FIRST ADVENT A – ST MICHAEL'S, ABINGDON

30 November 2025

Isaiah 2.1–5 / Romans 13.11–14 / Matthew 24.36–44

'Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires….'

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

ADVENT — for today begins the season of looking forward to the arrival of our Lord Jesus — Advent often keeps company with a rhetoric of *waiting*, as if all the church were a giant family of eager children, anticipating stockings filled with goodies, and carefully wrapped gifts under the ornamented boughs of an indoor fir tree. We children of God's kingdom, brothers and sisters, friends of Jesus, *heirs* of *eternal life*, *wait* for the time (be it on Christmas Eve for some, or, as for all right-thinking brethren, Christmas *morning*) when we may unwrap packages and open boxes in which God has laid up for us treats and presents.

So if we're paying close attention during the readings this morning, we may be a bit surprised, maybe even somewhat *put off*, that the readings have little to say about waiting, and not a sausage about presents. I mean, *honestly*, Bible, what were you thinking? Isn't that *negligent* at the least?

Or perhaps — just a chance — this morning's readings remind us that the advent of the Lord, the veritable great Day of Judgement on which God reveals all truth to everybody, isn't *defined by* Christmas customs we have developed over the centuries. If we listen closely to these readings, we may hear different theme music playing while speakers in shopfronts trumpet 'Jingle Bell Rock' — somewhere behind the wrapping paper and

tinsel and snowpersons and ribbons, a sonorous organ plays 'God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year; God is working this purpose out, and the time is drawing near; nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be: when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.' Not 'All I Want for Christmas Is You', but 'Let us go forth in the strength of God, with the banner of Christ unfurled, that the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world.' Not simply having a 'Wonderful Christmastime', but 'All we can do is *nothing* worth unless God blesses the deed. Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God gives life to the seed.'

Because the readings this morning sound *exactly* the note of warning and preparation that we hear in the hymn. Isaiah reminds us that a time will come when all the world will stream to Mount Zion to embrace God in peace and reverence, so that 'he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'. Isaiah doesn't assume that *everybody* already knows God's ways — there will be *teaching* involved: 'out of Zion shall go forth *instruction*, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem'. We mayn't wander just *any-old-where* our flesh desires, but we will *learn* to walk in his paths. And God has been very explicit about his ways and his paths, setting out a thorough series of laws and commandments and instructions, of which God promises 'Do this, and *live*'!

Likewise St Paul urges us to *wake up*, because nearer and nearer draws the time. As God shall surely come to judge between the nations, and arbitrate for many peoples, it behoves us to *tune in* to what God expects of us. Paul may be overoptimistic about how honourably people conduct themselves in the daytime, but he knows that especially at night we have been known (occasionally) to indulge in revelling and drunkenness, in debauchery and licentiousness, in quarrelling and jealousy. Contrariwise, as children of daytime we ought all to fight against sorrow and sin, to set the captives free. As we who teach prompt our students, you *know* what

time it is — examination is nearer to us now than when we first enrolled. This isn't a season for *waiting* for the exam, but a time for *revising*, for getting right what we've gotten wrong all term.

All the more so since, as Jesus himself reminds us in the Gospel lesson, about that day and hour *no one* knows, not even the angels of heaven. Our final exam — the truly *final* final exam — is coming at an *unexpected* hour. Our goal ought not to be to swot up on faith, hope, and charity at the very last minute, cramming moral precepts and transcendent commandments into our hearts so that we need put on the armour of light and live honourably *only for the brief moments* before the Judge calls us to give an account of our lives. Jesus warns us against allowing business as usual to drown out the celestial anthems of angelic adherence to God's ways. The more that our times remind us of the days of Noah, when everyone just played along with the ways of the world, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, then the more we need to commit ourselves to Noah's way of righteousness, of seeking to live blamelessly, of walking with God.

When St Paul instructs us to make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires, he speaks not as an apostolic killjoy, but as a nurse advising us how we may live *long* and live *well*. He remembers that our flesh ultimately fails us; flesh belongs to the order of things that perish, like the week-old veg forgotten in the bottom tray of the refrigerator. That courgette may have been a blameless squash, righteous in its generation, blossoming and growing with God — but it has gone the way of all courgette flesh, gone soft and watery and smelling distinctly unpleasant. *That's how flesh goes*. But if we put on Jesus Christ, if we unite ourselves in baptism to the ever-living Son of God, and sustain ourselves in his glorious light by *remembering* the needy, by practising *humility*, by beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks, we may rise with him from the flesh's death to the *spiritual* life *im*mortal.

You may have noticed that none of this falls under the heading of 'waiting'. Isaiah doesn't urge God's people to *wait around* for the days to come. St Paul doesn't say 'the night is far gone, the day is near', so see whether you can squeeze in another few minutes of sleep. Jesus doesn't say that if you don't know the day and hour, you should just take it easy for a while. This *time*, our Advent interval, God provides for us to warn, to wake up, to work out our salvation — nearer to us now than when we first believed — but *no*, not to *wait*, not even a *wee* bit. O house of Jacob, O members of the Body of Christ, come, let us not wait, but *walk* in the light of the Lord.

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen