

Advent 1

Jeremiah 33:14-16 ‘“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfil the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. ¹⁵” In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Saviour.”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Luke 21:25-36 ‘There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

²⁹ He told them this parable: ‘Look at the fig-tree and all the trees. ³⁰ When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

³² Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³⁴ Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.’

If you look much into Arthurian legend, you will soon come across the startling idea that King Arthur not only ruled during a magical and mystical period of chivalry, but will reign again. TH White’s series of Arthur stories, which commences with ‘The Sword in the Stone’, is titled ‘The Once and Future King’, leaning into that hope that this great leader would return. Somewhere in Avalon, wherever that is, Arthur sleeps, and shall be roused again, and preside over a new court.

This was widely believed in mediaeval times, but why? Partly this would be because the story is open ended about whether Arthur died. But *that* must come out of a combination of a yearning for the chivalric qualities espoused in the legends, and inspiration from the real messiah, the real king — Jesus.

If we begin with Jeremiah, we hear a promise of the restoration of the line of David — which is to say, the promise that the messiah, the son of David, will come. Jeremiah does not have so much material pointing to Jesus as Isaiah does, but he does have some — he provides glimpses of Christ as the Fountain of living waters (2:13), the good Shepherd (23:4; 31:10), the righteous Branch (23:5), the Redeemer (50:34), the Lord our righteousness (23:6) and a king after David (30:9). Despite the dark times that Jeremiah lived through, his eyes were firmly fixed on Jesus, anticipating his coming. He hasn’t seen the true king, but yearns for him, and the goodness of his kingdom, with all his might.

When we read Luke, we find Jesus in apocalyptic mode — speaking the Lukan version of the passage in Mark that we read two weeks ago. Jesus doesn’t say ‘I will return’, but ‘the son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory’ — a deliberate reference to Daniel chapter 7, and the reason Jesus has referred to himself as the son of Man throughout the gospels. In that passage, Jesus the king very clearly shows himself to be the present king (but

unrecognised) and the future king that everyone will recognise. We long for his return, because that will be a day (like the return of Arthur, but even better) when the world turns to the better values, and better principles and better — everything — that Jesus has espoused. Do you want to live in a country marked by love, justice, goodness, honour, humility, generosity? Of course you do! So you long for Jesus's return (even more than you do for King Arthur!).

The third reading is Paul, addressing the Thessalonians, who seem to be full of eschatological awareness. Paul longs for his own return to Thessalonica, but even more than that, he yearns for Jesus's return. He praises them for their great faith, but acknowledges that they must still learn. And how are they to prepare for Jesus's return? Paul says: 'May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.'

Paul says that the preparation for the Lord Jesus's return is for your love to increase and overflow for each other, and for everyone else. Do we do this ourselves? No, the Lord does it.

The most important thing I can ever say to you is that God loves you. I don't say this every week, and perhaps I should. God loves you. God doesn't love just the good bits of you, while tolerating the rest. God doesn't just think you're ok, while thinking that someone else is much better. God doesn't love you simply as part of a collective of people, without really knowing you. God doesn't cross his fingers when he says this! God knows you, personally, and he loves you.

Love is the big thing that changes our world. Prisons are full of men (mostly) who had difficult childhoods, with broken families, and too little love or attention. The ones who make a huge positive impact in our world are often (but not always) the ones who have known genuine love, in their childhood and later in life.

We have a secret hack, though. We know God loves us. We see this in the incarnation. We see it in the miracles. We see it in Jesus's death and resurrection. Knowing the power of God's love opens us to love, ourselves. It opens us up to being real about ourselves, in our strengths and failings. Christianity is just a case of dwelling on God's love, and responding — more out of joy than out of duty.

And that's what the next four weeks are about. As we anticipate celebrating Jesus's birth at Christmas, we focus on the love, the generosity, the empathy and the inclusion this means. We become thoughtful for others, we buy presents, we prepare nice food, we have parties, we give more to charity. We think more of others and less of ourselves. We find that we are doing what Paul calls for in preparation for Jesus's return — loving.

May your advent be full of God's love, as you prepare for a lovely Christmas.

Amen.