

Isaiah 63: 1-9
Mark 13: 24-37

The singer, Joni Mitchell wrote the words, “You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone.” We often don’t recognize the value of something until we no longer have it. That’s certainly true of sleep. It’s a precious thing is sleep. Anyone who has lain awake at night whilst sleep eludes them will testify to that. Shakespeare reminds us in Macbeth that sleep “knits up the raveled sleeve of care.” Lack of sleep can come upon us for many reasons. Work, worry, ill health to name but a few. Parenthood is another possible cause. A new mum wrote an article about how her life had changed. One of the things she mentioned as changing most was sleep. She now craved sleep. Her nights were frequently interrupted by the demands of the new baby. The same longing for more time to sleep seems widespread. Many in our society work long hours. There seems to be a widespread sense of exhaustion. At first glance, the words of Jesus today could add to our sense of guilt about never having done enough even although we never seem to have enough time to rest. Jesus speaks about being alert and ends today’s Gospel reading with a call to “stay awake.”

If you feel that you are trying unsuccessfully to cram more into an already crowded day, then Jesus’ words might seem bewildering or make you feel even more exhausted. But isn’t it true that when we are at our busiest, that we need to pause and take stock?

More on this seeming conundrum later.

Jesus’ words in the Gospel today refer to being alert for his coming.

This means not only his coming at the end of time, but also his coming among us here and now. Let’s think again about our crowded lives for a moment.

Staying awake and watching for signs of the presence of Jesus among us is not one more duty we put in our diary.

Rather it needs to be a quality of our life, - something that runs through everything that we do. If Jesus is among us then this affects our loving, our serving, our giving, our planning, our building, our community, and our country.

We have to cultivate an attitude to life that asks and expects that Jesus will make himself known among us in the challenges and tasks and opportunities of our everyday living. We don’t achieve this overnight. We have to strive to grow in our openness to Christ, as He moves among us.

Perhaps I could suggest to you that gratitude, and a sense of our own need, are two ways to help us become more alert to the mystery of Christ among us.

New parents, exhausted as they may be, should pause and wonder at the miracle of life and thank God for this blessing. Gratitude opens us up to God.

It decenters us for a moment and helps us realize that many of the most important things in life are gift, not achievement. Gratitude helps us spot the quiet, self-giving presence of Christ moving in our world.

If we hold a position where we make decisions, then we need to remember that people can and will be affected by those decisions. We need to ask God repeatedly

for discernment. It is easier to be alert to Christ among us if we acknowledge our need.

We haven't yet considered Christ's coming at the end of time. This kind of prophecy is what biblical scholars like to call apocalyptic, that is to say, literature dealing with the end times. It's always disconcerting to read this kind of prophecy. Incidentally, you will have discovered apocalyptic if you have ever sung the full version of "When the Saints go marching in." It includes stanzas based on today's Gospel, such as "Oh when the stars fall from the sky." There is even a cheerful stanza: "Oh when the fires begin to blaze." I think if we're honest with our selves, and sing those words meaningfully, it will leave us with a sense of unease.

There is an important lesson here. No matter how long the world goes on, it will not achieve perfection. The perfection of love and goodness awaits us in eternity.

It is important that we remember this, because from shopping to politics, so many things in our world make exaggerated claims about themselves and claim to give us total happiness.

As we get older, we maybe realize the truth of this, but that shouldn't make us complacent. The end times, sketched by Jesus in today's Gospel, remind us that this world will pass. We must set our heart on the things eternal for nothing else will do. This gospel reading is, on first glance, a bit of an unusual choice. It's not what one should expect for Advent, or is it?

Here's a wee story for you.

Wee Jimmy was lying in the middle of a field one summers day.

Puffy white clouds rolled by and he had fun seeing them and trying to make objects out of them. Soon he began to think about God. "God, are you really there?"

Jimmy said out loud. To his astonishment, a voice came out of the clouds, "Yes Jimmy, what can I do for you?" Seizing the opportunity, Jimmy asked, "God, what is a million years like to you?" Knowing that Jimmy couldn't understand the meaning of infinity, God responded in a manner to which Jimmy could relate. "A million years to me jimmy, is like a minute." "Oh," said Jimmy. "What's a million pounds like to you?" "A million pounds to me, Jimmy, is like a penny." "Wow!" remarked Jimmy, getting an idea. "You're so generous...can I have one of your pennies?" God replied, "Sure Jimmy, just a minute."

Wee Jimmy wasn't ready for that response, was he?

Our text this morning can seem an odd choice for this time of year. It has nothing to do with Mary and Joseph, the Wise Men, of shepherds watching their flock.

Instead, it is a story about a wealthy landowner going on a trip. When he returned, he would check on their stewardship. It is a story about being prepared, getting ready. So, in that sense, it is a story about being prepared.

Today is Advent Sunday, the 1st Sunday in Advent. A New Year, at least in the Christian Calendar: the day, which marks the start of the waiting time.

Before COVID, life at this time of year would, for many, go up a gear with the frenzied rush towards Christmas. I don't think it will be quite like that this year. But don't despair!

A former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Very Rev. Dr. John Chalmers, says in the December issue of Life and Work, that COVID-19 can't steal Christmas. He

says, “if we remember that all the symbols of the Christmas story are a reminder that God is with us and is most assuredly where the poor and vulnerable are to be found.” Perhaps this year, with less commitments we may find it easier to hear God say, “slow up and wait.” Not a “wait for me till I catch up with you” but “wait *on* me: pause –reflect-watch-listen-open your heart to what’s going on around you, do good, especially with the poor and the stranger, and you *will* meet me.”

The Taizé community, which has produced many songs of worship, has a chant which goes: “Wait on the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart!

In the busyness or the boredom of our lives -God invites us not simply to hang about idly on the off chance but to wait on purpose and with confidence.

We can take heart from the prophet’s words that God meets those who gladly do right; words that have stood the test of time, for have we not ourselves experienced meeting God at those times or in those places where righteousness flourishes, where flowers blossom in the desert.

Where new shoots spring up from buried grain; when the hungry are fed, prisoners released, debts remitted, and slaves freed? God meets those who gladly do right. This Advent season let us be amazed and humbled at the preposterous love of the Creator.

God risked being wrapped in mystery and silence in order to encourage us to true faith: reflective faith and active faith.

Reflective faith that lives to glimpse God’s presence in surprising as well as familiar places. The risk was and remains critical.

For 21st century Westerners, background musack, adverts, hype and spin all but blot out the common ground on which we all stand and have the possibility of glimpsing God. Watching and waiting is vital to reflective, active faith.

Waiting and watching is the preparation to being met by God. In the stable, wrapped in swaddling bands, God met a teenage mother and her courageous husband; in the stable, innocent and vulnerable, God met vigilant shepherds and canny foreigners. Who will God meet in the stable this year? Will it be you?

Wait for the Lord – keep watch, keep alert! Advent is here – the Son of man is coming amongst us in glory and mystery. May we all be ready for Him.

Amen