

Advent Sunday 2020 Zoom Talk

As we enter into the Church's Advent season, we begin a time of waiting and anticipation – a time to prepare to meet God anew, perhaps. The idea of preparation implies the need to be busy – such as by making plans and preparations in order to have everything in place in good time. Most years, for many people, this lead-up to Christmas is a busy, stressful, anxiety provoking season. Today's readings from Isaiah and Mark seem to fuel the feeling of unease and uncertainty (familiar to us already, in 2020?). The readings imply that something frightening and terrible is coming – and we're not quite sure what to do about it. Jesus' disciples Peter, James, John and Andrew may have wished they hadn't asked Jesus to tell them more about the 'coming of the Son of Man'!

But Jesus gives calm, simple advice on how to prepare; 'Keep alert', and 'Keep awake'. The notions of keeping awake and alert, however, *don't* seem to point to busy-ness – quite the opposite; more of an 'active stillness', if that's not too much of an oxymoron!

There's a story about a monk who went to his abbot, seeking enlightenment. He impatiently and eagerly fired questions at the abbot. The abbot replied 'Just look'. 'But I'm always looking', the monk replied disappointedly. 'No you're not', said the abbot. 'In order to look at what is here, you have to **be here**, and you are mostly somewhere else'.

Do the abbot's words resonate with anybody else, I wonder? ... I find my thoughts are so often scattered – speculation and uncertainty about the future; over-analysis and maybe regret at things past; events or actions that I can do nothing to change, but seem to gain some perverse comfort from clinging on to... How often am I actually present to the here and now? Can I see God for looking?

Someone once said to me, 'How can we meet God in the past? Can we meet God now sometime ahead? No, we can only meet God right here, now and as we are'. There's a little book on my shelf, entitled 'The Sacrament of the Present Moment'; the title sums up this idea very well.

As Jesus invites his disciples (and us) to make *inner* preparations; keeping awake and alert, looking and seeing, we can practise this 'being truly here' – coming to God just as, where and how we are.

And, as Fr David reminded us after the Zoom service last Sunday, we need to be kind to ourselves in all of this. What an incredibly difficult and strange year this has been, affecting almost everyone in some way. Of course God is powerful - but at the same time faithful, gentle, and full of compassion towards us, giving us permission to be the same to ourselves and others.

May God help us carve out moments this Advent, in which we cultivate an 'active stillness'; coming to God how and as we are, in readiness to greet the Christ child afresh.

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