinations

- Christmas - nativity - incarnation - it all becomes richer more wonderful and meaningful
- Jesus - discovering the child - the man - teacher - Saviour - Lord - God!
- the Day of Christ - presence - judgement - Kingdom fulfilled - GLORY!

The Advent Road is all about Jesus

All its blessings- grace, truth, knowledge, fellowship ...

- make up a growing union with Christ - with God

Our part is to *let the message be firmly established in us.*



Year B Advent 2

[Mark 1: 1-8]

Turn Around For Christmas

Mark 1.4 Turn away from your sins

Advent Sadness

For many people Christmas brings sadness
it's a time of memories and not all memories are happy ones
it is family time and family members are missed

But I have a personal sadness about Christmas for another reason which you may share

One particular family had had a particularly happy Christmas. Mum was more than pleased with the jewel necklace her own mother had given her. But the day ended on a different note when it seemed that Dad, in an unusually tidy moment, had gathered up all the wrappings and taken them to the incinerator at the bottom of the garden. It seemed that the necklace had fallen among the wrappings!

The same thing seems to happen with the jewel which is the Incarnation
- the gift of God in Christ at Christmas

God's coming is without question the more precious gift of all
- the promise of a whole new world - **in a person**
He is the world's true way to;
Peace;
reconciliation;
justice;
provision; plenty
the Kingdom of God on earth.

*And it seems that all of that - often gets thrown out with the wrappings;
sometimes even the wrappings of Christian practices and church worship*

The message of Christmas IS the most
amazing,
exciting,
world-shattering,
revolutionary truth
- the biggest and best thing to ever happen to humanity.....

Cheer up for Christmas

For a cheer-ful Christmas
First, go back to the story as Mark tells it
'Here's the Good News' [mind-blowing!]
It's about Jesus - the Christ - the Son of God - the Saviour

*And the arrival of the news all began **with a person** [just as was prophesied]*

That person was
John - the Baptist
John - the 'turned-around man'

His message was **turn yourselves around**,
and like any true preacher he could only speak what he was - 'a turned-around man'

Turn around for Christmas

The Kingdom of God - in Christ

- comes to his world through people
- people who are prepared
- people whose lives have been turned around by God

If we want the treasure of the Incarnation

We have to be '**turned-around people**'

Mark gives us a clear picture of what that meant for John

A turned-around heart

a heart right with God

unburdened of its failures and unworthiness

forgiven and free from guilt

He symbolised it in Baptism

- which was like a washing and a new start clean and whole

- being born all over again!

having self exchanged for Christ

millions testify [Gal 2.20] *It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.*

This life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave his life for me.'

- that every changed life is a building block for the Kingdom of God

When we ARE heaven-bound!

the whole world is changing around us

A turned-around life-style

But a changed heart is nothing unless it leads to a changed life-style

John's was certainly a different life-style

*Not just frequent trips to the desert for a diet of locusts and wild honey
and to endure the discomfort of camel-hair underwear!*

But his turned around life, like that of every Christian,
required a turned-about life-style

A life lived by the way of Jesus

By way of the 'sermon on the mount'

the way of contentment

The way of non-retaliation; of forgiveness and generosity

The way of God's **love - law**

Having a sense of responsibility and accountability to him for the way we live

It is turned about people who turn the world about !

A turned-around relationship

And at the heart of it all, for John there was the turned-about relationship with Jesus

From before his father saw an angel in the Temple sanctuary, God had been preparing John's life for this moment - but John had many doubts and questions

Could the Messiah really be Jesus?

BUT that all changed with a conviction of the Spirit
Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Preparing for all that Christmas really means for the world

Is really all about our relationship with Jesus

Really knowing him - God's Son - My Saviour - My Lord
whom we meet and view from our on our knees
- after all don't they say *Christmas is for the little people!*



[Isaiah 40: 1 - 11]

Living Comfortably

Isaiah 40.1 Comfort my people!

