

Sunday 3rd December 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		1st Sunday of Advent AIDS Awareness Sunday 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence, 25th Nov – 10th Dec
Isaiah 64:1-9	Ps 80:1-7, 17-19	1 Cor 1:3-9
		Mark 13:24-37
THE CRISIS UPON US		

“Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come.... or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mk 13:35-37)

1. ADVENT

December is here at last. There is a sense both of relief and also of exhaustion – schools and universities closed, exams written, papers submitted and marked. Holiday plans, preparation for family arrivals... The great annual South African shut down is upon us. Rest at last!

By contrast, today, the First Sunday of Advent, the first day of the church year, comes with the warning to keep awake! To watch! To be prepared! “Advent” means “coming” or “arrival”. Advent season, the four Sundays before Christmas, is the season during which we prepare our hearts and lives for the coming, the arrival, of Christ at Christmas, and for his second coming, his return as Lord and King and Judge at the end of time.

Advent is a time which gives expression to all our hopes and dreams and longings for ourselves, for our families, for our country... our longing for a new world, a new society. In Gospel terms, we long for the coming of the kingdom of God.

...and we find in the season of Advent that our dreams and longings are answered - by God’s promises of transformation, renewal - the

picture of a new world - and by God's coming to us once again in Jesus Christ...

We are invited, during these weeks of Advent, to a fresh start, a change of heart... repentance... but there is also a note of warning to make ourselves ready to face our ultimate destiny of our individual souls, but also of the whole created order.

There is a strange contradiction in what is happening around us. On the one hand, there is excitement and relief... end of year parties at work... manic rage...the madness of Black Friday and suddenly everyone has money...

By contrast – and this is the contradiction – the season of Advent is the call to a deeper rhythm, to be aware of a deeper current of hopes and longings and prayers, to listen to the inner drumbeat of stillness and silence and expectation...

Advent reminds us that we live in the between times - the end times - the “now” of our salvation, and the “not yet” of its complete fulfilment.

2. OUR READINGS:

...speak of the end of the world, the last days, the impending crisis:

Isaiah 64:1-9

A cry for God to “tear open the heavens and come down, so that the nations might tremble at your presence” (Is 64:1) ... the longing for God to intervene and act and be present amongst us...

Ps 80

“Restore us again O Lord of hosts: show us the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.” (Ps 80:3) In the SAPB version: “shew the light of thy countenance, *and we shall be whole*” – made

whole, healed, restored. The prayer, the cry of the psalmist – and our prayer – for God to restore us and save us, to make us whole, to heal us.

1 Cor 1:3-9

St Paul and the early church believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent. They were expecting the return of the Lord in their lifetime. They were waiting for the day of the Lord, when Christ would return in power and glory as king and judge, and bring an end to all things. Paul urges the Christians in Corinth to live in daily expectation of the final day. "... as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (vv 7-8).

Mark 13:24-37

Mark 13 is an extended block of teaching by Jesus, the so-called Markan Apocalypse. Apocalypse means "unveiling" or "revelation". There are several pieces of apocalyptic writings in the Bible – Daniel, Revelation, Matthew 24 – which deal with the end of the present world order and the coming of the new world.

Jesus looks to the future and predicts what is in store for his disciples.

There are three parts to our gospel reading:

- the coming of the Son of Man: The sun will be darkened; the moon will not give light; "then they will see the 'Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out his angels and gather his elect [his chosen ones] ... from the ends of the earth..." (13:24-27)
- the fig tree as a sign of the approaching summer – for us, it is the jacaranda trees in full purple flower – calling us to discern and read the signs of the times... "when you see these things

taking place, you know that he [or it] is near, at the very gates...”

- the warning to keep watch... stay awake... for you do not know when the time will come, when the master of the house will return (13:32-37)

2. The end times...the crisis upon us...

What are we to make of these prayers, cries, these words of prophecy? How do we understand Jesus' words in Mark? What do they mean for us today? Written 2000 years ago, do they have anything to say to us today? Have these words of prophecy been fulfilled? Or are we still in the time of waiting? Do they still apply?

Every age brings its crisis. In these crises, we see and experience and look for the coming of God, Christ present in our time, and we hear and discern the call and word of God to us now.

