**

Jeremiah 33.14-16
Luke 21.25-35
2nd December 2018**

## There will once more be sheepfolds

*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

Although you might think I’ve lost the plot, it wouldn’t be crazy to wish you ‘Happy New Year’ this morning. Of course, that’s because Advent Sunday traditionally marks the beginning of the Church Year.

The United Reformed Church, and The Church of Scotland, have both formally adopted the Revised Common Lectionary to guide us through the year. That means we at AFC will be having the same readings Sunday by Sunday as millions of Christians throughout the world. This annual lectionary – a friend has already given me mine as an early Christmas present – was first published in 1994. Like some of its predecessors it follows a three-year cycle with either Matthew, Mark or Luke as the main gospel for the year, with portions of John allocated to various Sundays in every year. This year, on the Church’s New Year’s Day we start the Year of Luke.

Luke is the longest of the gospels. It’s generally thought that it was written between AD 80-110 – so at least a generation, or even two after the ministry of Jesus. It’s fascinating that isn’t it? We sometimes read the gospels as if they were verbatim reports written down ‘Hansard fashion’ just after the events took place. They are not that at all. Instead they are carefully crafted works, written decades after the events they describe, each offering a slightly different slant on the narrative. And just to whet our appetite it’s perhaps worth saying that 35% of what we read in Luke is unique to him and can’t be found in any other gospel – so, that means new sermons for 2019 will have to be written!

Well, on this first Sunday in Advent we plunge into Luke’s gospel with chapter 21 being given over to that biblical idea of The Second Coming of Jesus.

It’s sometimes said that there are three comings connected with Advent: The first coming of Jesus at Bethlehem, his second at the end of time and his coming into our lives each and every day.

I wonder what you thought of today’s gospel read to us by Andrew? It’s dramatic stuff, in fact it’s called Apocalyptic literature and in those far off days people loved it as a genre and had no difficulty interpreting it. Much of it is lost on us today – apart from the fact that the style of this ‘doom talking’ seems very characteristic of the current news reports about our contemporary challenges.

When I was growing up my minister often told us of the Sunday afternoons he spent as a boy at his aunts as the adults talked of The Second Coming. It scarred him so much he regularly just hid under the table worrying about it all.

One commentator I read this week helpfully points out that Luke 21 is not the accurate language of prediction. It’s the language of poetry and metaphor. There’s even that line which goes: this generation will live to see it all…which is, at least, historically ambiguous, at worst factually incorrect. Yet, many in that first century world really did believe that the time between Jesus’ ascension through the clouds and his return on those clouds would be very short and all done and dusted in their lifetime. Some even stopped working because they couldn’t see the point of it all if Jesus was coming back so soon. Maybe they even stopped paying the mortgage!

This idea, however, of a coming Kingdom of Peace and Justice isn’t one that we should dismiss in a superior way. That’s because essentially this idea was surely meant to be inspirational – perhaps even motivational. This idea of a Kingdom of Peace and Justice, something that is both future and present, has been a cornerstone of hope for people of faith for thousands of years.

It’s been said, and this takes some thinking about, that ‘God’s future is God’s call to the present’. That’s not tautology but the idea of bringing something of God’s promised future into our current experience here and now.

This morning’s reading from the Jewish Scriptures also has this theme of waiting in hope.

Jeremiah has something of a reputation as a doom-laden prophet, yet these verses before us take the reader back to a sense of confidence in God even at the bleakest of moments.

The time is not a good one, either for author or reader. Jeremiah is in prison and the people have just experienced the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC at the hands of the Babylonians. These are dark and fearful times.

In the northern hemisphere Advent falls at the darkest time of year and all of us, no matter where we live, know there are periods in life’s journey when something of the night comes up upon us.

Yet, despite the immense struggle, both personal and national, Jeremiah’s words to us today are ones of hope as he imagines an alternative reality to the one his immediate context is bringing. He talks of that time when – he calls them the ‘coming days’ – when God will bestow upon Israel and Judah the blessings he has promised.

And in this future, we are introduced to that wonderful poetic line: there will once more be sheepfolds. For a pastoral people these words represented a return to self-worth, the regaining of their identity, the beginning anew of a valued life to be lived with the dignity of honest work as they wondered the hillsides in freedom.

This was light, piercing their darkness.

Yet the darkness can seem very long.

I have a colleague in a central London church who runs a ‘Longest Night’ service around this time of year. It’s a place, amid all the noise and tinsel of December, to come and own before God the pain of bereavement or loneliness that Christmas can sometimes rather cruelly bring.

Advent literally means ‘waiting’. It isn’t arrival, that’s Christmas! Advent is about travelling, and sometimes that means walking through the darkness with hope.

I suspect all of us like to think of faith as a noun. It’s a thing! Something we have. We might even describe someone as a person of faith, as if they possess it. Yet, maybe faith is more like a verb. It’s something we must practice, something we have to live out and do, a positive and determined act of the will.

Advent calls us to practice our faith even in the times of waiting.

There is, how can we put it, a certain kind of ‘dissonance’ in Advent. It’s not really a settled place to be.

In the bible story Mary has the honour of bearing Jesus even as she is viewed suspiciously in dishonour by those around her. She and Joseph travel to Bethlehem in a state of chaos and fragility just at a time when she most needed calmness and security.

It’s been suggested therefore that Advent is, in fact, a very good time to ‘name the gaps’ in our lives. Like the gap between who I am and who I’d love to be, the gap between the society we live in and the society we long for. And after the naming, to consciously acknowledge that God moves in those gaps. That’s where his love and light are at work. God is in the gaps and becomes a bridge between what we are and what we hope for.

So, 23 days to go and counting!

Although we know this time of year can become rather claustrophobic if we simply view it as a festival of family or meals with the ‘in’ crowd, Advent and Christmas actually present us with much bigger and deeper themes.

At its centre is that utterly unfathomable, yet wonderfully hope-filled, idea that God is with us and that ‘Love came down at Christmas’. And if God is truly with us, among us and around us, that means his Kingdom is already here, breaking in, piercing the darkness and pointing us to a different reality.

This weekend the COTHA Christmas Tree festival has been launched. Go to St Michael’s and you will see, as you look at the 30 or so trees there, a real celebration of Amersham community. Each tree has been sponsored by a shop, church or organisation. It’s a celebration of ‘us’, of our town, of all the expressions that make up this place where we live. A place we pray for and a place where God is present among us.

Today in church, we have launched our special offerings for Christmas concentrating on Children’s Charities internationally, nationally and locally. We’ve done that because we want that bigger Christmas vision which has something to do with sharing love and hope.

These are the deeper themes of Christmas and the broader characteristics of God’s kingly rule.

Jeremiah lived with the hope that God’s kingdom would be made known among us. Luke spoke of it and this morning we have sung of it: O come, O come Emmanuel.

So ‘Happy New Church Year’ and may we all travel hopefully through these coming days of Advent 2018.

May it be so in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green Amersham 30th November 2018*