

Scripture: Isaiah 2: 1-5 / Matthew 24: 36-44

Text: *Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.* .
(Matthew 24: 44)

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

This is a difficult occasion for everyone concerned.

Typically when the Moderator is asked to preach, it is because a congregation is celebrating a special anniversary or marking a special occasion.

People are excited, they will have been preparing and looking forward to the event for weeks and months, and the presence of the Moderator adds to the sense of occasion.

Today the circumstances are very different.

Since the first Scots Presbyterian church in Liverpool, Oldham Street Kirk, was founded in 1793, there has been over two centuries of Presbyterian worship in this great city.

Rodney Street Kirk, otherwise St Andrew's, dates from 1824 and, as I understand it, the congregation was founded following a disagreement over the appointment of a new minister to Oldham Street.

Evidently disagreements in the Church of Scotland are nothing new!

When Oldham Street closed in 1907, the majority of its members joined St Andrew's, and the congregation continued to worship at Rodney Street using the sanctuary until 1975, and then the adjacent church halls until 1983, at which time the Dean of Liverpool, Derrick Walters, gave permission for the congregation to worship in the Western Rooms of the Anglican Cathedral.

Until his retirement in 1985, the Reverend Earnest Brain was the last full time minister, and the worshipping life of the congregation has been sustained since then by pulpit supply, notably the Reverends Robert Andrews and Bill Wright, the latter having a childhood connection with the church.

With the former sanctuary now a student residence, today the congregation draws its final breath.

As it does so, I hope my presence as Moderator adds to the dignity of the occasion as together we pay tribute to Liverpool: St Andrew's, its history, its achievements, its ministers, its elders and office-bearers, and its people, all of whom have supported the congregation down through the years in worship, mission and Christian service.

Within the calendar of the Christian year, this Sunday marks the beginning of the season of Advent.

The Advent season is one of waiting and hushed expectation, a time of vibrant and trembling darkness.

In the coming weeks we will tell and re-tell familiar stories of Zechariah being struck dumb with the news that his wife Elizabeth was at last expecting a child, and of an angel appearing to a young woman called Mary betrothed to man called Joseph.

Elizabeth's child will be born and to everyone's surprise he will be named John.

Meanwhile after an arduous journey from Nazareth to the city of David where no room could be found at the inn, Mary's child will be wrapped in swaddling bands and laid in a manger.

Angels will disturb shepherds with news of the Bethlehem birth and magi will appear from the east bearing precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Led by a star they will find the child and his mother, but guided by a gut instinct they will know Herod is not to be trusted, and will return instead to their own country by another route.

Advent: the season of waiting, watching and wondering and many of you will have known and cherished these infancy narratives since childhood.

However familiar they are, let me do as Mary did when confronted by the angel's news, and ponder them with you in your heart.

Why?

Because as well as being the birth narratives of two women, these stories explore the great universal themes of hope and despair, darkness and light, desire and longing, and of particular relevance for this congregation today, of birth, death and new life.

With his repeated concern about the fulfilment of Jewish prophecy, his frequent use of Jewish terminology, his lack of explanation of Jewish custom and his emphasis on Jesus as the *Son of David*, scholars consider Matthew's gospel to have been written primarily for a Jewish audience.

If part of Matthew's purpose was to persuade his Jewish readership Jesus was indeed their long expected Messiah, it is worth keeping in mind that the people for whom Matthew wrote understood time to be divided into two distinct ages.

There was the present age, the time in which people now lived, and this age was corrupt, incapable of being saved and fit only for destruction.

As well as the present age, there was the age to come, a time of great hope when, in the soaring imagination of the prophet Isaiah, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the nations and the nations of the world will be at peace.

The present age and the age to come: this was the traditional Jewish view of time - and the dividing point would be the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

The Day of the Lord would be a day of cosmic upheaval and unimaginable terror.

The sun would be darkened, Jerusalem would fall, and as we heard in Matthew's narrative, such would be the confusion that as two men worked in a field one would be taken and the other spared while the same fate would befall two women grinding a hand mill.

Difficult, confusing; the story of Noah provides the clue.

Noah didn't know when the flood would come but Noah was wise enough to make preparations.

And such were his preparations that when the flood waters finally rose, Noah and his family survived while others perished.

Watchfulness, vigilance, staying awake and being prepared: those are the important themes in this section of Matthew's gospel, themes Matthew would return to in the subsequent parable of the wise and foolish brides and his great story of the sheep and the goats.

In other words, strip away the apocalyptic imagery and what you are left with is Matthew's profound conviction that time has a purpose, life is meaningful and all things find their fulfillment in the providence of God.

One of the things I take from this is that as people of Christian faith we need not concern ourselves with when and how and what will happen at the end of time.

It is enough for us to know that God knows.

What we need to do is be prepared.

Or to put that in other words; although the life, worship and service of this congregation is coming to a close, God's presence and promise and purpose in the world, and in our lives, is not coming to a close.

God continues to be active and as the calling of God is always to attend to the duties and activities, opportunities and challenges of life – and to do so in such a way that the unannounced arrival of Christ will not be a disaster but a time of praise and celebration.

Compassion, hospitality, humility, generosity, forgiveness, justice and a concern for the well-being of others; given the world in which we live, our calling to live out our faith as Christian women and men could hardly be more urgent..

Therefore you also must be ready.....

Of course this is a difficult day for all concerned for, as John Donne expressed it so eloquently, every death diminishes us, even the death of a congregation.

Yet on Advent Sunday, for all who are prepared to wait and watch and wonder and ready themselves, the story of Bethlehem's child comes as a blessing and as a gift.

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen