

Father, help us to see you as God, and not ourselves, that the love of Jesus may flow into our hearts this Advent. Amen

- Advent. Many people's favourite season of the Year. ... What themes naturally come to mind when you consider Advent? ... Probably high up on many people's list will be hope. Advent hope.
- And hope, a hope for God to act, is high profile in today's readings. In the very first verse of our first reading, Isaiah 64, verse 1 'O ... *that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence*'. There seems to be a real sense of yearning there, a hope for God to dramatically act in the lives of the Israelites struggling under poverty and possible enforced slavery. Even for Jesus in Mark's Gospel, there are hints of hope. Look at verse 27. '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.' That smacks of hope for the elect. Hope amongst the judgement
- And there is a lot of judgement. Judgement is one of the great themes of Advent, and until the last 200 years or so it would have been high on the list. But today is God's judgement a natural Advent theme for you? Do you consider it much? If so, then you have a good understanding of weaving the messages of scripture into your life. Our readings are full of it. Some with an element of relief, and a lot with overbearing overtones of trepidation.
- The third verse of Isaiah remembers stories of how God used to act 'When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence'. There is a definite sense that Isaiah wants God to do it again; look at the verse before '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!' That's judgement for you.
- To my mind there is a sense of looking for relief in all this judgement in Isaiah, tinged with a bit of trepidation. In Mark, the relief is still there, but the trepidation is much more the overpowering sentiment in a passage which is bung full of judgement. Look at the poetry in the very first verse. Is that mainly about trepidation or mainly relief? To some extent the jury is out! "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory.'
- For many, Advent is also about preparation. Getting ready. Getting ready for God to act. Once again you can clearly see this Advent theme of preparation in both our readings. In verse 5 of Isaiah 64, we hear Isaiah commenting on God's character and humanity's failings, '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.' There's an implication that we need to prepare, to change our hearts, to acknowledge we are not perfect, if we want God's help.
 - And in Mark, we are exhorted to make sure we have got our eyes open and are waiting, prepared. 'Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.'
- However there is little here about what the majority of the population of Britain, think of as the main Advent theme. For many it is starting to celebrate. Carol singing around the streets. Remember the days when you could sing carols? Presents wrapped and under the tree. Hot mulled wine and mince pies. I challenge you to find any of that in today's readings. There is little here of excitement, just of awed anticipation. There is little to suggest the action has started, rather that it is coming soon. There is little in the readings about December panic to get everything done, and rather more about trepidation that you might not be ready for God.
- So instead of looking at Advent in terms of the transitory and misguided world of which we are part, which Isaiah describes accurately when he says, 'We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.', I want to suggest a different way of engaging with the great true Advent themes of hope, judgement and preparation. And that is by using our imagination.
- What do you dream when you think of your hope for the world? When you consider God's judgement, where does your imagination take you? And when you think about how to prepare, to where does your mind wander?
- Isaiah must have had a lively imagination to be able to write in such evocative picture language like 'Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Jesus must have dreamed dreams to be able to say, ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'

- These readings are not schedules or human targets, like a Christmas to-do list waiting to be ticked off. These are dreams, picture language of how Isaiah and Jesus, and St Mark, hope life will one day be.
- But these dreams are grounded. They are grounded first in the perspective of the cross and resurrection. Look at verse 35 of the Gospel and spot the cross. *'you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.'* We are still in Holy Week here. The very next sentence after today's reading begins, *'It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread.'* Jesus is about to be arrested in the evening, to be denied by Peter at cockcrow and to be tried before Pilate in the morning.
 - And when Jesus speaks of *'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory*, that surely speaks of a resurrected Christ, rather than a crucified one.
- These dreams are also grounded in seeing the signs of the times. Where we are today. Where the world is today. Is it time for God to act? Isaiah's situation is a nation being victimised by their enemies when he prays, *'make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!'* It was clearly time!
 - Jesus gives a colourful little parable of a budding fig tree heralding spring. *'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'*, and uses it to remind us to look at what is going to decide whether the hope is going to be fulfilled soon. *'So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.'*
- And these dreams are grounded in keeping the focus on God, rather than ourselves. He may be working through us, but it is still God who makes the first move. As I quoted earlier, *'we are the clay, and you are our potter.'* We cannot choose the time, it is up to God. As Jesus says, *'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'*
- So what are your Advent dreams and hopes? Where does your imagination take you? Does it take on board the three grounding principles from this morning's reading? Is it grounded in the cross and resurrection? Is it grounded in the perspective of the budding fig tree, the time being right in the world around us? And is it grounded in a focus upon God and his perspective rather than simply our own desires?
- I think you probably know my dreams, my hope. That God will act to save his wounded world, damaged irreparably by human beings. I hope that he will act with mercy to save the vulnerable, but suspect that his judgement may not be so comfortable for you and me if we just drift on hoping for better things in the New Year when a vaccine starts to take effect rather than being prepared to make some changes to our own lifestyle to get ready. I think you probably know that I wonder if the present pandemic is a first step by God to put the world back on a more ecologically sound footing but that it will almost certainly require much more than this to encourage human beings to change their intransigent and destructive ways.
 - Do I want this to happen? Do I want God to act in this way? Well, like the view of judgement in the readings there's relief and hope tinged with trepidation about what it will mean for me! It gives hope for the salvation of the world but not necessarily for the comfort of Andrew Holford. Certainly little comfort if I don't get ready for it and stay awake like the slaves waiting for their master.
- And in all that, I see something of the cross and resurrection, the sacrifice necessary to produce the salvation of the world. I see something about the time being pregnant with waiting like a young pregnant girl journeying on a donkey on a rough road with her fiancée waiting to give birth. The fig tree is budding and ready to sprout.. And I see the focus on God rather than ourselves as world events get increasingly traumatic and unstable and the comfortable world order we have so carefully built up is exposed for what it really is, an unfair, unjust consumerist nightmare, so very far from the Kingdom of God.
- And all this makes the excitement and panic of a normal December as we scuttle from shop to party and back again eating shop bought mince pies and choosing the colour of our wrapping paper, seem strangely trivial.
- Is your dream the same as mine? Where does your imagination take you as you think of hope, judgement and preparation? And does it include the cross, the fig tree and the spotlight on God?
- If the answers to all this are 'yes', then you have an Advent hope which at one with our Advent bible passages.
 - In which case the advice from Jesus is his parable about the slaves waiting for their master comes into play, *'And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'* Happy dreaming! Happy Advent!