

Advent 1 (A)

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

A New Year

Happy New Year! ... Advent is the beginning of the church year, and there's something special about a New Year. It's a marker that something new is happening – a reminder that what matters most lies, not in the past, but in the present and in the future – that there are always new possibilities. Do you remember that very old TV ad (I think it was for Post Bank)? It used the catch phrase: 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life.'

We're called to live not in the past, but to look forward to what God has in store for us – to remember that today heralds something new – the first day of the rest of our lives. So, I'm wondering, on the first day of this New Year, what has God got in store for us?

Advent means *coming* – a time when we prepare for the coming of Christ. It's a season when we look forward to the future with hope. Over the next few weeks we begin to focus on the coming of Christ as a baby in Bethlehem, but that's not where we start. Advent begins with where God is taking us – with our future goal.

If we want to make a good beginning, then we must keep the end in view. Having a goal gives us energy and purpose. One of the things I enjoy about going to the gym is that I'm always reaching for new goals. When I achieve a personal best, I don't stop there. I work to reach another; to lift a heavier weight or master a new technique. My eye is always on the future. Nothing beats having a compelling goal and setting off towards it. If we took that approach, I wonder how this parish might change... I wonder how our lives might change... It's about looking to the future and not locking ourselves into what's been.

In the first reading, the prophet offers a vision of the world's destination. Someday, says the prophet, this is the future that awaits us; this is God's future for us: peoples from all over the world gathered together, all worshipping the one God with no more wars between nations. This is the future to hope for; a future that we can each work with God for through our involvement in the community and through our relationships.

Advent is a time to remember that God is the God of new things and that we're a people of hope. When we talk about hope there's often an element of wishful thinking about it. It might happen, but then it might not. But in Scripture hope is something sure and certain, because it's rooted in who God is and in the reliability of God's promises. Over and over in Scripture we're reminded of God's record of promise keeping, and we're invited to experience God in our own lives as we step into the future. So, we start this New Year looking to the future, knowing that God has hopes and plans that we expect God to accomplish through us, and choosing to work with God as God brings these about.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, and he said (this is a paraphrase): 'The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours... Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ and be up and about!'

Today is a new day, a time for beginning to act in a new way. Just as we wake up and get dressed every morning and face a new day, so we're to get dressed in the character of Christ and share his love and peace with others. How are we going to treat one another today? How are we going to talk

to and about others? Let's allow Christ to transform us into people who love one another and are committed to growing in love for God.

The Gospel reading gives a real edge to this. It reminds us that life doesn't roll on in some aimless way, but that behind it all, and in it all, is God. At some point God will bring it to fulfilment as we reach God's great goal – God will somehow remake creation and Jesus will take centre stage. We don't know when or how this will happen, but it keeps us on our toes, alert and awake, expectant and hopeful.

Matthew paints a picture of people going about their daily work and being surprised by the coming of the Son of Man, that is, Christ. Things can happen quickly, often when we least expect it. The telephone rings, there's a knock at the door, an email arrives, and our lives are changed in an instant. God suddenly comes. God appears while we're doing the ordinary stuff of life – washing the dishes, mowing the lawns, having a BBQ, helping someone in need. And the important thing is that we carry on doing these things, knowing that God is in them, that God is with us, leading us to new possibilities. This encourages us to live our lives with a sense of real intention and hope. It's a hope that stops us sleepwalking through life.

We're pulled into action by the hope for the future that God has placed in our hearts. We wait with expectation for Christ to come again at the end of time and to complete the kingdom of God that has begun amongst us. As we wait, we act for the good of the world around us – for that's what living in hope looks like. Living each day, trusting in God's goodness and grace – waking up each day and choosing to live the life God has given us as the first day of the rest of our life; a day in which God can use us to fulfil God's great plan for the world.

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St Matthew's, Hastings – 1.12.2019*