

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

'Keep awake, therefore'
Isaiah 2.1-5
Mat.24.36 – 44

Advent 1 Year A
December 2nd 2007

Regular members of St Mark's congregation will have noticed several changes with the coming of Advent today: a change of colour, of course, and a change of service sheet, which brings a more penitential and reflective beginning to the service, including the start today of a pattern we used last year -the pattern of singing first one, then two, then three, then four – and finally, at the Carol Service all five, of the verses of 'O come, O come Emmanuel' – that great hymn based on the ancient Advent antiphons of the Western Church.

You may have noticed, too, that today we have changed over to hearing from the Old Testament in the first of our readings, instead of from the Epistles. This will be something which will prevail on most of the Sundays in the coming church year. Next Advent we shall switch back to first lessons from the New Testament again. My intention is that over a period of six years – two cycles of our three year lectionary – we will have heard as much of the Bible as is on offer in the lectionary readings.

The Gospel we shall hear from most often has changed with the year, as well. Last year was the 'year of Luke'. Now we enter 'the year of Matthew'.

Finally, may I highlight that during this solemn season of Advent some particular aspects of the service are changing to be a little more traditional than before. I shall invite you to kneel, more than we have become accustomed to do recently, and we shall say the Lord's Prayer in the more traditional words, 'Our Father, who art in heaven...'. (This will be true in the Christmas services, too – in the hope that the older words will feel more familiar to those who come to church only at that time of year.) So – all this is by way of preamble to the sermon. But the changes, of course, are all intended to set the tone for this season – a tone of reflection, of penitence, of self-examination, and of expectation. And in this early part of Advent, there is no doubt about what the expectation is fixed on: not on Christmas – yet – but on the final coming of the Lord, the time of judgement and truth, the in-breaking of God's Kingdom, the time of restoration and salvation for all who truly yearn for it...

'Keep awake therefore...' says Jesus in our Gospel reading, 'for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming'.

‘Keep awake...be alert..’ – these are the watchwords of the season.

How hard I find it (and perhaps you do too) that our Lord’s exhortations to keep awake , ‘to watch and pray’, are set before us at two times of the year when I we may feel most tired. Now, as the days shorten and the summer holidays seem ages away in the past. The children are dragging themselves towards the end of the longest term of the year, and the Christmas festivities are looming-up as a series of tasks to be achieved (and that’s only on the domestic front!) - just now something inside us may well be saying, ‘Wouldn’t hibernation be rather a good idea?’

But into this mix comes Jesus’s clarion call: ‘Keep awake!’

And then, we hear it again at another time I also associate with exhaustion – the end of Holy Week, when we’ve ploughed our way through Lent, having had more than enough of the winter months with the dreariness of the weather and the darkness, and the normal dose of colds, etc. to pull us down - even then, when we may be very, very tired, we hear Jesus say to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, ‘could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of

trial...’ With what truth he continues, ‘the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak’!

‘Keep awake!’ ‘Stay awake!’ This challenge seems to be the necessary precursor to both of our greatest festivals, Christmas and Easter. Perhaps this coincidence should alert us to how important it is to let this challenge shape our response to the Good News which those festivals embody. Committed discipleship means ‘keeping awake!’.

Of course – not literally, or not all of the time. There is, of course, a great spiritual tradition of waking in the night watches – praying while the world sleeps, and that remains a calling for some, to be valued and honoured by all. And then, of course, there are occasions for all of us when duty or love may call us to fight off slumber, for the sake of some greater good. And sadly, for too many people there is the experience of lying awake because of pain, or anxiety. It’s a real spiritual discipline to turn that wakefulness to prayerfulness: as Psalm 4 advises, in the old prayer book version – ‘ stand in awe, and sin not; commune with your own heart, and in your chamber, and be still’.

But this is not the essence of Jesus’ call to ‘Keep awake!’

He's speaking more, I think, in the way that some people do when they talk about something as a 'wake-up call'. It may be that an individual has a brush with death – something like a heart attack – and he suddenly alters his priorities in life – starting to put relationships before money, for example. It was a 'wake-up call'.

Or it may be that whole communities are shocked by some event - the outbreak of race riots in cities, for example – and they treat it as a wake-up call, to examine and put right what has led to ghettoisation and a burning sense of injustice amongst the underprivileged.

Or it may be that the whole world is receiving wake-up calls right now – more and more of them, as catastrophic floods on the one hand, and growing deserts on the other, tell us that we can't go on living our mad, carbon-hungry life-style. The question is – are we hearing the call, and responding promptly enough with a mass movement that calls constant commercialism and economic growth into question?

If Jesus tells people who love him to 'keep awake', he's telling us – surely – to be those who shouldn't need shocks to change our ways. He's telling us to keep our priorities constantly under review – to live in the light of the Kingdom that will come, the judgement that can't be avoided, his final

appearing, which will reveal God's purpose for the world in an unmistakeable way.

There are plenty-enough signs in the world that should remind us that all is not well. Perhaps there are some signs of dis-ease in our own lives, too, which we've been trying to hide from ourselves. And maybe, even, in our church.... That's a question we've begun to broach by looking and praying-through the 'Seven Marks of a Healthy Church'...

But today we hear the call to be 'awake' in an unequivocal way. To have a constant attitude of self-examination, accompanied by alertness to the vision God sets before us. Because it is the vision – and not the sense of dis-ease – which will re-set the direction of our lives. Neither Advent nor Lent is about wallowing in a sense of helpless sinfulness accompanied by fear of judgement. Both of them, with their wake-up messages, are about continually re-orientating our lives in the light of what God has done, and will do, for his world.

And today, to accompany Jesus' 'wake-up' call, we heard a wonderful example of the vision that can inspire us – the vision written into the prophecy of Isaiah - of those days to come when all nations shall stream to the place of the Lord's worship; when people will seek the wholesome ways of the

Lord, and desire to walk in his paths; when swords will be beaten to ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks, and they shall not learn war any more.

This is a picture of the Kingdom that the Lord will finally bring in its fullness – not us; yet it gives us a clear direction by which to orientate our lives. It is the direction for living which embraces all nations – no racism or narrow nationalism can rule the hearts or deeds of those focussed on God’s Kingdom.. It gives the direction in life which makes Christians long to see others worship the Lord – and do what they can about it. The vision patterns lives which care about God’s ways of justice and integrity, and his paths of peace, being found so far as possible in every community – lives which will not rest complacent whilst people anywhere suffer because these ways are ignored or derided. The Kingdom gives the orientation to people who positively act to defuse conflict, and remove the causes of war – because conflict and war are have no part in God’s Kingdom.

Next Saturday in London many Christians will be marching, at the invitation of Christian Aid, to demand that the Government’s Climate Change Bill be strengthened. They will be marching in the conviction that climate change is already unfustly ruining the lives of the poor, and stoking up

conflicts, such as that in Darfur. Caring about this kind of thing enough to march is one kind of practical and political outworking of having the vision of God’s Kingdom before our eyes. What other practical ways of response can you adopt in your own lives this week?

Jesus says ‘keep wake’ – awake to issues in our own lives, in the church, in the world God loves so much. We may, at certain seasons, find the idea of sleep a more attractive one than the idea of wakefulness. But each Christmas, each Easter, comes round with the promise of the Kingdom – and it is for the sake of the Kingdom that we should ‘keep awake’.