

Sunday 2nd December 2012 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m. Emancipation Day (1st Dec)		1st Sunday in Advent – Year C World AIDS Day (1st Dec) 16 days of activism for no violence against women & children (25th Nov – 10th Dec)
Jer 33:14-16	Ps 25:1-10	1 Thess 3:9-13
		Luke 21:25-36

“Be on the alert, praying at all times for strength to pass safely through all that is coming and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:36)

This end of town is emptying fast. Every day this past week saw eager Rhodes students trundling their suitcases down High Street to catch the buses home. Schools have closed and only the teachers are left, finishing off the marking and doing some prep for next year. Our post-grad students are pushing to meet the deadline for their dissertations to be submitted. Plett rave is in full swing, we are told. The December holidays are upon us.

Advent – a time to wait

It is all too easy, as people wind down, switch off, go on holiday, to miss the significance of these days and weeks before Christmas. We are in the Sixteen Days of Activism for no violence against women and children – a time to be doubly aware of those who are the most vulnerable amongst us. Friday 30th November was St Andrew’s Day, with its focus on mission, as Andrew was one who frequently brought others to Jesus. Yesterday, December 1st, was World AIDS Day. It was also Emancipation Day, to commemorate the end of slavery in SA (British colony), 1st August 1834.

And today is Advent Sunday, the first day of the new year in the church calendar. We are in the season of Advent, the four weeks, the

four Sundays, leading up to Christmas. Advent is a time to wait; it is a time to look back; it is a time to hope.

These weeks of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany are known as The Season of Incarnation.

“Advent” means “coming” or “arrival”. The season of Advent is a time for us to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ in his birth at Christmas, and in his return as king and lord and judge at the end of time. It is a season of waiting and hope and expectation, knowing and praying that Christ will come among us, that Jesus will be born in our lives, that God will be with us in the coming year.

I remember as a child being so excited, come December – a mixture, I suppose, of holidays, and Christmas presents, and seeing grandparents again. But it is more than a child’s excitement. Advent is a time of hope, longing, believing, trusting that God will do a new thing, that God will break into situations that seem impossible, and bring new life, change, transformation.

Advent is also a time more than others when we articulate our longing for freedom. We wait and long for the coming of the kingdom of God, with its emphasis on justice. We long to see people everywhere free from evil tyrants, dictators, bullies, thugs, the systemic evil of the world, the economic and political and social systems that keep people in chains. It is a time for evil and corrupt rulers to quake in their boots because of the coming of the King, the coming judgement.

Advent - a time to look back

Advent is a time to look back. It is a time to recognise that God breaks into history, into our lives, into our world.

“The days are coming, says the Lord, when I shall bestow on Israel and Judah all the blessings I have promised them... I shall make a

righteous Branch spring from David's line; he will maintain law and justice in the land." (Jer 33:14f)

In what ways has Christ come to us? In what ways have we seen law and justice at work?

We look back over this past year and recognise ways in which Christ has been present amongst us. There may be signs of hope as we have seen a family or a marriage restored. Or there has been an experience of reconciliation between former enemies; or we have had a sense of being guided as we faced a difficult decision; or during a particularly dark time, perhaps of loss or grief, we have known God carrying us.

We look back, and we are more and more aware of Christ's presence in the life of the church – the sense of ferment, of energy bubbling up, of creativity; of things coming together, the movement of the Spirit; a growing awareness of encountering God in those spine-tingling moments in our cathedral services; prayer ministry in the Lady Chapel and lives profoundly touched and changed by God in that context.

We look back, and see Christ's presence in some of the big events around us: Archbishop Thabo intervening and listening in the recent farm conflicts in the Western Cape, and being a mediating, wise presence there – the presence of Christ, helping communities to find a way forward, together; the Marikana Commission of Enquiry, led by an Anglican, Judge Ian Farlam, using all his wisdom and expertise to bring healing to a desperate situation; the High Court ruling in Harare, Zimbabwe, which has given church land and buildings back to the diocese of Harare. The presence of Christ in situations of extreme conflict and hostility. For many, the recognition by the United Nations of Palestine as a state is a sign of God at work in the world.

Advent reminds us that Christ has come, that He is present in our lives, in our world today, and that He will come again in power to bring in a new age.

Advent – a time to hope

Advent is a time to hope.

The liturgical colour is purple – the purple of penitence; but also the colour of royalty, as we celebrate the advent, the coming of the king. It is so good to walk through the streets and see the jacaranda flowers, purple-laden branches, carpets of purple – the advent purple, as we prepare for the coming of the king.

We have the Advent wreath, with its circle, which says that God is the eternal one, whose mercy is without end. The wreath is green – a sign of the hope that we have in God, the hope of renewal, eternal life. The four outer candles with their names – the candle of Hope; the candle of Love, or the Bethlehem candle; the candle of Joy or the Shepherd’s candle; the candle of Peace or the Angel candle. And on Christmas Day, the candle in the centre is lit, the Christ candle – all as signs of the light of God which comes into the world with the birth of His Son.

It’s a time to look forward, a time to hope. Our prayer for the year that lies ahead:

“In you, O Lord my God, have I put my hope...” (Ps 25:1)

– and we shall continue to put our hope in God.

“Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.” (Ps 25:3)

May that be our constant prayer.

And what about the quality of lives we live, in expectation of the coming of Christ:

“may the Lord make your love increase and overflow to one another and to everyone...” (1 Thess 3:12)

Hope, also, as we hear the sobering words of our Gospel reading, which tell of destruction and disaster:

“Portents will appear in sun and moon and stars. On earth nations will stand helpless, not knowing which way to turn from the roar and surge of the sea. People will faint with terror... Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory...” Luke 21:25-27)

“Be on the alert, praying at all times for strength to pass safely through all that is coming...” (Luke 21:36)

We recognise that we live in a world that is unstable, that is changing. Every natural disaster, every tsunami or hurricane or earthquake brings with it destruction, death, judgement, the end of the world for many, and is a sobering reminder of how we are to live.

But we also recognise that bad leadership, corruption and greed can also lead to the end of our world: the collapse of the economy, suffering and chaos. Sobering to realise this, especially as the ANC approaches Mangaung and the election of their leader, and our President, for his next term of office.

Our response: we are to be on our guard. We are to be on the alert, and not to be lulled into a false sense of security. If people do not receive justice from the courts, from police, from our constitution, if unemployment continues to rise, if wages are inadequate and service delivery continues to be inadequate, we may see more Marikanas. If our school system produces young people who have no future, our country will explode sooner or later, as young people become more and more desperate. If the few, whether black or white, continue to grow rich on the backs of the many who are very poor, there will be revolution which will destroy everything.

It is hard to be optimistic, cheerful, in the face of so much that is falling apart – the lack of water for the past week in parts of our town;

the concerns around education. The prevailing mood is one of despair, deep anxiety, worry, and unbelief.

Yet we are people of hope, who must do the things that make for peace, the things that give life, who need not despair - because we worship a God of hope.

CONCLUSION

May the Lord bless and strengthen us in our life and our journey as God's beloved children, in all that lies ahead.