

## **Sermon:** Advent baby or Advent King

**Reading:** Mark 1:1-8

### **Introduction:**

Advent always confused me. The four weeks before Christmas is usually filled with adverts of Christmas, shops playing Christmas tunes, tinsel, lights, snowmen, cards and santa. It all seemed warm, cosy and inviting. All this changed when I began training to be a preacher and was introduced to the lectionary readings for each of the Sundays of Advent leading up to Christmas.

Here is what challenged me, when I began looking at the lectionary readings for Advent I soon discovered they had little to do with the Christmas I had come to know. The first of Advent gospel readings we heard Jesus is speaking of wars, rumour of wars and earthquakes and the end times. I wondered how on earth do I make this more Christmassy?

Surely next weeks reading will be more Christmassy. Then in the Second Sunday of Advent we pick up on the ministry of John the Baptist. The voice of the one calling out in the wilderness, John's message was one of repentance and prepare our hearts for the coming King. The third Sunday of Advent again focusses back in with John the baptist. Can you see what I mean? The readings didn't seem to relate to what I had traditionally considered Christmas type services! What happened to the preparing the cards, presents, tree, turkey? The obvious answer of course Advent is not Christmas, even though the cultural Christmas seems to begin celebrating Christmas from November!

### **Taking a fresh look at Advent**

We have just completed a year, journeying with Jesus through the eyes of St. Matthew. The gospel of Matthew begins with the birth of Jesus and ends with Jesus speaking prophetically reigning as King. What struck me about Matthew's gospel was out of

28 chapters

1071 verses

18,345 words

Only 6 verses are dedicated to Jesus' birth, which in covered in 22 words out of 18,345 words! In fact out of these 22 words we also have His name and His purpose saying, "But he did not consulate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins'.

As we have entered the new lectionary year we are journeying with Jesus through the gospel of St. Mark. It's interesting to note just how many verses Mark dedicates to 'Christmas?' Answer - absolutely none! This really surprised me when I read the Scriptures for myself. I had to ask the question, do you think we have over emphasised Christmas and the birth of Jesus in our churches?

The problem with commercialism in our culture is the message is less about Jesus and more about santa. If we in the church also skew the message of the gospel by focussing on the babe in the manger 2000 years ago, what hope does this offer a world which is lost spiritually, morally in free fall and commercially on the brink of bankruptcy? If we focus on the Incarnation and this risen King who is with us now and promised to come again, then our message is a message of hope to a confused and rebellious world. Sentimental messages of Christmas past will not give us the strength we need to see us through hard winters still to come. However the living Christ and the hope of His soon coming will, for those who put their trust and faith in Jesus. Are we looking backwards with sentiment or forward in hope?

This is what the gospel and New Testament writers want us to see. Matthew focusses on Jesus as King and mark focusses on Jesus divinity. Compared this to our cultural Christianity with a baby, gentle Jesus, no crying he makes, nativity. You may want to disagree with me and that is fine, we don't need to reinvent Christmas but we do need to recapture again the amazing miracle of the Incarnation and focus on Jesus as King who will judge the nations and less focus on the sentiment of a baby!

### **John the Baptist**

The Second Sunday of Advent brings our attention to John the baptist. He also had a miraculous start in life, he was to be set apart for God, appointed to be the forerunner of Jesus to prepare the way. John's mission and chief concern was for the people who are like lost sheep without a shepherd. Wandering, confused, without hope and lost. They are led by blind guides who only know the laws of God and not the God who gave them. He had a thirst for righteousness and holiness and so his message sounded hard and challenging. To the leaders, the priests he called, a, 'Brood of vipers' and said, challenged them saying, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

I realised when studying the Scriptures I had misunderstood Advent and Christmas completely. The focus of Advent is not just about the coming of the Christ child but the coming of a King. Advent is not so much looking back but looking forward to Jesus promised return as King.

Mark's gospel chapter 1:1-2 provides lost people with an encouraging word of hope as he writes, I've got good news for you.....

The beginning of the good news about **Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God**, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way"  
"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'"

This is a great opening to a gospel. Mark is wanting to share good news with us. Who doesn't want to hear good news today? This good news is about a person and Mark names Him for us, 'Jesus the Messiah' and then informs us about His unique nature He is divine (not in beauty but in divinity, for He is the Son of God. All this in the first verse, what a great start to a gospel.

Mark then goes on to share an ancient prophecy by which the world will know how to recognise this anointed one who is to come. So Mark reminds us of the prophecy spoken by Malachi who says,

"See I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire will come", says the Lord Almighty.

**(Malachi 3:1)**

John is the herald for the Servant King who is coming to rescue His people from their sins, declaring,

"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world".

**(John 3)**

Wouldn't it be refreshing this Christmas is we had an opportunity to watch not another nativity play but a live debate with our church leaders with John the Baptist? Imagine the

line up, Arch Bishop of Canterbury, the Pope and the President of the Methodist Conference along with John the Baptist. Can you imagine the news paper headlines the next day? The woke, snowflake generation would be hopping mad. The Baptist would fail to impress the audience and the latest polls would show John's popularity has declined significantly after the disastrous TV face off. There would be calls to strike John from our Christmas TV schedules and not give him any airtime. Twitter and face books would be alight with hash tags, 'Not in my name,' not just from the secular world but from some within the church today. I wonder how many church leaders would begin distancing themselves from John's message because of his theology and 'traditional' points of view. How many would be smarting after being called a 'brood of vipers and blind guides?'

