

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

As I was preparing this sermon this week, my mind went back to May 1993. I was curate in a parish in North London called Highbury. That might not mean anything to most of you, but to English soccer fans, or to put it properly, English football fans, Highbury is the home of London's premier football team, Arsenal F.C. and in 1993, they won the FA Cup, which is the equivalent of winning the Super Bowl. So, the day after they won it, they had an open-top bus parade through the streets of Highbury, which meant that at 10:45 on the day after, when we were halfway through a Sunday service, the bus with the FA Cup went right outside our windows. So, I was trying to lead a service in the church, while thousands of cheering fans were just outside the window waving at their heroes as the cup was paraded past.

I've got a similar kind of feeling this morning, because there are preparations going on just a few blocks away for the La Jolla Christmas Parade. Not quite the same scale as the Arsenal parade, but nevertheless, there are people dressing as Santa, the marching bands are getting ready, there's just general jollity going up the street there, which will be coming past our doors later on. And here in the church, we're hearing readings that have a decidedly apocalyptic feel to them. There's absolutely no seasonal cheer in any of our readings. It's starting to feel a lot like Christmas outside, but we're marking, in church, the beginning of this Advent season.

And I've heard Advent described as a counterweight to liturgical time. It stops us sliding straight from Thanksgiving into Christmas, from one feeding frenzy to another. Advent is not a comfortable season. The Advent message is meant to be unsettling. If we're to hear it aright, it's going to put us on edge. Advent forces us to look at some of the Bible's most challenging passages, and introduces ideas that perhaps, for most of the year, we wouldn't think about. But we simply can't ignore the Advent theme. It's too central in scriptures to be ignored, it's embedded.

Take today's gospel reading, from the Gospel of Mark, which is almost identically repeated in the Gospels Matthew and Luke. It's the longest part of

Jesus's teaching in that gospel. So often in the Gospel of Mark, very irritatingly for a preacher, there'll be a verse that says something like, "And Jesus taught the crowds" and won't say what He said. But here in Mark 13, Jesus is teaching about the great day that is to come, the Second Coming, it's laid out in great and long detail. And we acknowledge the centrality of this doctrine when, each week in our Eucharist, we remind ourselves that we do this until He comes.

There was a famous dean of St. Paul's Cathedral called Dean Inge, who went to visit one of his ex-curates in the West Country. And on his return, he wrote in his diary two things about the man he'd been to visit. One was that he kept lizards in the drawing room, and the second was that he had an interest in the early church's ideas about the last day. And Dean Inge seemed to think that both of these ideas were equally eccentric. I'm not sure about the lizards, but certainly maintaining a concern for the Christian teaching about the last day is not eccentric. Eccentric, no. Challenging, yes.

And as I looked at this passage again this week, I was reminded about how many unknowns there are in this chapter. Jesus says, "About that day or hour, no one knows, not the angels, not the Son. Only the Father. No one knows." That, however, has not stopped people speculating. I lost an hour of my life this week going down a rabbit hole on the internet, looking at most unhelpful websites, all with people trying to clarify the unknowns. So, I came across websites called things like The End Time Chronology, full of unedifying nonsense, speculating about things that are unknown.

This drove me back to the gospel reading, and the desire to focus not on the unknowns, but on the knowns. Whilst it's clear that there are things of which we and the angels cannot be sure, there are several things about which we can be sure. Let me pick out three. We might not know the when or the how, but we do know the who. It will be Jesus Christ, the Son of man, coming in great clouds with power and glory.

There was an Englishman called Ernest Digweed who died in 1976, and he left an estate valued at 26,107 pounds. And he said that this was to be paid to Jesus Christ on His return, at His Second Coming, and his

whole estate was to be invested for 80 years. If, and I quote, "during those 80 years, the Lord Jesus Christ shall come to reign on the earth, then the public trustees, upon obtaining proof, which should satisfy them of His identity, shall pay to the Lord Jesus Christ all the property which they hold on his behalf." Now, Mr. Digweed makes certain assumptions in his will that I'm not sure about. Like, will money be any use in those times? Will there be any problem identifying Jesus when He returns on the clouds? I doubt it. I'm confident though that everything will be made clear then, even if it isn't now.

The second thing we can be sure of is that there will be an end. Ends are good. Ends make sense of things. We all have that feeling when we finish a novel, perhaps a thriller, if the end makes sense of everything that's gone before, then it's a good book. You think, "Oh, that's why so-and-so did that earlier on in the plot. It makes sense now." Ends can bring that sense of meaning and completion. Yet we're not always comfortable with ends. For some years now, I've noticed that nobody dies anymore. They simply pass away. It's a euphemism that feels gentler, less stark. But in my view, passing away doesn't do justice to the jarring finality of death. Those who've gone through the unexpected death of a loved one know that it doesn't feel gentle. We should name it for what it is.

St. Paul doesn't say that "passing away has lost its sting". He says, "death has lost its sting". Passing away hasn't been swallowed up in victory, "death has been swallowed up in victory". We can dare to name the ends for what they are because we believe, as Christians, that ends can also be beginnings. In our resurrection faith, death is but the portal to an eternal life. And the great Day of Judgment that we think about in Advent marks the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth. When God acts to judge the world, evil will be overcome, and justice will be restored. And I take great comfort from the fact that with God, nothing goes unnoticed. Suffering and injustice would be unbearable if it were unnoticed, if no one cared. But God cares. God takes notice. And one day, He will act to put right what has been wrong, and to bring peace and justice to the earth. Our uncomfortable Advent message contains seeds of hope. An Advent calendar has windows for each

day, but the Advent season has a window into eternity.

Thirdly, the passage is very clear that we're to keep alert, to keep watch, and it ends with a simple instruction: keep awake. We're to live this life mindful of the fact that there is another world, another spiritual realm, that there will be a great Day of Reckoning. Advent's a time to make us feel uncomfortable. It prompts us not to get too comfortable in this material world, because this material world is not all that there is. As C. S. Lewis said, "It is since Christians largely ceased to think of the other world that they've become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven, and you'll get earth thrown in. Aim at earth, and you'll get neither." We're to live in the shadow of eternity, looking out for God's presence, signs of God's presence in the world. We're to wake up, we're to be alert to the nearness and proximity of God's kingdom. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning said, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God. And only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit around and pluck blackberries."

Advent is a time to look, and to see, to be alert, and to keep watch. "To watch," Cardinal Newman said, is "to be detached from what is present, and to live in what is unseen." So, this Advent season, let's wake up from our materialist slumber. Let's not forget that another day is coming. Let's watch for the signs of God's kingdom. And let's pray this Advent prayer with Robert Herhold. "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. We do not understand what this means, but don't let that stop you."

Amen.