



WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH



THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

29th NOVEMBER 2020

ADVENT 1

<u>READINGS FOR TODAY</u>	PARISH OFFICE: Please phone or use e-mail TEL:01252 331161; e- mail: office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS & BAPTISMS – phone for an appointment on 01252 321517 or 331161 WEBSITE: www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk
Isaiah 64 v 1 - 9	
1 Corinthians 1 v 3 - 9	
Mark 13 v 24 - end	

SERVICES IN CHURCH

Services in Church and St Peter's Centre will resume from next Sunday 6th December. There will be an 8 am service in St Peter's Centre, and a 10 am Holy Communion in church. From Wednesday 9th December the 9 – 30 am Holy Communion will also resume. Covid – 19 safety measures will still apply, everyone must wear a mask and maintain social distancing. There can be no congregational singing. The online Morning Worship service will still be published on our website for those who cannot attend.



ONLINE ADVENT COURSE CONTINUES THIS MONDAY

The course is entitled 'Hope' and is by John Birch – a theme which seems particularly relevant this year! There are three more Bible Studies and discussions: Listen to the witnesses; Hope in the Gospel promises; Hope for the future. The dates for the sessions online are Monday 30th November, Tuesday 8th and Wednesday 16th December all at 7 – 30 pm.

You can join online by following this link:

<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/77978490538...>

Meeting ID: 779 7849 0538

Passcode: Mq8Abp

Accompanying information > [/userfiles/Advent Hope - 2020.pdf](#)

To receive a printed copy of the course, please phone Fr Keith on 01252 321517 or Carol on 01252 313239

NATIONAL CHRISTINGLE SERVICE

SUNDAY 13TH DECEMBER at 9 am

Sadly, we will be unable to hold our own Christingle Service this year due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, we will be putting a Family Service on the theme of the Nativity on our website on Christmas Eve. You may wish to join in with this **National Christingle Service**, by registering, following the links below. The service will last 45 minutes.

Location: The Church of England's Facebook and YouTube channels Register to attend: www.christingle.org/attend

Also here is a link to the Facebook group too <https://www.facebook.com/events/2695266214024562/>

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – ADVENT 2

Isaiah 40 v 1 - 11; 2 Peter 3 v 8 – 15a; Mark 1 v 1 - 8

Congratulations and good wishes to everyone celebrating their birthday this week, especially: JOHN MONK (2ND); MARY LAMONT (4TH)

ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN - If you would like prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 This is a confidential service.

CARE AND SHARE - If you would like to donate any tins, packets, UHT milk, tea, coffee etc. for the shelves outside church, please leave items on the doorstep of the Rectory.

It would be nice to have some Christmas treats to put out next month! Thank you.

ST PETER'S CHURCH CALENDARS

Ideal Christmas presents, our calendar for 2021 has pictures of St Peter's and room for appointments. Only £5 they are now available - from Fr Keith on 321517 or wait until we are back in church.

FROM A CHURCH BULLETIN

For those of you who have children and don't know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

Next Thursday there will be try-outs for the choir. They need all the help they can get.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ADVENT SEASON

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation, as the Church prepares to celebrate the coming (*adventus*) of Christ in his incarnation, and also looks ahead to his final advent as judge at the end of time. The readings and liturgies not only direct us towards Christ's birth, they also challenge the modern reluctance to confront the theme of divine judgement:

Every eye shall now behold him
robed in dreadful majesty. (*Charles Wesley*)

The Four Last Things – Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – have been traditional themes for Advent meditation. The characteristic note of Advent is therefore expectation, rather than penitence, although the character of the season is easily coloured by an analogy with Lent. The anticipation of Christmas under commercial pressure has also made it harder to sustain the appropriate sense of alert watchfulness, but the fundamental Advent prayer remains 'Maranatha' – 'Our Lord, come' (1 Corinthians 16.22).

Church decorations are simple and spare, and purple is the traditional liturgical colour. In the northern hemisphere, the Advent season falls at the darkest time of the year, and the natural symbols of darkness and light are powerfully at work throughout Advent and Christmas. The lighting of candles on an Advent wreath was imported into Britain from northern Europe in the nineteenth century, and is now a common practice.

The Third Sunday of Advent was observed in medieval times as a splash of colour in the restrained atmosphere of Advent (*Gaudete* or 'Rose Sunday'), and the last days of Advent were marked by the sequence of Great 'O' Antiphons, said before and after the Magnificat at evening prayer, which continue to inspire modern Advent hymns and meditations.

THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent Wreath has three purple candles and one pink candle in a ring around a white candle, reflecting the liturgical colours for Advent, (the pink candle for the Third Sunday, when rose-pink vestments are traditionally worn).

The first candle is lit on Advent Sunday; additional ones are lit, one on each Sunday, and the white or gold one on Christmas Day.

There are several traditions about the meaning or theme of each candle. The scheme that accords best with the Common Worship Principal Service Lectionary is:

Advent 1 – The Patriarchs

Advent 2 – The Prophets

Advent 3 – John the Baptist

Advent 4 – the Blessed Virgin Mary

Christmas Day – The Christ

Each of the four Sundays then reminds us of those who prepared for the coming of Christ. 'The Patriarchs' can naturally focus on Abraham, our father in faith, and David, the ancestor in whose city Jesus was born. 'The Prophets' gives an opportunity to reflect on the way the birth of the Messiah was 'foretold'. John, who proclaimed the Saviour, and Mary, who bore him in her womb, complete the picture.

Morning Prayer at 10 am on Sunday

If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand.

