



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The First Sunday in Advent: Prepare

**Romans 13:8-4 &
St. Matthew 21:1-13**
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Jesus changes everything. To be more specific: Jesus *has* changed everything. Jesus *is* changing everything. And he will complete his work and Jesus *will have* once-and-for-all changed everything. And so it should be no surprise that the Christian year has always been reckoned by the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. Our Eastern brothers and sisters begin the Church Year at Easter and we, in the West, have for most of our history begun it at Christmas. Either way, our ecclesiastical New Year's Day recognises the Jesus has changed everything. And knowing how important these events are, the Church never just drops us into Christmas or Easter. Instead, a time of preparation leads us to both of these great celebrations. These were originally times when candidates for baptism—and Epiphany and Easter were the two great times for baptism in the early Church—these were the times when those who were to be baptised prepared: learning the faith, counting the cost, and finally committing themselves entirely to Jesus. Our traditions have changed a little down through the centuries, but the season of Advent still calls us to be prepared—to be prepared, knowing that in his first advent Jesus inaugurated his kingdom and that in his second advent, he will finish what he started. Advent reminds us that we are his stewards in the in-between, in this overlap of the ages. The present evil age has been defeated, its gods and kings dethroned and the age to

come has been born. But in his wisdom and his grace, God has not brought the new age all at once. Yes, this overlap of the ages allows for evil to continue and for wicked men and women to grasp at their slipping hold of the world. But as we saw in our study of Revelation, none of it is out of God's control. This all gives an opportunity for the good news about Jesus to be carried to the world and for the world to come in faith to Jesus who has come in his first advent, not to condemn, but to redeem.

Our Gospel lesson today reminds us of what Jesus has done and what he will one day finish. St. Matthew shows us Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the King, and he shows us the nature of his rule and his kingdom. Look at Matthew 21:1-6.

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them.

Matthew wrote his Gospel for a Jewish audience and so he naturally draws on their Scriptures and on Israel's story to give depth to what he writes. Specifically, here, he draws on Zechariah's prophecies that look forward to the Messiah and to the day when the Lord would come in

judgement on Israel's enemies. When Matthew says that Jesus came to the Mount of Olives, this isn't just a casual geographical reference. Jesus' ministry was full of acted out prophecies and here he chooses this spot knowing that it was the spot, according to Zechariah, where the Lord would stand in bringing judgement. And Matthew draws on Zechariah again to explain Jesus' strange command to the disciples to fetch a donkey. This was not how kings made their triumphal processions. At least, not ordinary kings. They rode on horseback or in a chariot. But Zechariah, hundreds of years before, had highlighted the humble nature of the coming messiah. He was the one who would ride to his coronation on the back of a humble donkey.

So Matthew, here, makes it abundantly clear who Jesus is. He is the Messiah whom the people had hoped for. But he also highlights the *nature* of Jesus' rule. The people expected a king would come to overthrow the Herodians and the Romans with violence. Matthew reminds them, by showing how Jesus fulfilled Zechariah's prophecies, that Jesus will take his throne by a very different sort of path. Yes, he is the judge. Yes, he will deliver Israel. But it's not going to happen the way people thought, at least not yet.

As the crowds gather to line Jesus' way into Jerusalem, Matthew continues to draw on Israel's story. Look at verses 8-11:

Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the

prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

Not only do the people sing royal hymns to Jesus as he rides into the city, hailing him as “son of David”, a significant messianic title, but Matthew again draws on two events in Israel’s story that the people would have known well. First, as he tells how the crowd was spreading their cloaks on the ground, it would have been hard for his Jewish readers to miss the reference to King Jehu’s anointing. In 2 Kings 9 we read about Jehoram. He was King of Israel, the son of the wicked King Ahab. The apple had not fallen far from the tree in Jehoram. The prophet Elisha ordered that Jehu was to be anointed King in his place and announced that Jehu would bring the Lord’s judgement on the wicked house of Ahab. As Jehu was anointed by the prophet, the men who were gathered cast their cloaks on the ground before him and blew a trumpet. Matthew uses the imagery not only to make sure we know that Jesus is King, but also to hint that Jesus is also the King who will bring the Lord’s judgement on the wicked.

But the other grand image that Matthew draws on here and that leads into the next scene is that of Judas Maccabaeus. 2 Maccabees 10:7 describes the people hailing Judas as King by laying wreaths and palm branches at his feet. Judas had not only defeated Israel’s enemies, but he had purified the temple from its defilement by the Greeks.