Comfort - encouragement

Advent is a time for encouragement - looking forward with HOPE

The Church needs the word of encouragement in time of decline before change
as God's people needed it in their time of exile from Judah

Isaiah gives reasons for comfortable living: strong in faith and hope

- their sins are forgiven
- all people are going to see the glory of God
- the Word of God is enduring and indestructible
 - will be secure when everything else has passed away
- your Saviour God is coming

We have the same reasons for comfortable living

- sins forgiven through Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection (Luke 5.20 Colossians .14)
- the Kingdom is coming - indeed HAS come
 - the Church is the sign - the world is being transformed
- God's word endures - may be trusted when all else fails
- Our Saviour God is coming
 - his incarnation
 - his risen presence - Spirit - with us always
 - his final coming as King and Shepherd - Judge and Father

Be comforted - take heart - have a comfortable Christmas!



Year B Advent 3 [John 1: 6-8, 19 - 28]

Beginning with Jesus

John 1 : 2 From the very beginning the Word

The Unveiling

I wonder why we wrap presents?
Maybe it is to keep an element of surprise?

The opening of John's story of Jesus was like that.
He peels back the wrappings to reveal God's greatest gift of all - Jesus.

He begins with the Word
which we understand to mean
- every highest and best thought and activity in the life of the universe
- the mind and heart that is through all things - **God**

Creator - Light - Life
- opening minds to know him - the Father
- giving faith to receive him and to become his children

Then the final layer is ripped off. The Word became flesh.
God lived among us
We saw him, touched him, talked with him
We saw the glory of the father - all his grace and truth
In Jesus !

Paul continues the theme as he writes to Christians at Colossae
- *Christ existed before all things
and in union with him all things have their proper place.*
Everything begins and ends with Jesus
Life only has true meaning in and through him

Faith of new beginnings

Christianity is the Faith of new beginnings
And it all centres on Jesus who is at every new beginning

He was with God - was God - at the beginning of all creation

In Christ God restarts the world
- gives a new beginning to what people chose to distort, defile and destroy.

Coming in human form - teaching his truth by word and life - living our life - dying our death - rising again to open heaven for everyone who believes and unites themselves to him in love

he reverses the evil which has gripped the whole universe - he destroys death

And now he, by his Spirit with us and in us offers that new beginning to everyone who believes in him and accepts life from him

New beginnings is the business of the Christian Gospel

Why in fact the most popular of Jesus' stories is that of a prodigal son.

New beginning for a new year

The new year is always associated with new beginnings

A Christian new resolution is 'beginning with God' - 'beginning with Jesus'

Most new year resolutions founder because they miss the - 'in the beginning - Jesus'

It is good to have times when we are challenged about new starts for our lives

We all come to moments when

We feel the need to be forgiven

The need to be right with God

A little closer to him

Moments when we may cry out in doubt or even despair
from a critical life situation

Sort me out Lord ! Help ! Let me start again !

His promise never changes

God points us to a birth, a cross and a resurrection - the means of new beginnings
and says - 'In the beginning - Jesus'



[Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11]

Christmas Message for the World

Isaiah 61.11 All nations will praise him

A favorite Christmas card scene - a clear night sky spattered with stars

- over Bethlehem and a cave-stable at the back of an inn!

- a real world - like Bethlehem today

*The whole cosmos centred in one geographical, historical and spiritual point
(ref. Colossians 1)*

I wonder if Isaiah had a similar experience when he gave this message of *Good News for the World?*

I wonder if Jesus had watched the star-massed sky before he used Isaiah's words to explain his own purpose and the fulfillment of God's promise through his prophet?

What a Message for Today!

