

First Sunday in Advent

Lighting the Advent candle Hope

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light

Today we light the first candle, the candle of hope

We light this candle to remember those who waited in hope for the Messiah. We celebrate the hope that we have in Jesus Christ.

Let us hold on to the hope that we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Introduction: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Good morning. It is a privilege to be with you today, albeit I cannot be with you in person. My name is Peter Pay, and I am one of the Moderators of General Assembly. I am also a lay preacher based near Salisbury.

I bring you greetings from the General Assembly.

Hymn: O Come, O come, Emmanuel

Opening prayers:

Approach

Lord, we are gathered here today, with the candle of Hope alight. Knowing that in dark times there is always a light that can be lit. Let us, people in dusk and dawn, light the light of vigilance, knowing that you are always calling us to justice, mercy and humility- At this time of year and at all times of year. Amen

Adoration

God, your name is Love, and in your great love you have called us into community with each other. With you and in you and because of you , we are nurtured in love.

Yours is the name that lasts for ever. Your love reaches into all corners confirming those who wait for you – they wait in the name of Great Love. Amen

Confession

We have turned our face from you, O God yet your face is always turned towards us.

We have forsaken what we know is just.

We have ignored what we understand is true.

We have refused to believe what should be believed.

We have deceived ourselves in word and deed.

For this we humbly repent, and we turn our faces to you.

You wait for us and make us ever new. Make us ever new now

O restoring God. Amen

Assurance of pardon

Lord we give you thanks that no matter how we have failed you, you will forgive us. We pray we may learn to forgive others as freely. Amen

Reading: Mark 13. 24-32

Reflection Keep Awake/ New Hope

Advent- a time of waiting and watching.

A time of 'New Beginnings

1. Signs of Hope

Fig trees- lose their leaves in winter but keep all the fruits that failed to mature on the tree. These will never ripen. Indeed, I think that they may even weaken the tree if left there. It is in many ways a reminder of hopes of fruit that were not fulfilled; possibilities that never came to fruition. I remove them. It is the time to leave old failures behind. Otherwise they weigh us down. The next season will be different. New exciting possibilities for us to harvest.

Now is the time to prepare for the New season, new possibilities. To make a fresh start- new leaves, new fruits- some of which will succeed. Advent is a time for us to leave old failures behind. To make a new start. A time to find new hope, to see new possibilities that may ripen and come to fruition.

Each year is different. Some years we have a rich harvest- a glut. Others very little

Our challenge is to be ready for either- and to adapt.
To embrace whatever happens, to the glory of God.
There are constant signs of hope and renewal and constant predictions that might transpire.
Our modern world seems to be opposed to God's call;
Opposed to the gospel
Yet many people are yearning for something for meaning, for spirituality.
And the fig tree like our churches is about to start a new season.
Old harvests have passed, old failures are behind us
New possibilities will come.

2. Being ready

Jesus forecast destruction of temple- about a fundamental change- a new world without the old certainties.

There is much in gospels about readiness, and about unpredictability.

Life is full of unfinished business: If only... I was going to..... I could have.... I wish

We are challenged to be ever ready- constantly waiting and watching.

I believe the current Pandemic is a key moment.

1. a test of past readiness (or not)
2. an opportunity to serve our communities in a time of need
3. an opportunity to prepare for a back to a new and better normal.

It is indeed a wonderful opportunity to ready ourselves. To prepare for the work ahead. Time to build ourselves up spiritually and physically for the work ahead. Indeed to make a start now. Developing our faith, building new skills, making plans, starting projects.

The End of the world is nigh.... The End of our old world- old values, old predictabilities, old ways.

God calls us to start seeking a new world. A world of Peace, justice, inclusion. A world meeting God anew.

Are we ready? Are you ready?

3. Staying Awake

I recall during a stay in Nigeria. I went out for the evening and when I returned I found our night watch was sleeping. I remember the panic in his eyes when I woke him. If it had been robbers rather than me, there would have been no second chance.

Our Gospel passage reminds us that we too are left in charge of God's work. How does it feel to be left in charge?

Responsibility, care, alert, tension? Child, Dog/ house sitting, looking after valuables are hard enough but God's work that is something of a much bigger order.

His message about keeping awake is a reminder that we can never know or understand God's timetable. Some opportunities only occur once. We need to be alert to those moments. We cannot afford to be caught napping, of missing the moment. If we do, there may be no chance for catching-up. Think of a visitor to your church, to your zoom service. Think of someone asking you about your faith. This may be a key moment not to be missed that only you can respond to. We must indeed stay awake, alert to opportunities, to signs, to needs, to others and be ready to respond.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is writing to the Church in Corinth. A community in internal conflict. He is reminding them that they have the resources, the opportunities and God will encourage them. They can achieve great things in His name.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my^[a] God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of^[b] Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sowe too are the servants of God, We have been entrusted with His valuable work. Here in our community and in the wider world.

The Good news is that we can get on with living faithfully. Liberating us from the need to worry- It is God's timetable not ours.

And we are tasked with being people of love, showing grace and openness. We need to watch but do not need to worry about when, because when should not matter if we are ready and awake for the moment

A New Advent, a fresh start, new opportunities, new hope.

Amen

Hymn: Hark the glad sound

Prayers for the people:

Loving God, accept our glad thanksgiving for all you have given us, and hear our prayers for the world.

We pray for those for whom there is no celebration – the poor and the hungry, the homeless and the sick, the lonely and bereaved, the oppressed and the persecuted; so many people in so many parts of the world. We pray for those whose lives are marred by fear – those who are anxious for themselves or a loved one, who see no hope in the future, or who live under the constant threat of danger of many types.

Lord, you call us to respond to their need and so help us to reach out in love.

We pray for all who wrestle with grief – those whose lives have been broken by tragedy, who live each day in perpetual shadow, crushed by the burden of sorrow. The deaths of so many people during recent months due to COVID-19 which is affecting so many. We pray for all who feel isolated particularly as for some they cannot see family members and hug them.

There are also those who feel unloved, unwanted, who find it hard to show love towards others, or whose relationships have been broken by cruelty, discord, division.

Lord, you call us to respond to their need so help us to reach out in love.

Loving God, may your light reach into the darkest places of the world, so that there may be hope rather than despair, joy rather than sorrow and love rather than hatred. Come now to our world through Jesus Christ, to bring the good news to the poor, release the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. As we look forward to your coming Lord, let us in a moment of silence offer to you the concerns in our hearts.

Lord you call us to respond to the needs of others so help us to reach out in love as we offer these prayers to you, our Saviour. Amen

Let us say together the words our Lord taught us

Our Father, ...

Lord's Prayer

Hymn: Forth in thy name, O Lord I go

Offertory prayer: Lord giving in a time of lockdown is more difficult, but we know it is also more important too. May our offerings of both money and ourselves of our time of our talents be used to spread your word and to build your kingdom here in our communities and across the whole world. Amen

Blessing: As we go out into our world, may we carry the light of hope with us. May it sustain us and may we share it with others struggling in darkness.

Shall we bless one another by sharing the Grace:

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and evermore. Amen