

**St John's/St James/All Saints – Advent Sunday 29 Nov '20 – A Service of Light
Mark 13: 24-37**

Advent is all about getting ready – because Jesus is coming! Today is just the beginning of Advent - 4 more Sundays to go until we arrive at Christmas Day and, even in these unprecedented times of lockdowns and staying safe when festivities and celebrations won't be quite the same, I'm sure an awful lot of "getting ready" will still be going on as we work our way towards Christmas – when we celebrate Jesus coming to this world for the first time as a baby in Bethlehem.

But advent is about more than just looking forward and getting ready for Christmas. It's also about remembering that Jesus can come to the world every day and in every age through the lives of his followers - you and me, and that Jesus will come again to the world at the end of time, when he will come as our King and our Judge. And no one knows when this will be so we need always to be ready and prepared for his coming – to stay awake and alert – because that's what our Bible reading was all about just now. But – what does this kind of "getting ready" for Jesus coming look like?

Well, helpfully – there are lots of symbols in Advent that can help us to work these things out. To give us a picture of what we should be doing – how we should be as we get ready.



We've already come across one of these – our ADVENT WREATH.

It's beautifully made and you might well think that all the different colour candles – purple, pink and white, are rather a nice finishing touch. But they've been placed like this in the wreath for very special reasons. First of all we have the three purple candles - we lit the first of them at the start of our service. Purple is the church colour for Advent – it's the same colour used

during Lent – and purple signifies that, in the church's life, this is a time for Christians to stand back and look at themselves – take time for a bit of self-examination – to take stock

of themselves spiritually and, should we find things in our lives that aren't quite right – then it gives us an opportunity to ask for God's forgiveness and for his strength to get ourselves back on track. Put another way – it's a bit like a spiritual spring clean. A time for dusting away the cobwebs and for making sure that we are ready for when Jesus comes again.

The fourth candle in the circle is rose pink. Not quite so sombre and a sign that as we get nearer to Christmas, things are getting brighter and more celebratory.

These four candles, as you can see, are set in a circle of evergreen foliage - foliage which is there to help us focus on different aspects of God's endless mercy and his undying love for the world – for each one of us.

Traditionally in an advent wreath there would be:

IVY – We all know ivy clings to walls/trees/ buildings – it's very clinging! and ivy is there to remind us that we need to stay close to God – cling to him day by day - so that his Holy Spirit can give us the strength we need as we get ready for Jesus.

And then CEDAR – Cedar trees down through the ages have been known as symbols of eternity and of peace and so a sprig of cedar is there to symbolise God's gift of eternal life which is freely ours through Jesus. God loved the world so much that he gave us his Son that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. John 3:16



And HOLLY – holly bushes have beautiful red berries but also have some very sharp prickles on their leaves - a stark reminder of Jesus' suffering – his crown of thorns and of the blood he shed as he gave his life for us and for the sins of the world.

And lastly there's sweet smelling BAY – to remind us that Jesus' death was not the end. He rose victorious over sin and death on Easter Day!

All four sprigs of foliage ivy, cedar, holly and bay helping to remind us of God's endless mercy and his undying love.

Each week in Advent we'll light an additional candle on our wreath and the amount of light will gradually grow brighter. Then on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas Day we light the tall white candle in the middle. It's taller so it can stand up and shine higher and brighter - announcing to all that Jesus the Light of the World has come as we retell the Christmas story and remember how Jesus came as a baby in Bethlehem. Jesus the Light of the world – the light that shines in darkness – as we read in that famous John 1 Christmas passage of scripture. Jesus is - “The light of the world – the light that shines in darkness and the darkness has never put it out”.

Light and darkness are both very powerful symbols aren't they. We talk about the darkness or shadows of despair on the one hand and the light or a ray of hope on the other. We seem to automatically choose light to express good things and darkness for things that are evil or bad. And yet light, in the context of Advent, can be comforting but it can also have a frightening aspect when we think of Jesus coming back to the world as our Judge. Light is a great help and pleasure to us most of the time because it brightens up our lives and shows us the way. When the sun shines – it makes us feel so much better. Yet light also shows up everything for what it is. When the light shines brightly through my windows at home, it shows up every spec of dust to be seen – any crumbs or dog hair on the floor just can't go unnoticed. And the brighter the light, the darker the shadow it casts. And these good and bad aspects of light are helpful to think about during Advent because they represent both the good news of salvation – the light that Jesus brought to the world over 2000 years ago as well as the judgement – the examination of our lives as we think of Jesus coming as our judge at the end of time.

Jesus came to the world to save the people of the world by lighting their way to God. But the light of Jesus also exposes all the nasty things about a person – the sort of things that we so often want to keep hidden within ourselves and forget about. The bad temper, lies, unkind thoughts, resentment, selfishness and greed. It is never easy to face up to the truth about ourselves, is it? And for some it's easier to skulk in the dark than to let the light of

Christ's forgiving love come into their lives and change them. And this is what Jesus wants! To be invited into our lives so he can fill us with his forgiving love and change our darkness into his light.

Well, so far we've thought about getting ready for Christmas. And also about being alert and ready for when Jesus returns in glory – yet there's also another aspect of being ready - because Jesus can and does come to the world day by day, right here and now, and he can come through us, his followers and we need to be ready and prepared to receive him into our lives so that we can live out our lives for him. Jesus living in us, so we'll be ready to bring the light of Christ to all around.

There's a verse in the Bible (Philippians 2:15) that tells us we must shine like stars lighting up the skies as we live for Jesus and spread his message of love.

A couple of years ago, we (me, my husband and a couple of SA friends) visited Sutherland, a small town in the middle of nowhere in the Karoo mountains in SA's Northern Cape. It's home to South Africa's large telescope – SALT – as well as home to high power telescopes from America, Russia, the UK, Germany, Poland, India and New Zealand – all of them looking deep into outer space to observe the stars and planets and all other rich and exciting phenomena of our universe. The two main reasons why the base is sited there and used by so many countries are 1) the ground in that particular area is extremely stable, and 2) the night sky in this little town called Sutherland in the middle of nowhere, is at its darkest point – and free from pollution.

We stayed in Sutherland overnight and – what a sight the night sky was! Just to our human eyes. The deepest darkness of the sky lit up by the Milky way in one direction and stars – millions of them it seemed – colourful and in 3D sparkling all around. I felt I could reach up and pluck one or two from the sky. Just like plucking apples from a tree! I've seen wonderful African skies before but nothing prepared me for this. The stars in this darkest of dark night sky were bright and sparkly – lighting up the deepest darkness of the night.

And so this Advent, as we remember that Jesus the light of the world has come and is coming again – let us make sure that we are awake and ready to live and to shine as people of the light for Jesus in the world today! That as Jesus fills our lives, we will be like the stars shining in the deepest dark skies above Sutherland, chasing away the darkness.

May his message of light live on through us, today and always.

Amen

