

## Sermon for Advent Sunday (29<sup>th</sup> November 2009)

I was looking at the church audit questionnaires from last Sunday. If you haven't filled one in yet, do take one today - it's important in helping us know more about who we are as a church. One of the questions asks whether you think we have fun as a church. So I thought we'd start the year with a joke because it's good to laugh together. So here are some howlers from real church newsletters:

- Weight Watchers will meet at 7pm in the church. Please use the large double door at the side.
- Remember in prayer all who are sick of our church.
- On Sunday the vicar unveils the church's new stewardship campaign slogan: 'I've upped my giving - up yours.'
- Don't let worry kill you -- let the church help.

That last one brings us back to earth with a bump. Worry! If you listened to the gospel reading, that seems to be what Advent is about. No sooner are we beginning the year than we're talking about the end of the world in catastrophe. Is Advent a beginning or an ending? Why does the church prepare for Christmas by worrying, when the rest of society is buying presents, going to parties and eating too much?

Of course, if you listen carefully enough, the gospel isn't about worrying at all. It's about hope and trust in God in the midst of disaster. When we hear of disasters and problems, Jesus tells us to stand up and raise your heads, because redemption is near. We're reminded of that at the start of the year because we forget so easily. We do worry. I even worry if I've got nothing to worry about.

But the terrible things we see around us in our world, and the pain and suffering we experience in our own lives should not worry those who trust in God; they're just reminders that God is coming to save us. Just as we endure winter storms because we know the trees will soon be in bud and summer is coming, so we need not fear when we experience disaster, because it is a sign that redemption is near.

Easy to say; not easy to do. So how do we endure disaster, difficulties and pain and still hold on to hope? The gospel gives us two ways: stay alert and pray.

What does it mean to be alert? I think it's about noticing glimpses of God in everyday life. It's so easy to see the world, because it confronts us always. But it's not so easy to notice God. We get tiny glimpses, clues left for us by God, to remind us that he's all around and he's in control. I don't know what the glimpses of God are for you.

For me, they're things like going for a walk on a crisp, sunny morning; or the smell of a newborn baby; or shared tears and laughter when I remember someone I love who has died. Our glimpses of God are important to us, because they are what give us hope to get through the messiness of life. Spend some time in Advent thinking about how you notice God's presence, and it will be time well spent in preparing for Christmas.

I want to help you notice some things about this church that are glimpses of God too. They're things you might not know, but they're signs that God is with us, comforting us and disturbing us.

First: for the first time in many years we've paid our parish share without undue worry at the last minute. That's a really positive sign for our future, and it's due to your generosity. It's a glimpse of God's work in you. So thank you.

Secondly: our group system has gone through a time of considerable change. So today we give thanks for the glimpses of God made possible by all those who have served the church through the groups over the years. And we pray for new group leaders and group members that we will continue to experience God in each other and in our worship, as friendships grow and our worship is enriched.

And lastly: our PCC has agreed a vision and purpose for the church for the next three years. Our vision is the transformation of all human life in Christ, and our purpose is Living Faith in Burghfield. There's not time to unpack that today, we'll talk about it in detail in the new year. But for now I want to highlight one important part of our purpose which helps us catch glimpses of God. It's prayer, and it's what Jesus encourages us to do in the gospel passage. Be alert, Jesus says, and pray. So we're going to focus on prayer in the year to come, because this underpins and enables all we are and all we can be, as individuals and as the church. You were given a gift as you came in, it's this Prayer Guide. This is a resource from the diocese to help and encourage us in our prayer life. Have a look at it, and perhaps use the simple form of prayer on the middle page each day during Advent, to prepare for Christmas, or practice the presence of God and try to notice the glimpses of God in your daily life.

Of course it's hard to be alert and live in hope amid all the rubbish of the world and our lives. God never promised it would be easy to live as his people. That's why Jesus tells us to pray that we might have strength. Because without prayer we can do nothing. So let's pray.

Lord, we know all things come from you, and we thank you for the material resources entrusted to us. Make us wise stewards so we do not lavish our money on passing desires, but invest our earthly gifts according to eternal values.

For our groups at St Mary's we give you thanks. For those who have led them over the years. For all who have shared in their work. And we pray for the future our groups and all those who are part of them, especially our new group leaders and group members.

And, good Lord, reshape us all until in generosity, in faith, and in expectation that the best is yet to come, we are truly Christ-like. Make us passionate followers of Jesus, rather than passive supporters. Make our church a place of radical discipleship and a signpost to heaven, then, in us, through us, and - if need be - despite us, let your kingdom come. Amen.

Blessings  
Gill