

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is advent Sunday, neatly falling on the 1st of December. It's the beginning of the church year, and it's the season in which we anticipate the coming of Christ Jesus. We don't just think about his coming as a baby in Bethlehem, although that tends to dominate this season. We are to make room for thinking of other aspects of Jesus' coming. His coming by his Spirit, and at the center of the focus of advent is looking to that day when Jesus will come again at the end of time. Advent's a time to focus on what we call the second coming of Jesus. That time he'll come to establish his everlasting kingdom of justice and peace.

And that great hope of a new dawn runs throughout scripture. We see it in the Old Testament reading where the prophet Isaiah speaks of the day when, "God will judge between the nations and they will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and nations will not learn war anymore." Jesus himself often spoke of his return and the coming kingdom, and the passage from Matthew that we heard is typical of the apocalyptic strand in Jesus' teaching.

It's there too in the epistle, in the writings of Saint Paul, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed," he writes. "The night is far gone. The day is near." And I want to focus on our gospel reading and pick out two imperatives that we see in that reading. The first is this, keep awake. "Wake up," Jesus says, "as you don't know on what day your Lord is coming." An imperative reinforced by St. Paul who wrote, "Now is the moment to wake up from sleep." I don't know if you're aware, but the English bookmakers William Hill have odds of a thousand to one against Jesus coming again this year or next year. If you're interested in placing a bet, because those are rather attractive odds, I should tell you that to claim your winnings, the second coming of Jesus has to be confirmed by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Now, I'm not sure a lot about this last bit, because what it says in the gospels would seem to make it clear, with its talk about Jesus coming on the clouds, that no such confirmation by the Archbishop or anybody else will be needed. It will be obvious to all. Yet the fact that the bookmakers are prepared to offer such long odds tells us that it's easy to live as if there will be no end, to think that it's something that will never happen, that Jesus is never returning, that this world is all that there is.

And it's so easy to get seduced into thinking that the material world we live in, day to day, is all that matters. It's so comfortable for many of us. Why would we imagine anything different? But we need to wake up from our slumber, remember that there's another kingdom, there's a kingdom slowly emerging amongst us that will one day be born into glorious fullness. That's the kingdom we should never forget, we should never lose sight of. "The night is far gone. The day is near. Wake up." Wake up because our hold in this earthly kingdom is not as secure as you might think.

I remember sitting with my wife Laura in a London hospital a few years ago waiting for test results, and we said to ourselves, if these test results aren't good, then our whole world is turned upside down. All the plans we've made will count for nothing. I'm sure many of you have had the same experience. That was a wakeup call. Suddenly one realizes that our hold on this life is very tenuous. Things could very easily be very different. "The night is far gone. The day is near." Nearer than we might imagine.

The second imperative is this. Be ready. "Be ready", Jesus says, "for the son of man is coming at an unexpected hour." Advent is a time of preparation. It's a reminder that we live between the times, between the now and the not yet. The now of this world, the not yet of God's kingdom, which is coming but has not yet arrived, and in Advent, we're called to prepare ourselves for that which is to come. My grandfather used to be in what was called the faith missions. He used to pull a cart with all his belongings around Ireland. It was quite a full

on experience, and he shared a room during one of these missions with a young man who... My grandfather, who was quite a tidy, immaculate person, but I don't know why this made an impression of him, but he used to tell us about the incredible care that his roommate took to arrange all his clothes.

So right down to when they got ready for bed at the end of the night, the roommate would pack everything by the bed, absolutely immaculately, even taking out his handkerchief from his pocket, folding that, placing it on top. And my grandfather asked him why he did this, why he went to such lengths, and the roommate replied, well, it was in case Jesus returned in the night.

Now, I don't think that's the kind of preparation that Jesus was talking about here. If we are to be prepared, it's not a question about what we just do with our smalls. It's about our whole life. What do we do to prepare for the coming of the kingdom? Are we investing our life in the things that will be of value in the kingdom of God? That's the kind of preparation he's talking about.

The day is coming when Jesus will establish a kingdom. It provides a standpoint from which we can judge and value our own life. It's a kingdom of love, justice and righteousness. Are these the things that we're putting our energies into now? That's what being prepared is all about. It's all about building the kingdom of God now, investing in kingdom values. As Christians, we are a kingdom people, a people of hope, with a different set of priorities. We can know what really matters in life.

We know too that dawn will break soon. We are preparing ourselves now. "The night is nearly over. The day is almost here." CS Lewis said that, "It's since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven," he said, "and you'll get earth thrown in, aim at earth and you'll get neither."

The bookmakers might want to encourage us to wager a few dollars on whether Jesus will return this year, but the gospel calls us to bet everything on the hope we have in Jesus and his kingdom. We're called to wager our very lives on the good news of Jesus and of his new kingdom. In Advent, the question before us is this, have we hedged our bets or are we still living in accordance with the coming kingdom? Are our life's chips still placed on the square marked hope? "The night is far gone. The day is near. Wake up, and be ready."

Amen.