Good news for the poor

- when the sky covers poverty that is world-wide - and close to home

Healing for the broken hearted

- when the sky overshadows war and broken relationships, disillusionment, homelessness is daily front-page news

Release for Captives

- *freedom for prisoners - refugees - political prisoners - abused women - trafficked children* all under that expanse of sky

Salvation

- return to God - healed, forgiven - to live in his will and for his Kingdom with praise and joy

Real for Today

When Jesus preached from Isaiah's words - he said quite simply
That's the promise! Here it is! **In Me! [It's Christmas!]**

and we are privileged to have the whole story

- teaching, preaching, Cross, Resurrection
- the Gospel spreading across the world
under those same skies

Start here

Isaiah begins his words - as Jesus did

The Sovereign Lord has filled me with his Spirit...

Which is where we too begin

Filled with his Spirit we have vision of a healed world under a star-lit sky



Believing Big

Luke 1.20 The angel Gabriel said to Zechariah, You have not believed my message

A Stretch of Faith

The whole Christmas story is a challenge to **Believe Big**

For Mary

'I'm a virgin!' How can this be

And the angel replied: Yes it is a real world. But as real as the Spirit of God at work in it. There is nothing God cannot do!

For Joseph

A great stretch of faith - God's child before his!

The child will be God's promised Saviour - the one who releases people from their sins - from themselves !

The shepherds

Terrified - bewildered - hearing a choir of angels singing - 'The Christ - the Messiah - the longed for hope of the centuries - has been born - in a stable!'

Magi

Following a star - to find a new king - and finding themselves kneeling before a cattle trough, offering gifts from the world's riches - believing this child was king of kings!

Their responses

But more amazing were the responses they made

Big faith responses

Mary *I am the Lord's servant - let what you say happen to me*

Joseph *did what the angel told him and married Mary - and followed the events through to Bethlehem - on to Egypt and to life as refugees before returning to Nazareth*

Shepherds *let's go and see for ourselves - they praised God - believing what they had seen*

Wise Men *kings - priests or whoever they were - offered their gifts - an act of faith that this child was the one they had travelled so far to find*

Altogether it is an amazing story of **faith**

And because they believed and acted on what they heard and saw - they shared with God in the pivotal event in the history of the world - through which the world is still being transformed for good - as God's Kingdom is being established

It is truly a story of people who **Believed Big**

Zechariah's Faith

Right at the beginning of the Christmas story another character believed big.

Zechariah

The elderly and saintly priest from a hill village in Judea
Zechariah's lack of faith was questioned by the angel who met him in the Temple.
The one thing he and Elizabeth had longed for - but now impossible!

Zechariah's problem was that God - in the way he often does - answered his prayer in excess

Not just a child - but a child called John whose life purpose will be to fulfill ancient prophecy - and be the one who prepares for the Christ

HOW? is a natural response

To stretch our faith

It is not uncommon to be in that position

Seeking to be right with God - to live good, honest, loving lives - wanting to be made in the likeness of Jesus

WE PRAY

And yet when an answer comes we find ourselves asking - *How?*

To Zechariah's credit - after nearly a year of being dumb - when the child is born he writes *his name is John*. It was his way of saying 'I DO believe!

A Christmas Challenge

Christmas is a challenge to share the faith of those who helped make it possible

A challenge to **believe big**

Because it IS a big thing which happened

the biggest and best thing ever to happen in our world

God - in his own world - sharing our life - at work in his own creation

Immanuel - God is with us !

The creator - the Holy One - in our world - in our daily life - in touch with you and me.

The Saviour - or rescuer

A world hurtling towards self-destruction

And God comes to provide the rescue operation he has been working on since before it first went wrong

Involving his own sacrifice of his own Son

Involving the slow changing of the world through the transformation of individual lives

This is the promise of Christmas

For those who will **believe big**

because they grasp the real wonder of Christmas

This amazing, possible impossibility which has happened and is still happening!



Romans 16: 25 - 27

Give me something useful!

Romans 16: 26 The truth ... is made known

An older response to the question - What would you like for Christmas? is Give me something useful! Let it be a surprise!

