

## Advent 3

Dear friends, welcome most warmly to our worship this morning. On this the Third Sunday of Advent we continue our journey of preparation to celebrate the Birth of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, at Christmas.

Our readings, thoughts and prayers today focus upon the teaching of our Patron Saint, Blessed John the Baptist

### Address

*May the words of my lips,  
and the thoughts and mediations of all our hearts  
be now and always acceptable in Thy sight,  
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer*

**Amen**

I remember in one Advent Assembly at King's, raising my hand above my head, and firing a starting pistol. I had concealed it in a paper bag. I am sure many of the boys, now middle-aged, still remember it too.

I then reflected on the words *Startled at the solemn warning* we had just sung! Well, you'll be relieved I'm not going to do that this morning.

But it's not a bad start for an Advent Sermon: because the Advent message is one of urgency, it is an alarm, a wake up call. Remember the words of Paul in the Advent Sunday Epistle, *Now is the time to awake out of sleep*. And that same urgency is very much a part of the teaching of our own rather foreboding, John the Baptist. John's message is an urgent call to repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins, in the light of the coming of God's Messiah. John's imagery is disturbing. He warns of an axe being laid to the root of each tree, and the tree that fails to bear good fruit being cut down. He speaks of the threshing floor and the separation of the grain and the chaff. He warns of the fire of God's judgement.

We cannot overestimate the urgency and importance of the Advent message. The coming of Christ challenges us to face the Ultimate realities and questions of existence: the meaning purpose and direction of our lives, our deepest needs and longings, what will make us truly happy, truly fulfilled, not just now but for all eternity, our eternal destiny, life and death, with or without God, with or without our loved ones, what in theology is subsumed under that word *Eschatology*:

And the Advent message is, that the eschatological moment isn't just in some indeterminate time in the future ..... it is here, NOW.

*The time has come,  
the kingdom of God is at hand,  
repent and believe the Good News.*

These opening words of Our Lord in his public ministry, echo and develop the words of John the Baptist.

*The time has come*

The Greek language has two words for *time*.

The more familiar will be *Xpovos*. We measure it on a chronometer or a calendar. In a few moments we will hear the clock in the tower strike. In twelve *days* it will be Christmas Day. Scientists measure much longer and shorter periods of time, which reveal the sheer wonder of the created order. The light from the furthest visible star in the Universe takes 9 billion years to reach us. 9 billion years. Just try to imagine that.

One is reminded of the Psalmist and Joseph Haydn *The Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork*. This ammonite fossil I am holding in my hand is a mere 400 million years old.

At the other end of the *Xrovos* scale the scientist measures time in nanoseconds. A nanosecond is one billionth of a second. Finite time is mind-blowing, if we take *time* to think about it.

But in the New Testament the really important word for time is not *Xrovos*.

The word used there, and 86 times elsewhere in the Greek New Testament, is *Xairos*. *Xairos* has the connotation of a crisis. The essence of a crisis is that it forces us to make a decision. It forces us to act. Imagine your house, or like the Formula 1 Driver a couple of weeks ago, your car is on fire. You *must* act. In a crisis, even *not* to act, is to have made a decision, albeit it a negative one. And that decision or non decision-making can be a matter of life or death. And living in the Covid and Global Warming crises, we are all too familiar with the need to make decisions and act: or perhaps, sadly, not familiar enough.

The Advent, the Coming of Christ provokes the Ultimate crisis of our very existence. *Xairos* in the scriptures speaks of our Eternal lives, of our immortal souls, of our relationship with God and our relationships with one another, leading to glorious Spiritual life, or Spiritual death, not just here and now, but for all Eternity. Therein lies the

*ultimate* decision we have to make in our lives. Such is the message of John the Baptist. Such is the message of Our Lord. *‘O Xairos evyiken The time has come, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel.*

But above all Xairos time speaks of seizing the glorious opportunity that such a moment presents. The coming of Christ isn't a threat: it's a Promise. It's the glorious fulfilment of the promises God made throughout the Old Testament. The Gospel isn't just Good News. It is the ultimate Good News: far beyond our dreams and imagining: far beyond, as the Prophet Isaiah proclaims, what *eye has seen, or ear heard, or the heart of man conceived.* The Gospel of Christ meets and fulfils our deepest longings, our deepest needs: it fulfils our true purpose and destiny. God's overflowing love in Christ offers to each one of us Eternal Life, not only infinite in time: but a fullness, depth and richness of life in loving union and fellowship with Him: and a fullness and depth of loving fellowship through Christ with one another, And not in some future time: but NOW, and for all eternity. If finite Xrovos time is mind-blowing; eternal Xairos time is even more so.

Let us take time this Advent, amidst all the hustle and bustle, to ponder that amazing reality of God's overflowing love and generosity and not fail to lay hold of it. The Advent, the coming of Christ, the *Xairos* moment, offers us the choice: to accept and receive that free gift of God's overflowing love, to reject it, or simply let it pass by, like sand slipping through our fingers.

And that is why Our Lord in that very puzzling parable of the Kingdom of God praises the unjust steward: not because he is a cheat and a thief, but because faced with a crisis, he seizes the moment, the *Xairos*, He acts decisively.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins carries the same spiritual health warning. And in a crisis we are all familiar with the need to *Stay Alert*.

Advent is a season of preparation for our Celebration of the Birth of Christ.

But if we are wise, and understand its true meaning, it is much more than getting the turkey, choosing just the right Christmas presents, and putting up and decorating the tree, however important and enjoyable this may be.

The coming of Christ into the world, reveals in his Person, in his life, his teaching, his self-giving death on the Cross the absolute perfection of God's love.

Such perfection of love God calls each one of us to lay hold of and to follow.

*You,*  
says our Lord,  
*must be perfect,*  
*as your Heavenly Father is perfect.*

Such perfect love, revealed in Christ, if we are honest to God, and honest to ourselves, throws into relief how much we each fall short of that perfection: in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions.

The Greek word for falling short of perfection: for our shortcomings is *Hamartia*. It is usually translated as *sin*. But the image of the word *Hamartia* is of a spear being thrown at a target: and falling short of the mark. And in the light of God's love revealed in Christ, we realise, however hard we may try, we still fall short, of God's perfect loving will for each one of us, in our personal and family lives, as individuals, as members of society, as members of a world community, as members of God's family the Church.

Such realisation speaks of our need for forgiveness, and our need to change.

The Greek word for change is *metanoia* which is usually translated as repent. Used well, Advent is a God given *Xairos* moment, an opportunity honestly in stillness, reflexion and prayer to come before God in penitence: a moment to realise our need to change.

And such reflection will lead us to realise not so much our need to change: as to *be* changed.

That Lenten Collect, *O God who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves* points to a fundamental reality of our spiritual condition; our need to be delivered from the darkness of the world, and from the darkness of sin. To change we need to receive the light, the forgiveness, the strength, which God in his loving kindness offers to each one of us through Christ: what we know and experience as Grace: Grace, God's free unmerited gift of forgiveness; Grace God's overflowing gift of love, joy, peace which are ours through Christ.

Let us close with the Advent Collect which we are urged to pray each day in this Holy Season of

Advent. It is a prayer for Grace. May we this Advent season, this Xairos moment, realise our need for God's Grace, if we are to be perfected in love, and transformed into that likeness of Christ to which we each are called.

Let us pray

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who alive and reigns with thee and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. **Amen**

