Advent Sunday  
St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5  
Matthew 24:36-44

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was a Cub Scout motto was “Be Prepared”. It’s a good motto for anyone in any walk of life I suppose, and it is the resounding, continual, consistent message of Advent, this first season of the Christian year which begins today. Actually I had a first-hand test of my preparedness on Friday when various things conspired to lead the vicar to asked me to preach as well as to preside this morning. Are you prepared to write an Advent servant in two days Tom? And I guess you’ll be able to tell me in eight or nine minutes whether I was prepared enough or not!

But actually it's a joy for me to preach this morning, because in this brave new Robert-less world, the vicar has asked me to come to preside and preach here on Christmas morning. So it's lovely to get to know some of you before that anyway, but also actually rather lovely to begin the journey that will lead us 25 days later to the birth of Christ at Christmas. It's lovely to begin with you, and then come back in a few weeks’ time to see all five candles burning.

And actually there’s a golden thread running through everything we do today, on this Advent Sunday, and indeed it is a thread which continues to run through the whole of this season, if we let it speak to us, and if we can manage to hold in tension the competing demands of being an Advent people in the midst of a Christmas world. I’ll come back to what I mean by that in a minute. [I wonder how many Christmas lunches you have already accepted invitations to?]

This Sunday we launch into the reading of Matthew’s Gospel. We’ll read it for the whole of this year, up to and including the Sunday before Advent 2020, and we will read our way through the birth, and life, and ministry, and death and resurrection of this man Jesus, towards whom everything points, and who is the centre, the heart, and the wellspring of our lives.

And, as perverse as this might sound, I’d like to talk about what we’ll read in 51 weeks time, just for a moment. When we get to the end of this New Year and we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, the Gospel reading we will read is Matthew 25 – the parable of the sheep and the goats. “I was hungry”, we will hear our Lord say to us, “and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was sick and in prison and you did not come to me. And they shall say to the King, “Lord when was it that we saw you hungry, or thirsty, or sick or in prison and did not care for you?” And the King shall say to those on his left hand, “truly I tell you, whenever you did not do this for the least of these who are members of my family, you did not do it to me.” We are starting this New Year with the end in mind, this morning. Where we are going is that terrifying and illuminating parable where Our Lord makes it absolutely clear that when we see, and notice, and react to, and make decisions about whether or not to act or not, towards the needy in our world, we are seeing, noticing, and choosing whether or not to ignore him.

The call, throughout Matthew’s Gospel, and indeed throughout the whole of the scriptures, is to justice. Advent is about justice. It is, at its heart, about listening, about being ready, about hearing that cry which wells up from the very depth, from the bone and the marrow of creation; that cry, that yearning, for a world that is fair, and just, and honest. Advent, and indeed Jesus Christ, is about integrity. How is it that this baby in the manger, this shabby itinerant preacher, this crucified criminal,
has something to say to me, to you, about how the world could be different, gentler and yet more robust... transformed?

So we begin, on Advent Sunday, holding in our minds the sheep and the goats, and we start with Isaiah. Isaiah the prophet, is like a loudhailer with a conscience, if you like. It’s as if someone is sitting on the shoulder of the people and shouting into their ears – ‘will you please look around you and what’s going on. Look at your society, look at your religion, look at your heart. Can you not see the inconsistencies, the hypocrisy, the double-standards?”

And what does Isaiah want to talk about, right at the beginning of his work? He wants to talk about what is going to happen to weapons. Weapons, in a week where we have had another terrorist attack in our capital. He wants to talk about swords - and I guess logically kitchen knives, guns and suicide vests - being so entirely put beyond use that they can be used to furrow the ground instead. About spears so decommissioned that you can use them for your gardening. He wants to talk about justice. Justice, in a month in which we will once again take part in a democratic exercise to choose those who govern us. About a God who is coming to exact fair judgement upon the world. Weapons – swords, spears and so on, are needed because there is imperfect judgement, unjust rule, bias, criminality, corruption, jealously, covetousness. It is these things which result in a need for weapons. Because if David sees my television and likes it, he might come and steal it in the night. So I need to go up to the sports shop and buy a big bat so that I can lie in wait for David.

Injustice breeds mistrust and hatred and that pollutes society. And Isaiah is crying out to the people, a people who have drifted and relapsed and forgotten the principles on which their nation was founded, he is crying out to them to walk in the light. To make a radical decision to move into a new mode of being, a new set of assumptions about how we do business one with another. A society of faith and trust, where it is God who gets to judge – where it is God and God alone who gets to decide how much you, or I, am worth.

But that is not a world which has yet appeared – the Kingdom is coming, but is not yet here. And don’t we know it this week, this month. And so we do need to be prepared; to keep awake, the attitude which Christ calls his hearers to adopt in today’s Gospel reading. Do not be taken by surprise, is his message. The new order is coming, and it is not going to look very much like what you recognise now.

Just like, of course, at Christmas we recall that when the King entered his kingdom he did not look very much like a King. And as we heard last week, when the King was enthroned, that throne looked rather like a cross. And as we will hear in 51 weeks time, when we meet our King in the street, he probably doesn’t look much like a King either. He looks like a sick friend, or a homeless beggar, or a disturbed visitor to the cathedral, or the problematic and irritating person we most want to avoid.

There was an amusing and salutary story in the news years ago now, but I still remember it, of a new pastor appointed to one of these super-churches in the States, you know, congregation of 10,000 or something. And on his first Sunday, with only the elders in the know, he turned up for church dressed as a down-and-out. And he waited to be ministered to. He was first of all asked whether he was in the right place. Then he was moved by a Steward from the front row of the church, where he had sat down, to the back. When before the service he asked for some food, none was offered, and neither were any details of local food banks or hostels. His congregation were rather dismayed when, at the notices, when he was welcomed by the elder, he got up from his seat at the back of the church, climbed, with his
shoeless feet, into the pulpit and began to preach. He preached on the sheep and the goats.

Be prepared. Keep awake. Look for the arrival of the kingdom. These are the messages of Advent. That is why we light, slowly, one candle after the next, because the kingdom comes gradually. The light grows gradually. But it does grow. And yes we are counting down to Christmas, and all that that means to us as Christians, but we are also counting down to the time when everything will be transformed, when weapons will be garden forks, when tears will turn to laughter, and unexpectedly the King will be in his kingdom. The advent challenge is to live, as much as possible as if all five candles were already burning today. As if the kingdom was already here.

Amen.