

Advent for All Ages
Sermon at St Andrew's Chesterton, Cambridge
Advent Sunday All Age Service, 29 Nov 2020
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It is a great joy to be with you again at Saint Andrew's, Chesterton, after 20 years. We worshiped with you as a family from 1995 to 2000 and our three daughters, Rosalind, Miriam and Katie, were in Saint Andrew's Youth Choir.

When we left, in August 2020, Lyn Carr, churchwarden, produced this for us. It is a wonderful framed chart and card. You probably can't see the signatures, but you will when I bring it to church, when we're allowed back.

You will see John Reynolds is there and the Grande family are there and many others. Wherever we travelled after Chesterton - to Islington first, then Dorset, and then London - we took that framed card with us. So we have brought it back to Chesterton, now that we have retired to Green End Road.

Rosalind, Miriam, and Katie have each had a baby this year - our first three grandchildren. They each have a son and it's a joy to be part of that wider family.

Happy New Year! It is a strange thing to say at the end of November, but Advent is the beginning of the Church's year.

We are looking forward to two things. We're looking forward to the end of history, when the whole universe is wrapped up by the Lord, and things are remade and recreated. We're also looking forward to the birth of Jesus - to the secret, subversive birth at the heart of the universe. At the beginning of Advent, we especially think about the end of the universe.

Behind me, you can see an Indonesian batik. I bought this in Camden Lock, in London, for my wife, Ali, whose study at the time was blue and white. Most people in the Indonesia are Muslims, but this was actually painted by a Christian, named Aprat.

I love it because it has huge, enormous energy. It's almost like the big bang at the beginning of the universe. It may be that there'll be a big bang, of recreation, at the end of the universe as well. The blue circle is like our blue planet, as seen in photos from outer space. If you look closely - those of you who play football or enjoy watching it - you may see the shape of the World Cup trophy. It's not necessarily meant, but I like to think it is similar.

In our Gospel today (Mark 13: 24-37), Jesus says this: 'Be alert. I have already told you everything' - and it's great that we can rely on Jesus' words, for heaven and earth will pass away but Jesus' words do not pass away. 'Be alert... In those days after that suffering the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.'

So, what does this sort of language mean? Jesus is using language that the people of his time would understand. It refers to Isaiah chapter 13. Isaiah 13 was about the fall of Babylon, which had destroyed Jerusalem. Babylon then gets destroyed and it is like the sun going out and the moon getting dark and the stars falling from the sky.

How does this relate to what we're doing today? Well, Ali and I have always read children's stories to our children and this is one of our favourite stories. This is [*Jeremiah in the Dark Woods*](#) by Janet and Allan Ahlberg. They also wrote [*Each Peach, Pear, Plum*](#) and it may be that you know their stories. They begin this story with hints of lots and lots of other stories. They begin like this:

Once upon a time there were three bears, seven dwarfs, five gorillas, a frog prince, some sleeping beauties, a wolf, a dinosaur, a mad hatter, a steamboat, four firemen on a fire engine, a crocodile with a clock in it -

[more about that later] and a considerable number of giant bean stalks and a little boy named Jeremiah Obadiah Jackenory Jones.

So we know those stories - seven dwarfs, three bears. It's in a similar sort of way - though it's different because Jesus was talking about history - that Jesus refers to the sun being darkened and the moon not shining and the stars falling from the sky. The disciples think, 'Oh, yeah. We know that sort of language. Jesus is predicting that similar things are going to happen. Jerusalem is going to get destroyed again'.

And it sadly happened. Because Jerusalem rejected her Messiah, it was destroyed in 70 AD. That is what most of this passage refers to. The Roman powers destroyed the city and the religious powers fell.

It wasn't 'the end of the world' in 70 AD, because it's still continuing, but it was 'the end of the world for them' and, in different times of history, it has been 'the end of the world for particular people'. Many people are going through struggles in different parts of the world today.

Now I've got a clock here. I mentioned the crocodile and the clock earlier. Jesus said, 'Wake up!' This is what happens [Alarm clock rings loudly]. 'Wake up. Be alert'. That is crucial, but we don't actually know the time of Jesus' coming again, when the whole of history will be wrapped up.

One Roman Catholic priest wrote a book saying that the end of the world would be in 1847. He asked permission from the Pope and the Vatican to publish his book. They were very wise. They gave permission to publish it in 1848.

'Nobody knows the time', Jesus says, 'Even the Son of Man - he himself - doesn't know the time. So, don't believe people when they say they can actually predict timings.

Our Gospel passage mentions the fig tree. I've got a fig tree here, in this pot. It is usually on Ali's desk. Jesus points to the fig tree concerning signs of the times. We need to look at the signs of our times. We should discern and trace what is going on, in what is taking place. So, in the events of the world today, let us work them out. There are the surface events, but we need to go deeper. What is going on, in what is taking place?

If you see signs on a motorway, they can be 'end of motorway in one mile' signs or they can be a 'hazard warning' sign. All is not well. The signs Jesus is talking about are especially the 'hazard warning' signs.

500 years ago, Martin Luther, the great German theologian, was asked, 'If you knew that the world would end tomorrow, what would you do today?' Do you know what he said? He said, 'I would plant a tree'. A brilliant answer. So, we need to be alert, but we also need to be sensible and continue doing the next right thing.

1600 years ago in North Africa, Augustine heard God speak to him through children. He was in the garden and the children in the garden next door were singing. The children were singing, 'Pick it up and read. Pick it up and read.' In

Latin, *Tolle lege*. 'Pick it up and read. Pick it up and read.' He thought he heard – and he did - God speaking to him through the children. It's always good to listen to children. God can speak to us through children. So he went back to his desk and there on his desk was the New Testament and he read the passage that was open. It happened to be Romans chapter 13. He was trying to decide whether to become a Christian. He was putting it off and putting it off and putting it off. Then he read this:

Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers... put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh.

And he did. He decided at that moment to get baptized.

There's a lovely word, which is 'procrastination'. *Cras* is Latin for 'tomorrow' and procrastination means 'putting off till tomorrow what you should be doing today'.

There's a little rhyme which says:

Procrastination is my sin,

It brings me greatest sorrow.

I really must stop doing it.

I think I'll start tomorrow.

And we all do it, don't we? Augustine was putting off and putting off and putting off that decision to become a Christian. He needed to do it now and he did it.

I wrote a poem about Augustine which is in this book, which wrote in Islington. You can see it's got the same cover as the Indonesian batik. It's called *Signs and Seasons*. The [poem](#) ends with these words:

Now, no procrastination, delay;

Later is now, tomorrow, today.

So, three things to remember: be alert, plant a tree, and do it now.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.