

**Advent 1**  
**28/11/2004**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 2:1-5**  
**Psalm 122**  
**Romans 13:11-14**  
**Matthew 24:36-44**

**Advent people: living towards God because God lives towards us**

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This is the first day of the Christian New Year. The colour changes as does the tone and the mood. We begin a new Gospel and although we know we are moving towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus, with all the imagery and warmth that implies, today the themes are of the end time. As with any new book, we may more clearly understand the story by turning to a key section first. But something deeper is implied here. Advent does not begin by looking back to the birth. Advent begins by looking forward to the fulfilment that lies ahead of us. In this is an important key to the Church's life. We do not live from the past - we live from the future on the basis of a promised hope yet to be realised. The first Christians had a heightened sense of the return of Christ and wrote with the urgency that implies. We don't know what to make of their time scale; what matters is that the urgency of their concern came from a clear sense of what is important.

There was a Band called Chicago, which sang in one of its songs: "Does anyone know what time it is? Does anyone care?" Advent is the season when the Church tells us what the time is. On our New Year Day we do not make Resolutions but we do take account of the time. We rediscover that we live in the time in which God has chosen to turn towards us, and journey with us in our life. Because of this we recommit to living as an Advent people - people of faith and hope who expect God, and the fullness God will bring, even though we do not know in advance how or when God will be present to us.

Matthew speaks of God who comes as a thief - unexpectedly, without warning. That is why his call is to avoid becoming bogged down in mundane activities, which distract us from the real purpose of life: to be awake to the presence of God. A couple of years ago a thief broke into the Manse during worship and made off with some money and possessions. Any self-respecting thief would realise that the church notice-board tells when the Manse will be empty, and when the hour of opportunity will arrive. For Advent people there is no such clear indicator of the hour - indeed we are warned against focussing on calculating the time in that sense. We are called instead to live in wakeful expectation of God, because of the news that God has turned towards us. For us taking time for worship may mean choosing to avoid being bogged down in the mundane. And it may mean sharing the joy of the pilgrims of old, which is the joy of heaven.

Matthew and Paul call us to live towards God, because in Jesus Christ we have seen that God lives towards us, and will bring to fulfilment the new life offered in him. That is behind Paul's image of a new day that is coming, bringing to an end the night in which we are living. For this reason he exhorts us to put off our nightclothes and put on fresh clothes, appropriate to those who live in the light of Christ's new day. In his metaphor of night turning to day Paul seeks to convey the sense that a profound change has taken place. God's move towards us, revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, is for

him the first inkling of a dawning that will render impotent the present surrounding darkness. His expectations were definitely towards a shorter time scale, but his meaning is clear. God has worked to draw us into a new relationship of love: things are no longer the same and this has implications. Live honourably in the day, he says. In other words - honour the light of the life that has been shed: express in deeds the knowledge we have that God is for us. But in practice what does that mean? When Paul called for lives not given over to revelry and drunkenness, licentiousness, quarrelling and so forth, he did not mean by this that we should all become Puritans. He is speaking about something that goes beyond morality. He speaks against living a careless, self-focussed life. Living in self-indulgence is hardly possible for those who seek to live towards God. And living towards God is possible because first, God moved towards us - a move that has affected all the created order. That is what makes this the hour of opportunity. This is where the call to wake up comes from. That is why we gather to reflect on what time it is.

In Charles Dickens Tale of Two Cities there is a story of a Cobbler who had been imprisoned for many years in the Bastille. During his confinement he had worked on many more pairs of shoes than he could count. When the French Revolution commenced and the Bastille was overrun, he was set free and returned home. What did he then do? He set up shop in his home and kept on working exactly as before. People who passed his house heard the unceasing hammering of the Cobbler who was still a prisoner in the habits of his past life and could not awaken to the new possibilities now open to him.

Advent reawakens us to our real purpose in life, which is to worship and serve God. Will our reflections this Advent make a difference? Will we awaken to the new opportunities the year ahead offers us to live towards God and live lives that reflect the light of God? Or will we find that we do not understand the time and cannot break out of patterns that imprison us in doing what we have always done?

Paul is very clear: it is urgent that we truly live as children of the love of God. That is why our first reading offers us picture, reflected in today 's graphic, of someone who is deliberately transforming weapons into instruments of peace. Here a life that was oriented towards the darkness of hurting and destroying life is now constructively turned towards goals that are nurturing and life giving. The challenge of Advent is to reflect on what engages us and ask: does this involve commitment to things that are futile? Or does it indeed involve living out the hope we have been given? And we should not think that such a life it begins with our idea that there is need for a new world. Everything in our readings, including the Psalm, suggests that God has decided that there will be a new world, and that some people have been raised up to know that, to witness to it, and to live for it joyfully, as a sign for all humanity to see.