### **Brood of vipers**

What did John mean by calling the religious leaders a brood of vipers? Basically he is calling the leaders a family of venomous snakes, or another way of phrasing this could be deadly sons of that ancient serpent, doing Satan's work not God's. John was not afraid to challenge anyone, from the religious leaders, through to the king. John was a godly man and when men and women have spent time in the presence of the King of heaven, they become less intimidated by kings and rivers of this adulterous and evil age. John called out Herod's sin for marrying his brother's Phillips while Herodias saying it was not right in the sight of God as it was adulterous. Imagine if the Archbishops, and Methodist President called out our political leaders on their adulterous relationships, I imagine they wouldn't last as long as John the baptist did today.

What do you think about John the Baptist? Some may see John's approach as hateful by today's standards, unloving and out of touch! So what did Jesus think about His cousin, John the baptist?

The first thing we notice is what we don't hear! Jesus does not apologise for John's attitude, his over zealous bluntness or correct him saying his theology was too hard, too black and white and out of touch and plain wrong. We certainly don't hear Jesus saying, John should have been more loving and how wrong he was. So what did Jesus actually say about John? Jesus says,

"Among those born of woman there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist"  
and refers to him as a "burning and shining light."

No one has ever received such high praise as John did from Jesus. And to affirm John's analysis of the religious teachers of the day, Jesus repeats the same claim made by John in **Matthew 12:34** calling the religious leaders a 'brood of vipers'. Imagine then a televised debate with church leaders, politicians and Jesus? No wonder Jesus said, 'You will be hated by everyone because of my name' (**Matt 10:22**).

### **John the Herald**

John's mission given by God was calling the people to prepare their lives for promised Messiah and they can do so through the waters of baptism of repentance. The preaching, teaching and call in Advent should be the same, as we get ourselves ready for the long awaited King who is coming to reign and judge the nations. This is what made me rethink the message of Advent. It doesn't match the cultural christianity and secular message we are all so familiar with, filled with sentiment, and popular services of carols and candles, however it's a message which is real and sobering.

If the disciples walked through our towns, and cities today or even attended some of the seeker sensitive church services, would they know what we are celebrating and why?

St. Mark wouldn't know what we are celebrating and would probably be so confused with cultural christianity with its trees, reindeers, stars, santa's and snowmen.

## The coming King

When we view Advent as a season to prepare ourselves for the coming King we will see a great and glorious picture of a wonderful King who is coming to take up His seat in this world and reign in glory, with all of His saints in light. In glorious triumph He will descend , after the shout of the archangel and the blast of the trumpet. Like a thief in the night, unexpected and out of the blue Jesus will descend on the clouds, just as the disciples watched him ascend. Jesus coming, riding upon a horse (a Kings entry), followed by all of the angelic beings with Him. The angels will be tasked to go to the four points of the world and gather the elect for an audience with the King. For the time has come and everyone will see.

Imagine those who are in prison, who have lost their freedom for maintaining their faith in Jesus, as they are locked up in chains when suddenly their cell fill with light as their chains fall of and the doors fling open. The angels saying, 'get up and follow me' (**Acts 12:7**). Imagine those who are being tortured, persecuted or about to be slain for owning Jesus name. When their eyes behold the Kings messengers gathering them together rescuing them from their foes. For those who have faced scoffers and being mocked in their homes, at work or their communities when the angel interrupts and invites the Christian saying, 'follow me'. Can you picture the scene? This is going to happen at some point, what if it is our generation - does this thought make us more fervent. If not then remember St. Peter who said he would never deny Jesus and then he experienced the Lord's gaze fix on him in the courtyard when the cock crowed as Peter denied knowing Jesus for the third time, how he wept bitterly!

Jesus reminds us His coming will be like a thief in the night, unexpected and the world will not be ready for it. The days will be just like the days of Noah, eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage on that great and glorious day of the Lord. Everything going on as normal just as it did in the days before the floods suddenly came. We need to rethink Advent for the King promised to come. The first Advent Jesus came quietly in a small town, the Second Advent will be much more noisy and wont be missed by anyone.

The King is coming and He will judge the nations

There is no one who can overthrow Him and

No one to come after Him.

For He is the Alpha and the Omega

The Beginning and the End

He will be Israel's long promised King, ruling from Zion, ushering in peace

During His reign.....

The lion will eat straw like the ox

The wolf will lie down with the lamb

The ways of war will be remembered no more

The weapons of war will be turned into plough shares and pruning hooks

There will be peace on earth and lives shall be cut short

Every knee shall bow and

Every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord

He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

This is the hope of those whose faith is in Christ. John's message is for the world to be ready through repentance and faith in Jesus, turning our hearts back to God who created them and all things. This Advent don't just look back to the manger, He coming as King and God's people will truly rejoice and sing for joy at the greatest gift the world has ever seen. Now wouldn't that make an exciting Christmas this year! **Amen**