

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen.

Happy new year! Today is the start of the new church year also known as Advent.

Advent is the season of **preparation** for Christmas, not the **celebration** of it. It is linked with Christmas the same way that Lent is linked with Easter. However, Advent is just as different from Christmas as Lent is from Easter.

During Advent the colours of the church are changed to purple the colour of repentance and reflection.

We light candles during Advent and we sing specific hymns, known as advent carols. The most famous carol being O come O come Emmanuel.

Advent meaning 'coming' after the Latin word Adventus.

The four weeks of Advent are broken down into the themes:

1. Hope (or promise)
2. Preparation (waiting or prophecy)
3. Joy (peace)
4. Love (adoration)

In the busyness of the season and the commercialism that is all around us. We ask that God will help us to keep our minds and hearts focussed on Jesus.

By starting the new Church year, we are also saying goodbye to Luke's gospel which has been with us for the last 12 months and moving on to Matthews gospel.

Luke was a doctor and his Gospel was written for the underdog. Matthew was a Jewish tax collector, well versed in Jewish law and symbolism and we will see this as we work through his gospel over the coming year. Advent is also a time where we read and study the writings of the Prophet Isaiah and the writings of Paul in his letters to the Romans.

Advent is the time for waiting and for preparation, a good time to reflect on the year that has gone and, as advent is also the start of the new Christian year, it is also a good time to consider how we can live our faith more fully in the coming year.

Perhaps we should be bolder in our faith, perhaps finding out answers to questions we have been putting off or telling friends, neighbours or colleagues that we go to Church and follow Jesus.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, the disciples ask Jesus about the End of Time. They want to know if it will happen soon. In response to their questions Jesus tells stories. He reminds them that in the days of Noah, people were living their lives with little concern for God. Only Noah and his family were wise enough to listen to God's warning and build the Ark.

When Jesus comes again, he tells his disciples, it's going to be like that. Life will be going on as usual; people will do what they normally do, buying and selling, working and playing, just ordinary things. Then suddenly, without warning, the Lord will return. When that happens, some will be ready, and some will not.

Recently I received a letter from my old manager's wife, Sue. Ben was a brilliant boss, he looked a lot like Lord Sugar and was very wise and business savvy.

When Alan and I married his words of wisdom to us were never go out the door without a kiss and always tell each other of your love. He retired a number of years ago but we kept in touch. He kept active by attending the University of the Third Age events, researching history and attending his local community centre keep fit classes.

Three months ago, having shared a coffee and discussed their plans for the day, he kissed his wife goodbye and went down the High Street to get a haircut. He never returned, the massive brain haemorrhage was instant and pain free.....Jesus said

“ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left..., for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Some people are simply kept busy doing the things that are important to them, they don't think of the future or their faith or those left behind. Sue was sad but comforted that they had had such a special relationship.

In Matthew's Gospel the disciples are asking Jesus a "when" question. Jesus insists that is the wrong question:

He says "But about that day and hour no-one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. The important thing is not for us to speculate about "when" the world will end but rather to focus on how we ought to live our lives as fully committed followers of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps Jesus will come again, very soon, in your lifetime or in mine. Or perhaps Jesus will simply come to each of us at the conclusion of our earthly lives.

In today's reading, we are reminded of how precious life is. We cannot know what later today or tomorrow will hold, so that makes each moment so special.

Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding corn together; one will be taken and one will be left. These simple illustrations remind us of a reality:

Life is forever filled with the unexpected astonishing joys and unanticipated tragedies.

The sudden death of a friend, a natural disaster, random uncertainties of life, the cry of a newborn baby, the beauty of the countryside around us.

This start of the new Church year, Advent, is Jesus is trying to speak to you? Can you hear His voice? Can we train our ears, or has His message been drowned out by all the noise and distractions that we have allowed to fill our lives, particularly at Christmas?

Advent calls us to pause and take stock.

Therefore, we must be ready, that is the Advent message we hear clearly on this First Sunday of the new Church Year.

Through our faith, we know one day Jesus will come back, though the day and the hour are unknown to all but God. But when he comes let us be prepared. Let us take this time to prepare for and search for the greatest reward of all, our Christian faith and let us follow Jesus every day through Advent and the rest of our lives.

Happy New Year!

Amen