

Lord, direct our thoughts and teach us to pray.
Lift up our hearts to worship you in spirit and in truth.
As God's people we have gathered.

Let us worship him together.

What God has prepared for those who love him,
he has revealed to us through the Spirit;
for the Spirit searches everything.
Therefore let us in penitence open our hearts to the Lord,
who has prepared good things for those who love him.

Penitence: God of mercy,
we acknowledge that we are all sinners.
We turn from the wrong that we have thought and said and done,
and are mindful of all that we have failed to do.
For the sake of Jesus who died for us,
forgive us for all that is past,
and help us to live each day
in the light of Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Absolution: May the God of love
bring us back to himself,
forgive us our sins,
and assure us of his eternal love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
This is the word of the Lord;
Thanks be to God.

Mark 13:24-37 [The Coming of the Son of Man]

'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

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

Today is Advent Sunday. It’s really a bit odd: because in church terms this is the start of the new year. At Advent, we begin once again to prepare for a huge festival. Advent signals the start of our preparation for Christmas. So, it’s a time of preparation. It’s not a feast, but a preparation for the Feast – the feast of Christmas.

And we all know what this preparation means, don’t we? Worrying about a Christmas present for the people we love. What can we get for Mum? And for Dad? Shopping! It can take up so much time; so much preparation. And should we have turkey for Christmas dinner? Or goose? Ham? Or a nut roast maybe? And do we really have to have sprouts? Again? Oh! And: a real tree? When should we put up the decorations? Where can we find our Christmas pullover? But let’s stop all this. Right now. Because during this preparation time – for that is what Advent means: - we really should ask ourselves – why?

There are lots of reasons. It’s great to have some down-time at the darkest, coldest time of the year. Just a time to lay back and take some time out. To eat well. To see some of the people that we’ve missed over the year. To remind ourselves just how fortunate we are compared to many people in the world. I worked in Tokyo for a couple of years. And they did all of those things. But, it was different. Yes, it was a mid-winter feast. But there was no other reason for it. They didn’t celebrate Christmas Day as a holiday. All the grown-ups went to work on that day. Because they aren’t Christians. They have no reason to celebrate what we will celebrate - The birth of a little baby boy called Jesus. The Son of God. And that’s the difference.

So what we are preparing for is the birth of this little mite who changed the world. And Advent gives us some time to reflect on our Christian beliefs. Over the next four weeks we will hear what the Bible tells us. About what the ancient people of Israel hoped for, for so long, and what God promised them. And as we get closer to Christmas Day the message from the Bible will become clearer and clearer. So that by Christmas Day we will be ready to celebrate the birth of the Son of God, as a little baby. That is what makes Christmas so much better than in Japan. Because we have this message to reflect upon – that the Son of God will dwell on earth with us. And, almost as an aside, the whole scenario changes today. We have been hearing the Christian story all through the year as told by Matthew. Now today we start reading from St. Mark’s Gospel for the first time in three years. And we will continue with him throughout the year.

So, let us look for a moment at today’s readings. Today’s text starts with the plea of Isaiah to God – “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”. That God would somehow come down to earth. For that is our Christian hope. But Mark’s gospel reading starts curiously, in the future, with a question to Jesus - “Tell us, what will be the sign that all these things – the end of the world, or the second coming, are about to be accomplished?” This Sunday’s readings are all about the the future return of Christ in glory – his second coming. The technical term for that is one beloved by some fundamentalists - “PAROUSIA”. What an impressive show-off Greek word that is – “Parousia”. It refers to the second coming of Christ

The gospel reading itself begins with some standard apocalyptic scenes, beloved by scary-movie makers – “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light: then they will see the Son of Man

coming in clouds". We then have a softening of the hardness as it moves to the general theme of watchfulness – The fig-tree, suggesting that the second coming can be guessed at by the sequence of events. Then, "Be aware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" And a short parable of a man going on a journey, whose return cannot be determined.

Reading today's passage with these confused snippets about the end time – the parousia, made me feel that Mark is actually very uncomfortable. Why? Well, one of the portents of the second coming was to be the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. At the time this gospel was written, around 68 CE, the Temple was indeed razed. So, the obvious sign for Mark: - the end of the world must be nigh.

But, THE WORLD STILL TURNED. It turns yet! The world will end; but the question - "when" is the wrong question. But only one word stays with me from the entire passage – "WATCH". Watching is what we are told to do.

To me that was best laid out in last Sunday's gospel reading from Matthew, plain as a pike-staff: "For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink". What a counter-cultural notion! Our culture focuses on

Getting food and drink for ourselves, not giving it.

"I was a stranger, and you welcomed me". Our culture focuses on me; not noticing or welcoming strangers. On shopping and clothes, not the lack of clothes in others.

On our health and well-being, not on the sufferers. On our freedoms and rights, not those without rights – prisoners or refugees. Christianity IS counter-cultural.

"I was a stranger, and you welcomed me". Do you ever see Christ in someone?

In a friend, a neighbour, a total stranger? To use the mystic language of the Gospel, that person could be Christ! So, Watch!

Watch... for the stranger... are we just tolerating our new Irish people? Or are we welcoming them? Do we tolerate their hesitancy with our language? Do we defend them if we ever hear or see a racial taunt? Jesus tells us that "In as much as you do it to the least of my brethren, you do it to me."

Watch... It's our attitude to our fellow men & women that interests Christ. When you look into the eyes of a stranger, remember: "Christ, IT COULD BE YOU!

And now to the one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, power and glory. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died and was buried;

he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,

the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of 1st Sunday of Advent

Almighty God,

give us grace to cast away the works of darkness

and to put on the armour of light now in the time of this mortal life

in which your son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;

that on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty

to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

As we prepare for the coming of the Lord, let us pray for the Church and for the world. Grant that the whole Church, as a faithful servant, shall be vigilant to perform the will of her Master. In watching and in penitence, may your people make ready for the coming joy of the Nativity. *... hear our prayer*

Guide all in authority to discern the signs and to act with wisdom and justice. Open their minds and direct their wills to look beyond the immediate advantage to the lasting good of all humanity
... hear our prayer

At this Advent time give us grace to serve by example and by deeds those who are close to us, our families, friends and neighbours and those with whom we work. As we look towards the season of Christmas, may we remember with humility and gratitude the great love of the Father in sending the Son *... hear our prayer*

Our prayers now are for all who have been affected by the Coronavirus; but also those whose normal life has been brought to a sudden halt. Lord, care for all your people, whether they are in hospital, in ICU, cocooning at home; in fear or depression, isolated, or lonely. Care for the carers also, and protect their health and well-being
... hear our prayer

We pray for those who have known the coming of the Lord at the end of their lives. May they rest in the peace to which he has called them, and may we be ready for our calling, and receive mercy.
... hear our prayer

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

In this time of preparation, go forth into the world in peace,
be of good courage;
hold fast to that which is good;
render to no-one evil for evil;
strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak;
help the afflicted; honour everyone;
love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;

and the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always. **Amen**