Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal at Evensong on Sunday 30th November 2025

Bible passages: Isaiah 52.1-12 and Matthew 24.15-28

I think we tell ourselves some tales, when it comes to the Bible. We tell ourselves that gentle Jesus, meek and mild, is an easy man to listen to, a good and caring man who doesn't bother our sensibilities. And we tell ourselves that the Old Testament is full of vengeance and wrath, and not really suitable for modern thinking, or for children.

And we tell ourselves some tales about Advent, too. We tell ourselves that we're preparing for Christmas. Which we are, but...

We've just heard two readings which put paid to these stories we tell ourselves. Words of Jesus which warn, and provoke fear. And words from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah which offer God's comfort. Words for Advent which don't speak about the baby Jesus (or do they?), but which point towards some future we haven't encountered yet.

There you have it. The tales we tell ourselves, and the always messier, more complicated truth behind them.

Jesus isn't always easy. The Old Testament isn't always harsh. And Advent isn't directly about Christmas. If it was, the lectionary would have offered us a completely different set of readings for this evening, and for this morning too – this morning's readings were in a very similar vein.

What are this evening's readings about? Isaiah is certainly speaking about salvation, about rescue, about redemption. In this way, his promise of peace, of good news, of salvation, is most certainly about Jesus, but not so much about the baby in the manger. Through Isaiah, God is promising a triumphant entry of a victorious leader into Jerusalem – this prophecy is about God with us, Jesus the baby grown up, and taking on the spiritual forces which oppress us. It's much more a prophecy about Jesus' death, his resurrection, and the spread of his salvation to ends of the earth.

It's hopeful, encouraging. And we need hope and encouragement when we hear Jesus' words from Matthew 24. Woe! Woe to you!

Some of Jesus' warning, or prophecy, seems to have been realised decades later. This desolating sacrilege which Daniel warned about (let the reader understand) was another desecration of the Jerusalem temple, the temple which was not only desecrated but destroyed in AD70 by Titus. The Wailing Wall is all that's left of that Temple. And at that time there was great suffering, and the dispersal of the Jews all around the Roman Empire, leaving Jerusalem in rubble. Woe! Woe to those who died, who were enslaved, who had to flee. Woe to the pregnant women and the nursing mothers.

Woes which are still experienced in wars today. Woe in Ukraine, woe in Gaza, woe in Sudan, in Myanmar, woe around the world.

Yet it doesn't seem we've experienced this return, this coming of the Son of Man yet, have we? Like a lightning flash from one side of the earth to the other.

Jesus warns us, here and in the reading we heard this morning, not to spend too much time speculating about all this. We know we're a part of God's Kingdom, but you may have heard it described as the 'now and not yet' Kingdom. We love and follow Jesus, we pray and we praise and we serve, but we haven't experienced either the events Jesus describes or the full comfort which God promises through Isaiah.

Fulfilment of these things is what we look forward to through Advent. It's a time of preparation, but the preparation is for Jesus the saviour, even Jesus the judge, not simply Jesus the child in the manger. Yet, we can find out a lot about how to prepare, taking Jesus' mother Mary as our example. We did the same this morning, so if you were in either of our morning services, I'd be grateful if you'd look at this final section of my sermon as helpful revision.

When Mary was given the alarming and unexpected task of preparing for the coming of Jesus, for his birth, how did she prepare?

We know a few things Mary did, to prepare for 'the coming of the Son of Man'.

She prayed in a way which was informed by her scriptures. The Siren Prayer we'll share tomorrow is based on her words: she prayed, wide awake to the reality of God's justice. She praised God because he was going to bring down the established order of power and oppression, and would lift up the lowly and feed the hungry. A vision of justice not far from Isiah's image of turning swords into ploughshares. Mary also visited a relative and prayed with her. And she had some challenging conversations with her fiancé Joseph, trusting he was also prayerful enough to wake up to what God was doing.

Mary prepared, waiting for the Lord, by tuning in to the ways he was at work in the world, and in her own life.

She prepared by keeping in close contact, even when it was challenging, with other key people of faith.

So when her son, Jesus, warns us to prepare in our own times, we can look back to his first coming, celebrated at Christmas. Like Mary, we can prepare by prayerfully reading God's promises of goodness and justice in the Bible. Like Mary, we can prepare by praying for our world today, based on those promises from God. Like Mary, we can submit to God's will in our lives, being prepared to line ourselves up with his work, rather than attempting things our way. Like Mary, we can keep up prayerful connections to others who are also seeking God's way. Like Mary, as we wait for Jesus, we can accept difficult conversations and challenging times rather than avoiding them, because we know the spirit of God is with us when we join his mission in the world.

Let's bow our heads and pray.

Lord Jesus, you tell us to prepare. You tell us to expect the unexpected. You tell us that you are coming, with a future of justice which no one can anticipate in the current troubles of the world. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, so that we live in active prayer and grateful obedience, as we wait and prepare for you.

Amen