And the temple is precisely where Matthew takes us next as he follows Jesus into the city. Look at verses 12-13

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of

prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”

Jesus’ purification of the temple had at least as much to do with rebuking the people for what the temple had become ideologically as it did with the buy and selling. The selling of animals for sacrifice was a necessary part of what the temple was and, since the temple used its own currency, someone had to be there to make change. The more serious issues was that the temple had become a symbol of the violent revolution—a revolution like the one Judas Maccabaeus had led—that had become the hope of the people. Again, that’s not what Jesus was about.

Most importantly, Jesus’ disruption of the temple put a temporary stop to the sacrifices that day. This was another acted-out prophecy that brought to a culmination all of his declarations of forgiveness and healing that had bypassed the temple, the sacrificial system, and the priesthood. This was Jesus’ announcement that the temple’s days were numbered. God was about to do something not only new, but better. Jesus points here to a coming new covenant in which he would take on the role of the temple himself, in which he would be the mediator between God and human beings, he would be the one in whom forgiveness of sins would be found, he would be the one to bring God and man, heaven and earth together.

The Gospel shows us that in his first advent, Jesus was revealed to be the King whom God had promised to his people. It also hints at the fact that, while Jesus has inaugurated something new, even now, two thousand years later, we await its final consummation. We still wait for Jesus’ second advent. And this leads us into our Epistle. Let’s look at Romans 13, beginning at verse 8:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For

the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

A shockwave went out across the world that first Easter morning when Jesus burst from his tomb. The work of new creation was begun that day. And yet, except for Jesus’ followers, no one seems to have noticed. The present age rumbles along, its rulers go on ruling, and people carry on with their business. The old gods remain, even if we aren’t so crass as to build temples with statues of them. We may not worship Caesar or Aphrodite or Mammon, but we still worship money and sex and political power. St. Paul knew that it’s surprisingly easy for even Jesus’ own people to forget that the kingdom is breaking in and the old powers have been stripped. It’s easy for us to fall back into the ways and priorities of the present age and to give half-hearted allegiance to Jesus. That had been Israel’s problem all along. It should not be ours. Jesus has filled us with his own Spirit. The law that was once external and written on stone has now been inscribed on our hearts and our hearts have been turned to God. As Israel had the Exodus behind them and an annual Passover celebration to remind them who they were and the glories that the Lord had done for them, we have the cross and the empty tomb behind us and the Lord’s Supper to remind us—and as Jeremiah prophesied for us last Sunday, the Exodus pales in comparison to the glory revealed at the cross. Problem solved! Or you’d think. But we still need nearly constant reminders, we need to recall Jesus, his death and resurrection, we need God’s word and we need his grace. And so Paul reminds us to live the law of love that the Spirit has inscribed in our hearts.

Paul puts all of this in terms of the *torah*. Don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't covet—just don't wrong your neighbour. To love is to fulfil the law. Paul uses the Greek word *agape*, which describes the sort of love that gives of oneself as it puts others first. This is the love that Jesus showed us on the cross as he took on himself the sins of the very people who had rejected and despised him. This is the love that defines the kingdom and that the Spirit has poured into our hearts. Be in debt to no one, Paul writes, except to know that for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom, you owe everyone you meet a debt of love. Imagine how effective the Church would be if we truly lived this way, coupled with being faithful proclaimers of the good news about Jesus.

Instead, though, we're too often like the man who knows he's going to be late for work, but keeps hitting "snooze" on his alarm clock, rolling over, and going back to sleep. Paul goes on:

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. (Romans 13:11-12)

Paul knew that Jesus would return. Jesus had promised that the Lord would come in judgement on an unrepentant Jerusalem within a generation. Whether or not Paul thought that this would be the final end of the present age is debated by New Testament scholars. I think Paul saw another horizon beyond the destruction of Jerusalem. As we saw in our study of Revelation, after the Lord judged unrepentant Israel and vindicated his faithful people, a time would follow in which the gentiles would come streaming in, having seen the faithfulness of Israel's God. While the other apostles were carrying the gospel to their fellow Jews, Paul had

received a calling to carry it to the gentiles. And Paul saw another horizon, one beyond the soon-to-come judgment on Jerusalem. Paul saw that the pagan nations, particularly the Greeks and Romans, would one day face their own judgement. The time was coming for the King's return in judgement, first on the Jews, and eventually on the gentiles. He would finish what he had started. The present evil age and its false gods and false kings would be done away with and God's new creation would be born. Jesus' first advent was the alarm going off. Jesus had announced a coming judgement, but in his life, death, and resurrection had established a means of reconciliation with God. That day the first rays of the sun had begun to peek over the mountaintops. And now, Paul's saying, the full day will soon be upon us. Get out of bed and get dressed for work!