A few years ago, there were a number of “end time” films – movies – which were immensely exciting and terrifying stories of great cataclysms and disasters, often linked to climate change: massive floods and waves crashing down over New York – the Statue of Liberty disappearing under water; the seas rising and completely engulfing London or Cape Town; huge storms, savage drops in temperature, people struggling to survive, people literally facing the end of the world.

The end times, the end of the world, are sometimes popular themes for preachers, who warn and terrify their listeners with stories of what is to happen, dire warnings of impending disaster, living each day as if it were our last. Traditionally, Advent preaching focused on the Four Last Things: heaven, hell, death and judgement.

Why this fascination with the end of the world? Why do people listen with such eagerness when preachers speak and warn of the end times?

We find much in the Bible that speaks of the coming of the Lord. The Bible has a number of apocalyptic passages – Mark 13 is one of them – also Daniel, Revelation – which speak of the future, a great event, what will happen at the end, the day of judgement. The world as we know it will come to an end. God will intervene. The day of the Lord will come upon us “like a thief in the night”, without warning. Christ will return as Lord and king and judge. Be ready!

Certainly, the natural world is unstable, frightening, dangerous. Every natural disaster that happens – tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, huge forest fires – brings us face to face with this reality – our world as we know it will not last forever. We do not control the future. Every crisis that you and I face – personal crises, things that happen to us when our world falls apart – reminds us that we are living in the last days – between the ascension of Christ in glory, and his return.

Advent invites us, in the words of the gospel, to read the signs of the times. What do we see? We see darkness and despair: environmental degradation, drought and global warming and poverty; state capture and corruption; broken lives, struggling families; leadership failures at so many levels. Is this what God wants? And we as the church don't always it right either. When I read the signs of the times, I am frankly terrified, and deeply despondent.

And we are facing a crisis here at the Cathedral, with our finances. Is this also a sign of the times? We are not overspending. But the Cathedral is receiving much less, each month, than people promised and have committed to. A deficit of R13,000 last month, R8,000 the previous month... the pattern through much of this year.

The ministry of the Cathedral is being supported by about 60 people, out of all those who come and go through our doors. Last year, 105 people pledged to give regular financial support to the ministry of the Cathedral. This year, thus far, we have replies from 64. What is going on? It seems to me that we no longer have the capacity as a congregation to keep going. What do we do? Retrench key staff and

reduce the ministry? Tell Cameron Luke not to come after all? Ask the Bishop to release me or the sub dean or Claire from ministry here, and place us elsewhere in the diocese? Stop repairing our buildings? Close the Cathedral? None of these are options. I am deeply worried and simply don't know what to do any more. I despair for 2018. What is going on?

Jesus looked at the temple and foretold its destruction. When we look at the Cathedral, at the church, what do we see? Ongoing growth and life? Or the end of the church as we know it? Is that what we want? Is that what God wants? The future of our country and of the church is in our hands.

The signs of the times, if we choose to read them, are signs of warning. A call to act. A call to respond. A call to keep the faith.

But also, as always, a call to trust. Because the signs of the times are not only darkness and despair. There is good news. Unexpected gifts are all around us. There are signs of hope, life. Eager young students. The successful application by Kepa's Kwantu Community Choir, for the World Choir Games, next year. Faithful people pouring themselves out for others. A loving and caring Cathedral community. The life of worship. The faithful support of 60 people, who keep the dream alive. You and I as we hold to the faith of Christ. People who hear and respond to the call to turn to Christ. People who continue to seek God's will for our lives and for our country. Signs of hope and life.

And so...

We began the service by lighting the Advent candle. Light in the darkness. Hope in the face of despair. The light of Christ.

... the HIV-AIDS candle, as a reminder of God's love for families, young children left without parents...

... the 16 Days candle, as a sign of God's presence with all who suffer, our love and support for victims and survivors of gender based violence, rape and abuse...

... and we hold in our hearts and prayers all in leadership, in our country, in our church; the diocese of Khahlamba with their elective assembly this week; the diocese of Umzimvubu; the ANC conference later this month as they choose their party leader and our next President of SA... ...we trust... we look to God who is faithful... we commit ourselves to remain faithful.

CONCLUSION

May the Lord bless us as the Cathedral community during Advent, and in all that lies ahead.

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