



***The Church's prayer for this Sunday – the First Sunday of Advent***

Almighty God,  
as your kingdom dawns,  
turns us from the darkness of sin  
to the light of holiness,  
that we may be ready to meet you  
in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

**Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> November 2020, the  
First Sunday of Advent**

**Psalm 80: 1-8, 18-20**

**Prayer for Israel's Restoration**

**To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.**

<sup>1</sup> Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
<sup>2</sup> before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!  
<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
<sup>4</sup> O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
<sup>6</sup> You make us the scorn of our neighbours;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.  
<sup>7</sup> Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
<sup>8</sup> You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
<sup>18</sup> Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.  
<sup>19</sup> Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is  
now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

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## A reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 64: 1-9

<sup>1</sup>O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
<sup>2</sup>as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
<sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
<sup>4</sup>From ages past no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who works for those who wait for him.  
<sup>5</sup>You meet those who gladly do right,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
But you were angry, and we sinned;  
because you hid yourself we transgressed.  
<sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
<sup>7</sup>There is no one who calls on your name,  
or attempts to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.  
<sup>8</sup>Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,  
and do not remember iniquity for ever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

**For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.**

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## Today's reading from the gospels: Mark 13: 24-end

### The Coming of the Son of Man

<sup>24</sup> 'But in those days, after that suffering,

    "the sun will be darkened,  
    and the moon will not give its light,  
<sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
    and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."

<sup>26</sup> Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

### The Lesson of the Fig Tree

<sup>28</sup> 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

### The Necessity for Watchfulness

<sup>32</sup> 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

**For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.**

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## **A reflection for the First Sunday of Advent from Revd David Newton, Lead Minister for Comberton, Caldecote and Toft**

Last week I met – via zoom – with my Spiritual Director. This is someone who asks me probing questions about my walk with the Lord. Most clergy have someone like this whom they meet with. We get together once every couple of months; he is skilled in what he does, and I am blessed by his gentle quiet listening and questioning.

This time, towards the end of the session he asked one of those questions – as he does – that caught me off guard and that needed pondering, the kind of question that spiritual direction is all about. He asked what impact the last 8 months has had on me; what it had ‘done’ to me *within*.

Now, I had spent plenty of time being asked by people what I had learnt, or what was good in all this, or what good could grow out of this time. But no one had gone so directly for the heart and asked, what’s been going on *inside* during all this?

I’m ashamed to admit that I hadn’t given it that much thought. I had instead just been ‘getting on’ or perhaps more accurately, ‘getting by’.

I said I’d have to have a ponder and chew it over, which is what I’ve been doing ever since. More on that later.

Today marks the beginning of the season of Advent, the beginning of the church year, which looks to Christ’s coming at Christmas, as well as to his second coming in glory. However we might interpret such an idea as ‘the second coming’ (and there are some fairly extraordinary sci-fi type interpretations out there) at its heart, it is all about judgement.

By judgement I do not mean something connected with fire and brimstone, with punishment and an angry God. Instead judgement is about revealing things as they really are.

A food critic makes a judgement about how good a chef’s cooking is – they reveal (in their own limited way) what they ‘see’ that is good in a dish and what is bad in it. They draw out the subtleties of flavour and texture that my palate might have missed. They attempt to show everyone else the ‘reality’ of this dish – perhaps hidden behind trendy décor and fancy presentation.

The Judgement of Christ then is about this showing of things as they really are. We can think of this judgement in two ways.



First, we can – and must – in some sense think of a ‘final’ judgement. ‘He will come again to judge the quick and the dead’ we say in our creed. There will come a day when everything will be laid bare before the Love of God. For some that Love might burn like a roaring flame, whilst for others it might console like a gentle fire in the hearth. To think of future judgement is to hold on to the possibility of hope – that evil will be ‘burnt up’ and all things restored in the life of God.

But second, we can – and must – also think about this judgement as happening here and now. We can – and I think must – think of ‘the second coming’ not just as a future event, but something that happens in our hearts and in our lives as we continuously open ourselves up to God’s Judgement.

So, we pray – especially at this time of year – tear open the heavens and come down (as our Isaiah reading starts). Traditionally, every Advent service started with these words. It is a prayer orientated towards the future, yes, but also a prayer for now – that God might come down upon us in judgement *now*.

It is a prayer that his Love would help us to see ourselves and the world around us, as it really is; it is a prayer that our eyes would be opened. And, going a bit further, it is a prayer that God’s Love would burn up the chaff within and kindle whatever goodness there is instead. Or, in the words from Isaiah, that we might allow ourselves to become clay in the potter’s hand to be shaped and moulded and remade. That is what judgement is all about. That is what the Coming of Christ on the clouds in power and glory – in this moment – is all about.

Which brings us back to the question from my Spiritual Director. What impact has the last 8 months had on me... what’s been going on *within*? To be honest, as soon as he asked I was pretty sure of the answer, but I didn’t like the answer very much so I hedged around it. So, let’s cut to the chase now: it’s made me grumpier, angrier and more impatient.

That’s the judgement, that’s what’s been revealed. Now of course, other more positive things have been going on as well – none of us are that simple or transparent. But, too often I think, Christianity emphasises the good things that come out of hardship; it emphasises all the ways in which we’ve grown through difficulty. Unfortunately, the reality is that for most of humanity, suffering does not *naturally* bring out the best in us; it leads to vice not virtue. The reality that I do not want to hear is that in the wake of the last 8 months I have probably not really become more Christ-like, in fact I have probably picked up a few habits of the heart that need re-aligning.



So, this Advent, I want to open myself up to that extraordinary unlimited Love that pours down from above. I want to let that love renew me even as we face another 5 or 6 months of life looking relatively similar. I want to invite Christ to come again into my heart (again and again and again) to renew me.

And I want to develop greater habits of generosity towards everyone else who might also be grumpier, or angrier or less patient than they were; or who might have developed other wonky habits of the heart through these hard times. For we all need to give each other an extra pinch of grace in these days.

So, I invite you to join me on the journey into Advent. Amen.