And then he shifts the metaphor. From "Get out of bed you sleepy-head" he takes a more serious tone. It's one thing to sleep in when you should be getting ready for work. It's a far worse thing to be out carousing all night when you know you've got work to do in the morning. He goes on:

The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:12-14)

Laziness is bad and there are plenty of lazy Christians, but even worse are people who know they should be living for Jesus and the age to come, but are instead living for the present wicked age and its false gods and kings. Paul makes a list of the wicked things people do under cover of

darkness: they indulge their appetites, they get drunk, they get involved in all sorts of sexual sins. But Paul doesn't stop there. Most Christians don't do *those* sorts of things, so Paul goes on with the list, from orgies and drunkenness to quarrelling and jealousy. Maybe that hits closer to home—especially if you spend much time on social media. But long before social media existed, Christians were struggling with quarreling and jealousy. Christians get angry with each other, their relationships break down, sometimes churches even split. These are the works of darkness and they're just as bad and just as unbecoming the people of God as drunken orgies are. Going back to the first part of the Epistle, people who love their neighbours don't fight and don't become jealous any more than they get involved in sexual immorality.

Instead, as befits living in the day, we put on the "armor of light". Paul hints at the fact that living as people of the day when we're surrounded by people of the darkness is going to be a struggle and, some day, even a battle. We put on the *armor* of light. What is that? Paul goes on to put it in terms of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ. But what does that mean? Paul uses this put on/put off metaphor a lot in his epistles and the gist of it is that we need to remember to whom we belong.

Think of the Israelites. Pharaoh had claimed them as his slaves, but the Lord had freed them. It wasn't freedom for freedom's sake. The Lord freed Israel from Pharaoh's cruel bondage so that the people could serve him. They went from belonging to a cruel king to belonging to *the King*—a king who loves his people. The Lord would live in the midst of his people, that was his promise. And, for their part, the people would live as befits people who belong to and fellowship with the Lord—that was the *torah* and the tabernacle.

Brothers and Sisters, the same goes for us as Christians. Through Jesus, the Lord has delivered us from our bondage to sin and death and has made us his own. We once were in bondage to the darkness, but now have the privilege and joy of serving the light. And as Jesus' people, we're not just the people who live camped around the tabernacle. No, we are united with Jesus, who is himself the tabernacle, God with us, *and* who has made us, his very people, a temple when he gave us his Spirit. It is astounding what Jesus has done for us, but somehow we're still prone to forgetting. We hear the alarm sounding, we see the sun peeking through the curtains, and we roll over and go back to sleep. We do that because we've forgotten the joy of our salvation. We do that, because we've failed to steep ourselves in God's word. We do that because we've neglected the fellowship and worship of the saints. We do that because we've forgotten that God has made us stewards of his good news. We do that, because we've failed to think on and to meditate on the amazing and gracious love God has shown us in Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, the Lord knew we would forget these things. That's why he's given us means of grace to "stir us up" as we prayed in last week's collect. He's given us each other. Friends, the Church is a place where we stir each other up to love and good works. He's given us his word to prick our consciences when we go astray, to remind us of God's faithfulness when we're struggling to trust, and to show us the incredible depths of his love when we're tempted to take a ho-hum approach to our faith. He's given us the sacraments. In our baptism he has washed us clean and plunged us into his Spirit. In that water he made each of us his own, just as he made Israel his own when she passed through the Red Sea. And in the Lord's Supper he gives us a means of participating in the very events—in the death and resurrection of Jesus—

that mark our exodus from the bondage of sin and death.

Friends, be prepared. Knowing that that King has come and that he will come again, avail yourselves this Advent of the means of grace. Whether you've been carousing as if it were night, or you've been sleeping in, or you've been busy about the work of the kingdom, steep yourselves in God's word, be reminded of the love and the grace and the faithfulness of God. Meditate on the cross and on the empty tomb. Remember the baptismal water through which you once passed and find assurance that you belong to Jesus. And, finally, come to his Table. Here is not only the manna in the wilderness for a hungry people. Here is the bread and wine by which we participate in the death and resurrection of the King and find out identity as the people of God.

Let's pray: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*