

Advent 1, '20  
Eindhoven

[Isaiah 64:1-9]; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
Mark 13:24-37

### **Look out, but look forward!**

[Slide 1: looking back & forward] Today is the very First Sunday of Advent, the church season that season encourages us to look out for something to come. The name was adopted from Latin word *adventus* for 'coming' or 'arrival', translating Greek *parousia*. We look forward and we look back. We look back at the Lord's first coming, in the Christ child – love come down at Christmas. But we also look ahead. Since Jesus walked the earth, God's kingdom has come, in the hearts of believers and in signs of love and power that we can see and feel if we are open to them. But at Advent we also look ahead to the Lord's coming in final triumph, when his kingdom of peace and harmony will be truly universal, accepted by all.

So Advent is a time of looking: a powerful mixture of 'look out' and 'look forward'.

[Slide 2: watch out] 'Look out' because we are told that the Lord's final coming will be not just a time of victory of justice and righteousness. The Lord will come to clean house in a world, where there is such a mess. We desperately want an end to all wars, and end to all poverty and persecution, an end to all sickness and suffering. But the Lord's coming in judgment can also be a frightening thing for many of us.

Looking out for the Lord's coming can make us nervous. Jesus says in Mark's Gospel

<sup>24</sup> 'But in those days, following that distress,

“the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light;

<sup>25</sup> the stars will fall from the sky,

and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

<sup>26</sup> 'At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

Jesus turns to the symbol of the fig tree again, perhaps the same tree he had earlier cursed (see Mark 11.12-14, 20-21) and which had withered. He holds out the possibility of it putting out shoots that would signal the end of the darkness of winter and the coming of summer. However, if one is not paying attention, these signs are easy to miss. Therefore, be alert and stay awake.

<sup>33</sup> Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come,' he says, AND <sup>37</sup> What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!" In other words: 'Look out' it's coming.

This conjures up worries about our own judgment, about how we have lived.

Some of our children look forward to this time of year -- Sinter Klaas or Santa Claus is coming. But in some versions of these stories, judgment is also involved! [Slide 3: Better]

One 86-year-old classic American Christmas hit goes:

Oh! You better watch out, / You better not cry,

You better not pout, / I'm telling you why:

Santa Claus is coming to town!

He's making a list, / He's checking it twice,  
He's gonna find out / who's naughty or nice.  
Santa Claus is coming to town!

He sees you when you're sleeping, / He knows when you're  
awake. He knows when you've been bad or good,  
So be good for goodness sake!  
So... You better watch out, / You better not cry  
You better not pout, I'm telling you why.  
Santa Claus is coming to town.

One Dutch verse captures this too: Wie zoet is krijgt lekkers  
wie stout is de roe.

The American song has been recorded by over 200 artists,  
including Bing Crosby, Neil Diamond, Bruce Springsteen, Frank  
Sinatra, The Temptations, Mariah Carey, and Michael Bublé.

However joyful the melody, and smooth the singers, the lyrics  
do paint a scary Big-Brother-like picture of St Nicholas, who  
knows all that you think and do, and punishes wrong.

Question: Do we also think about the Lord in this way, too?  
Some Biblical passages alert us. On the one hand, we should  
be full of hopeful anticipation, looking forward. On the other  
hand, there is a bit of worry for ourselves and others, look out!

Health warnings to avoid disasters never sound pleasant, but  
they are crucial. But those warnings, by definition, are to  
secure our health. What I myself fear, though, is that fear of  
the Lord has often focused too much on fright and phobia and  
not on respect for our omniscient and omnipotent God who is

endlessly loving and merciful. We should also anticipate the  
Lord's coming with great joy and relief.

[Slide 4: Looking forward] Yes, our Lord wants us to be  
faithful and active in his service until his coming, as the post  
communion prayer for today will say. But he does not want  
us to be fearful and panicky in his service. He wants us to be  
joyful in his praise. Because his kingdom is breaking out, or  
rather breaking into his world, and there will be no more  
crying, no more pain. That is worth celebrating, constantly!

Spiritual writer David Adam composed a short book called the  
*Echo of God* for use in Advent. When David was a curate, his  
vicar insisted he preach on the traditional themes at Advent:  
Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven. David was given Hell  
and Judgment. But while addressing those, he preached on  
joy and hope, because even though judgment and hell are  
experienced by many, God's coming into our lives really  
shows that 'love changes everything.'

Yes, Advent is about 'Look out', but it should also be about 'Look  
forward.' Even David Adam's vicar had Heaven as the final  
theme. That is the goal. And let us enjoy the evidence each and  
every one of us does have of God's love here, and look forward  
to the day when all the earth will welcome its embrace.

St Irenaeus put it beautifully: 'The glory of God is a human fully alive.'

As we look forward to God's coming glory, we should glory in  
that, and praise his name, celebrating each blessing that he  
gives. The Eucharist, where we celebrate the Last Supper  
before the great and redeeming sacrifice Jesus made for us,  
is Greek for Thanksgiving. We should give thanks for our  
Saviour all the time. This gratitude speaks volumes. By

contrast, a pithy little prayer attributed to St Teresa of Avila begs [quote], 'From silly devotions and from sour-faced saints, good Lord, deliver us!'

Let us live in the waiting time that we now have on this earth with joyful appreciation of Jesus' gift to us and in joyful anticipation of what is to come!

[Slide 5: St Paul writes to his friends in Corinth, and reminds them of God's blessings:

1:<sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – <sup>6</sup> God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you *eagerly* wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will also keep you *firm* to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, *who has called you into fellowship with his Son*, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul does have a few critical things to address further in the letter, but he begins with thanksgiving, as we should. Paul often opens his letters with thanks to God for his goodness and power to transform life, and for the wonderful Christian communities he has shared in building. Trinity Eindhoven, we give thanks for you, and pray for you. You have so much to give thanks for, for so many years of growth and care. And you also have so much to look forward too!

For God has given you such wonderful people and such wonderful gifts. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the immense

grace God has given them, which has enriched them. When we think of the Lord and his coming, let us not think of what we lack, but of what God has given.

In the Jewish Talmud it speculates about the judgment at the end times. And there is an interesting twist. It says, 'In the world to come each of us will be called to account for all the good things of God put on this earth which we *refused* to enjoy.' Sad, but hopefully an awakening.

In Joan Chittister's book, *The Rule of St Benedict*, a young monk approaches an abbot for enlightenment, and the abbot says: 'Just look.' The young monk replies sulkily, 'I'm always looking.' The abbot responds, 'No you're not. In order to look at what is here, you have to be here, and you are mostly somewhere else.' We are often carried away by this or that. How hard it sometimes is to pause and observe the glory of God in our lives and surroundings. How hard it sometimes is to wait, expectantly, positively, or to enjoy gratefully when we are restless and anxious.

[Slide 6] But in this Advent, in this stange and curious year, let us take the time to take a breath. To breathe in the Spirit of God. To look around at all the wonders God has created. And to look forward, not in fear, but in joyful anticipation. His kingdom is coming, and his will is being and will be done. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but Christ's words will never pass away.

To God be the glory and the victory, great things he has done. Let us, with the fig tree bear, fruit while we are here, even as we await better days.