

# How are we preparing to meet the Christ Child?

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Advent 1: Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

## INTRODUCTION:

Today we begin another Christian year in the Church. The season of Advent. This is a season of preparation for Christmas, just as Lent is a season of preparation for Easter. Christmas and Easter are probably the 2 most significant festivals of our faith, so it is a good idea to prepare ourselves in case we lose our focus. Because I think it would be fair to say that in this country we have mostly lost the Christian focus of Christmas. The baby has been thrown out and replaced with Santa, the Christmas Pageant and a rampant consumerism and over-indulgence that even the Apostle Paul at his most strident would find hard to comprehend. And instead of preparing and being reflective and contemplative we are rushing here and there to end of year functions, Christmas lunches and dinners. So, let us stop for a few minutes and look at the readings we are presented with today.

## POINT 1:

I will briefly look at Isaiah's vision of God and Paul's vision of Jesus, but it is Matthew's vision of Jesus that really has me intrigued.

Of course Isaiah lived many centuries before the time of Jesus, but he was familiar with the idea of a coming Messiah. He had a vision of God, or the Lord, that centered around Jerusalem. It was a communal vision and it was global or worldwide. All the people would come to Jerusalem to be instructed in the ways of God. *He shall judge between the*

*nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares....nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.* Isaiah's vision is of a peacemaking God. Ironically this was not the experience of the people of God who fought endlessly with their neighbours and even amongst themselves. Never the less Isaiah's vision was their aim. This vision of God was communal, global, and political.

#### POINT 2:

By the time we get to Paul, his vision of God is Jesus-centered. It is very focussed upon the individual rather than communal. And his interest is in how Christians behave. He exhorts the community of faith to love. He reminds them to *wake from their sleep*. He uses imagery of light and darkness and asks them to *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*. He also reminds followers of Jesus that salvation is closer to them than when they first believed. This may be a veiled reference to Paul's belief that he would see the return of Christ in his lifetime. So he is reminding believers to be prepared to meet Jesus again.

#### POINT 3:

Now we come to our Gospel reading from Matthew, and what a reading it is. Instead of gentle Jesus meek and mild, here Jesus according to Matthew, has gone apocalyptic. In order to understand these verses we need to understand what apocalyptic writing is. In the New Testament the most obvious example of this is the Book of Revelation, but also this section of Matthew's gospel. Apocalyptic writing describes imminent disaster and total or universal destruction. It is an unveiling of catastrophic events in history. In Jewish and

Christian writings, it usually speaks to communities that are experiencing persecution and upheaval. In this section of Matthew's gospel the apocalyptic events referred to are the

days of Noah, the 2 people in the field and the 2 women grinding meal. In all 3 cases, some people were prepared and some were not. Matthew has linked these apocalyptic images, which are not intended to be taken literally, to the second coming of Jesus. His intention is clear. Are you prepared and watchful or are you missing the signs of Jesus' return?

So we jump from preparing ourselves for the birth of the baby in the manger at Bethlehem straight through the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus to the second coming of Jesus, the Parousia. What a way to start Advent.

What are we to make of these readings. How do they prepare us for the birth of Jesus? Isaiah reminds us that God wants to teach us his ways so that we may practice justice and put away warmongering. Isaiah also reminds us that faith is worked out in a community that walks in the light or the illumination of the Lord.

Paul, on the other hand is concerned with the individual's relationship with Jesus and how that works out in their behaviour. He encourages Christians to love and to walk in the light.

Lastly, Matthew's Jesus uses apocalyptic imagery to herald the second coming of Jesus. He urges believers to read the signs and be prepared and watchful for that day, at the same time saying that only the Father knows when this cataclysmic event will occur.

## CONCLUSION:

I wonder what thoughts, words or images these Advent 1 readings evoke for you? How as a community of faith and a diocese are we preparing to meet the Christ child? Where is our manger? How are we as individuals preparing ourselves to put on Christ? And how watchful and prepared are we to meet Christ at the final curtain? That's not something many of us think about, I suspect, despite being part of the biblical

faith tradition? Welcome to the journey of Advent. Prepare yourselves for an adventure of cosmic relevance to a world that is in dire need of spiritual awakening.