Perhaps the best present comes as a surprise - unwrapped gradually - we have some idea what it might be - then the final awesome revelation!

That is how Paul saw the immense, mind-blowing, heart-thumping wonder of Christmas and the Gospel

Let's give glory to God!

The gift is unwrapped

We saw it unfold in history - in the words of the prophets and the scriptures

NOW its here - for real!

What it means personally

God given strength to stand firm in your faith

What it means globally

The truth made known to all nations

so that ALL may believe and obey

A useful gift

And so this Gospel is the most useful gift! Life! Full and forever life!

How then do I use it?

Witness to it in word and life-style;

Serving others in their needs

Loving the world in the selfless way of Christ jesus

praying - with all the world in mind

Is my faith enough to believe the world will find peace?

Is my prayer big enough to ask that the Islamic world will one day celebrate a real Christmas?



Year B Christmas 1 [Luke 2: 22-40]

Peace !

Luke 2.29 Now...your servant can go in peace

Longing for Peace

Time to take down the Christmas decorations;
disrobe the tree; look through the greeting cards
Time to put away the hopes of peace on earth?
forget the vision for another year?

It would seem like that to a complete outsider - a visitor from another planet
A fantastic message of 'peace on earth' - and yet everywhere the satellite pictures show
countries still at war - families and communities divided
and reports of all the associated suffering and deprivation which goes with it
- churches in contest for the same Gospel which speaks of cosmic reconciliation!

Terrorism brings war closer - OUR peace is disturbed

It is a reminder that peace is not *over there*. It begins here - with us
Peace on earth is related to my living now.

Peace is personal

The Gospel teaches us that peace is a personal thing

Peace is an inner, personal thing
A personal experience of God's salvation
Which is Simeon's message for Mary and Joseph

And when we experience that peace
we catch Simeon's vision
of a world living in God's will
rid of the hatred, bitterness and rivalry which destroys love
A vision which inspires an earnest will to get involved in peace-making
by working, praying, *living* peace

The World and the Gospel of Jesus Christ both cry out for
Christian people to discover the personal peace of God
to open our eyes to the vision of sharing that peace
leading them to live and work for God's peace in the world - of home, community,
nation, and international scene

Simeon and the story about him is a sure guide to how this is done
Briefly Simeon was:
Living in the way of God
Living in the will of God

Living in the way of God

In a couple of verses, Luke draws a sketch of Simeon

A godly man

A good man

A God-fearing man

A man of faith and hope and vision

waiting for the Kingdom of God

- waiting for God to do something new with his people - feeling it 'in his bones'

A man who had the Holy Spirit with him - filling his mind with hopes - promises that he would see the Messiah before he died

- not a possessive man who was determined to live to see the Kingdom - but a faithful man who was content to see the Christ, and trust the rest, the future to God

Living in the Will of God

An interesting comment Simeon was led by the Spirit to the Temple

at the time when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus in for the purification ceremony

and presentation ceremony for the firstborn son

More and more convinced that the 'miracles' of God are not so much extraordinary events, as the *timing*

of ordinary events

which is indication of living in God's will

being in the place where God wants us to be at the time he wants us there, to be part of his purpose

Take hold of Christ

What really convinced Simeon was

not a dramatic sign from heaven

not label tied round the baby's ankle - 'from heaven with love' ! Messiah !

But taking the child in his arms and giving thanks to God

- as often happens in that real world of the spiritual - he could have known - felt - deep inside him - this was it ! this was the promise - at last ! God had honoured his words

Now...you have kept your promises !

It has forever been a picture of Christian experience

God gave us himself in Jesus

- to be held in human hearts - just as a baby is held in human hands

To take Jesus in that way

is to discover that in fact God holds us

and holds us in a peace that the world apart from him can never know

My peace I give to you

It is an awesome gift

to share it can mean the heart-breaking work of cross-bearing

But to refuse it would be to reject Christ

and the peace of God which passes all human understanding

World peace begins here