

Sunday 1st December 2013 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		ADVENT 1 – Year A World AIDS Day 16 Days of Activism against Abuse of Women and Children 25th Nov – 10th Dec
Isaiah 2:1-5	Ps 122	Romans 13:11-14
		Matthew 24:36-44
LET US LIVE IN EXPECTANCY AND HOPE		

“Hold yourselves ready, therefore, because the Son of Man will come at the time you least expect him.” (Matt 24:44)

Ever since I was a child, these last few weeks of the year have always been weeks of growing excitement. Schools are closing or have already closed. The university year has ended. People are going on holiday. Families are getting together. Christmas is just around the corner. For us as young children, December meant a long drive all the way from our home in Pietermaritzburg, down through Kokstad and Mthatha, to George, where our grandparents lived – the annual visit, with all its wonderful memories of family and embrace and welcome and love and belonging and homecoming. It was a trip and a visit we looked forward to, something for which we waited, for months. Such vivid memories, even after all those years.

ADVENT SUNDAY

Today is Advent Sunday, the 1st Sunday in the season of Advent, with just over four weeks to Christmas. It is the beginning of the Christian liturgical year. Happy New Year! December 1st is also World AIDS Day. The word “advent” means “coming” or “arrival”. We mark these weeks of Advent as a season, a time, to prepare for the coming, the arrival, of Jesus Christ – his birth, his coming into the world at Christmas; and his coming again as Lord and King and Judge at the end of time.

This is a time to prepare – not only our homes for the guests and family who are arriving – meals, cleaning, painting, making ready -

but also a time to prepare our lives, our hearts, for the new birth of Christ, the new life and new hope that is given to us at Christmas. And it is a time to prepare, to be ready, for the coming of the Son of Man, the coming of the Lord, into our lives, into our church community, into our context, into our world; a time when we are reminded to live in expectancy and hope.

We have symbols – things we can see and touch - that remind us of the significance of Advent. We are using the liturgical colour purple – the colour both of penitence or repentance, and of royalty – so holding together the double themes of preparing ourselves by turning from all that is wrong, and of giving honour to the coming King.

We have the Advent wreath, with its circle of greenery, as a sign of new life and growth and hope; and its four purple candles, one for each Sunday in Advent, and its white candle, for Christmas Eve, as a sign of the light of God during this period of waiting, as we begin again with the story of our redemption. The light of Christ comes into the darkest parts of our lives, to bring newness and hope for the future.

This is a time when we look forward to the coming of Christ into our lives and our world, once again; and we wait in hope and expectation for what God will do, for doors that we trust will open, for the kingdom of God to come, for the will of God to be done in new and perhaps unexpected ways.

This has been a difficult and even painful year for many; and as we come to the end of 2013, we may well have wondered what it all means – have our heartaches and struggles and disappointments served any greater purpose? And where was God, through times of darkness?

Advent comes to remind us of God's reality and presence – Advent sounds the call to live in expectancy and hope – hope for the coming kingdom, hope for the coming of Christ, hope for God to break into our world.

LIVE IN EXPECTANCY AND HOPE

Our scripture readings underline this call to live in expectancy and hope.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah speaks of the time when “the mountain of the Lord’s house will be set over all other mountains...” (Is 2:2) – a time when the things of God will be at the heart of all peoples, when “all the nations will stream towards it...”; a time when God will judge between the nations; a time when there will at last be peace. It is a picture of the coming of the kingdom, the return of Christ as Lord and King – the time when all will be well – the time when there will be an end to oppression, an end to the abuse of power, an end to misrule and corruption and the waste of state resources, such as we beginning to see with the financing of President Zuma’s home at Nkandla.

Our second reading (Romans 13:11-14) uses the words of crisis to bring us to repentance. Certainly we are in a time of crisis: the crisis of HIV-AIDS, which we acknowledge on World AIDS Day, today, and as we pray for all infected with and affected by HIV-AIDS; and the crisis of abuse and violence against women and children, which we also acknowledge today, with the lighting of the barbed wire candle. In his most recent pastoral letter, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba pointed out that girls between the ages of 12 and 18 who are subject to sexual violence are 66 percent more likely to contract the HIV virus than those not so subjected.¹ And we are facing crises in governance here in Makana, with ongoing service delivery concerns; and in education, with the provincial Department of Basic Education moving to drastically reduce teaching posts in a number of our local schools – at immense cost to our children.

St Paul urges the church in Rome – and us all - to “behave with decency... no drunken orgies, no debauchery or vice, no quarrels or jealousy” (Rom 13:13) – very down-to-earth warnings as we go into

¹ *To the Laos – To the People of God, November 2013.*

the December holiday season with its excessive partying, post-matric drinking sprees, and, sadly, an increase in levels of domestic violence. “Let us ... throw off the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.” (Rom 13:12).

WAITING FOR THE END

The gospel reading is more complex. It forms part of two chapters in which Jesus is speaking about the end of all things. It consists of several teachings of Jesus, all on the general theme of waiting for the coming of the Son of Man, waiting for the end. We do not know when the end will come; and what is that end? A general cataclysm? A natural disaster? Tsunami? Earthquake? The end of the world – when the sun explodes and we all melt? A nuclear war that wipes us all out? Or simply the way tragedy and death and radical change strikes us quite randomly, touching the one, but not the other – and we cannot predict these events, we cannot escape them, we cannot control them. But when they do happen, in whatever form – in some way, God has come into our world, into our lives.

Much of life is random. Things happen to us, or don't happen, not because they were ordained by God but because we happened to be there - which underlines the Lord's warning to be prepared for the unexpected. Jesus uses the examples of two men ploughing, or two women grinding corn – and one is taken – one dies, or is bitten by a snake, or falls under a bus, we don't know – and the other is left. When our friend James Thomas was shot and killed in the Nairobi massacre recently, it was not because he had done anything wrong, or because his time had come. He and many others were simply was in the wrong place at the wrong time; while other friends and colleagues got out of there alive. We do not know when the Son of Man will come. Life seems to be completely random sometimes – and we simply have to live in faith and trust, knowing that God holds us in his love through everthing.

A recent film, *The Impossible*, is the true story about a family who against all odds survived a tsunami. It is an amazing story about

courage in the face of danger, but it is not a story about how God saved this one family but left countless others to drown. Life is random. We are called to live lives of love and compassion and forgiveness and honesty and truth and justice – because the Son of Man will come at a time when we least expect him.

CONCLUSION

We bring to God, during this Advent, our longings, our deep disappointments; closed doors, bitterness and sadness, betrayals and broken promises, dead ends; we bring to God all who live with suffering and despair and hopelessness; we bring to God all who live under oppression and injustice; all who are victims of abuse and domestic violence; we bring to God all who live with the cry in their hearts, “How long, O Lord?” Let’s allow our worship during this season of Advent to be a celebration of hope, of new life, of new possibilities, new beginnings. Let’s look for the potential and promise in others, even when they disappoint us. And let’s commit ourselves to bringing hope into the world.