**ADVENT 1 Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37**

Today is the first Sunday in Advent; the first Sunday in the new liturgical year. When we reach Advent, we know that Christmas is almost upon us.

Already Christmas preparations are in full swing. The decorations are in the shops, we’re already attending break ups and end of year celebrations. Many of us are starting to look forward to family gatherings and we’re thinking about what gifts to give. The Carol Services start this week. It’s a busy time, but it’s one that most of us look forward to. The warm fuzzies of Christmas are upon us.

Then we come to church this morning - the first Sunday of Advent - and instead of hearing encouraging readings which remind us of the coming of the Christ child – we hear this: **“**Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!”

Maybe we think – “Well, that’s typical Old Testament fire & brimstone. The Gospel reading will be better.” But the Gospel reading seems even worse; “But in those days, following that distress, "'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

It’s less than month before Christmas; what is this all about?”

Advent is a season which reminds us that the coming of the Christ child that first Christmas is not the pinnacle of the Christian story. It is a crucial part of the story – but there’s more!

The birth of Christ in Bethlehem was certainly the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, and a long awaited event, but the Advent readings over these next four weeks remind us that Christmas is part of a much larger story.

That story started way back in the Garden of Eden; when Adam & Eve were given the choice to obey God - or not. They chose not to and sin entered the world. From that time onwards, God has been at work in human history to redeem his beloved creation.

Through Noah, then Abraham, then Moses, and many more, God sought to teach his people his ways and bring them back to himself. Ultimately, we would need a Saviour, through whom God would become flesh and live among us; through whom he would reveal himself to us; through whom he would deal with the sin of the world; through whom he would give us a new heart, and place his Spirit within us, and through whom he will ultimately restore his whole creation.

The coming of the Christ child moves us closer to this end, and the readings of Advent place that story within its wider context.

And so in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, we have a lament. It begins with those frightful words, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!”

These words were written from the midst of Israel’s exile in Babylon and the early days of their return to the devastated and destroyed Promised Land.  Isaiah longed for God to show himself in power as he had in ancient times.

As the Israelites looked at the destruction around them, they were profoundly aware that they had brought this on themselves.  They recognised that their behaviour, as individuals and as a nation, had led to their destruction.  And they were sorry.

In verse 8, Isaiah asked God to not only to forgive the people, but also to restore, renew, remake them.  “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.”

The Isaiah reading is a reminder that all humankind has rebelled against God and incurred his judgement. The dark place Israel found herself in resonates in our own world as we look around us and see the darkness of sin expressed in the gluttony of consumerism, the horror of war, the exploitation of the poor, the raging of disease and the decimation of the environment. And like the Israelites, we too need forgiveness.

So as we listen to Isaiah’s lament, and listen to his prayer for his people, we see why we need a Saviour and a Deliverer and we are reminded that this is the reason for the birth of Christ in Bethlehem.

However, God’s plan is not complete in the coming of Christ at Christmas. And so the Gospel reading points us to that time when Christ will return once and for all to bring an end to all that is warped and broken, a time when he will make all things new.

In the reading from Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that things will get worse before they will get better. He says,“When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.”

Jesus goes on to describe a time of great persecution and darkness, but promises that these things will herald his return. Jesus then warns his followers to be alert, as his coming could be at any time, and they should be ready and waiting.

Advent is a time when we look at ourselves and at our world and recognise that we need God.  It is also a time for deep and serious reflection upon the way in which we live our lives, the ways in which our actions are either supportive of God’s will and way in the world, or are hindrances to it.  It is a time to reflect on the need for the reorientation, or redirecting of our lives so that they are more in line with what God wants us to be and to do.

Advent is a time to hope. It is a time when we remind ourselves that the brokenness and pain of this world in which we live will not last forever; that it will be healed and it will be redeemed, just as we are healed and we are redeemed.

Advent is a time of waiting for Christ to come.  It is not a static, hopeless or helpless waiting.  Advent waiting is empowered waiting. Through the Holy Spirit who lives within us, we are God’s agents on earth, and in his name we can bring his love and healing to bear on this broken & hurting world.

So, Advent is a time of renewal and change, of rededication and redirection. It’s a time to open ourselves up to new possibilities of love and service, and to renew our commitment to Christ and his church as we wait for his glorious return.

Let’s pray