(L) O Lord, open our lips

All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

(L) Reveal among us the light of your presence

All: that we may behold your power and glory.

The first candle on the Advent Wreath, or another candle, is lighted, and this prayer is said, reminding us of The Patriarchs:

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, God of our ancestors:
to you be praise and glory for ever.

You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith
and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment.

May we be obedient to your call

and be ready and watchful to receive your Christ,

a lamp to our feet and a light to our path;

for you are our light and our salvation.

Blessed be God for ever.

This hymn is said or sung:

Thy kingdom come, O God,

Thy rule, O Christ, begin;

Break with Thine iron rod

The tyrannies of sin.

Where is Thy reign of peace,

And purity, and love?

When shall all hatred cease,

As in the realms above?

When comes the promised time

That war shall be no more—

and lust, oppression, crime,

Shall flee Thy face before?

We pray Thee, Lord, arise,

And come in Thy great might;

Revive our longing eyes,

Which languish for Thy sight.

Some scorn Thy sacred name,

And wolves devour Thy fold;

By many deeds of shame

We learn that love grows cold.

O'er lands both near and far

Thick darkness broodeth yet:

Arise, O Morning Star,

Arise, and never set!

(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before
us; let us pray with one heart and mind:

All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
so may the light of your presence, O God,
set our hearts on fire with love for you;
now and for ever. Amen.

(L) When the Lord comes,
he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness,
and will disclose the purposes of the heart.
Therefore, in the light of Christ let us confess our sins:

All: Turn to us again, O God our saviour,
and let your anger cease from us:
Lord, have mercy.

Show us your compassion, O Lord,
and grant us your salvation:
Christ, have mercy.

Your salvation is near for those that fear you,
that glory may dwell in our land:
Lord, have mercy.

All: May God our Father have mercy on us, forgive us our
sins, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

We now say 'A Song of the Wilderness' together:

All: Lift up your voice with strength,
O herald of good tidings.

- 1 The wilderness and the dry land shall rejoice, ♦
the desert shall blossom and burst into song.
- 2 They shall see the glory of the Lord, ♦
the majesty of our God.
- 3 Strengthen the weary hands, ♦
and make firm the feeble knees.
- 4 Say to the anxious, 'Be strong, fear not,
your God is coming with judgement, ♦
coming with judgement to save you.'
- 5 Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, ♦
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
- 6 Then shall the lame leap like a hart, ♦
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.
- 7 For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, ♦
and streams in the desert;
- 8 The ransomed of the Lord shall return with singing, ♦
with everlasting joy upon their heads.
- 9 Joy and gladness shall be theirs, ♦
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

All: Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All: Lift up your voice with strength,
O herald of good tidings.

We now say the collect for today:

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us
in great humility; that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Read Isaiah 64 v 1 – 9 followed by Psalm 80 v 1 – 8 &
18 – 20 concluding with:

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as
it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Read 1 Corinthians 1 v 3 - 9

(L) Alleluia, alleluia.
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.
All: Alleluia.

Now read Mark 13 v 24 – end

Here are some thoughts on today's readings from Fr Keith:

It is only in Luke's Gospel that we learn of the circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist. In Mark's Gospel, the one we will be following in most of our Gospel readings this year, John is already grown up when we meet him. No-one knows why Luke chose to give us the details that he does, but, without Luke's early chapters, we would not have the texts of the two important canticles that are said all around the world at morning and evening prayer each day. Mary's song – the Magnificat at evening prayer, and the song of John's father – Zechariah, the Benedictus, at morning prayer. Both have inspired generations of Christians down the centuries, not least composers who have set them both to beautiful music for church choirs.

Later in this service of morning prayer we shall be reciting the Benedictus, and, on this Advent Sunday, I think it is appropriate to look at it afresh. It is important, not just as a historical document, but, I believe, because it has a lot to say to us about the Advent theme of preparation for Jesus' second coming at the end of time, and the role we ought to be playing in that. Here is an extract:

'And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

To give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins.'

The 'child' here, is, of course, John the Baptist, and he does indeed fulfil the role assigned to him, and points people to Jesus when he grows up. As we say those words though, as members of the Body of Christ, I think that they challenge us to emulate John the Baptist today. After the resurrection, Jesus sent His friends out into the wider world to 'prepare the way' for His second coming by carrying on preaching His own message – 'repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'. Two thousand years later, now that's our job. We are the ones who have 'knowledge of the salvation' that can only come through the forgiveness of sins by Christ's death on the cross. In a world where millions of people either don't know Jesus, or have rejected Him, we are called to be the prophetic voices now. We must that tell people about the joys of salvation, and the consequences of rejection of this message about repentance.

The words of Jesus in Mark 13 are stark. The Son of Man will be seen coming again on the clouds, with great power and glory, not just to Christians but to the whole of humanity. His angels will gather the elect from 'the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven' so there will be no opportunity for anyone to hide when it happens. And we mustn't kid ourselves that there'll be time to change our minds at the last minute, because only God the Father knows when the end will be. Therefore, we all need to keep awake, as Jesus says. We mustn't be taken in by those who claim to know when it's going to happen – Jesus is quite clear that no one knows the day or hour only the Father – not even Jesus himself.

This week people have been greatly concerned about how, in the midst of a deadly pandemic, we can somehow celebrate Christmas. After the difficult year we've had, that is perfectly understandable, and of course celebrating the birth of our Saviour is always an important date in our calendar. But, I suspect that, as in any other year, not many people will have been thinking about how they are going to keep Advent – apart from possibly buying a chocolate Advent calendar as a treat! Only a minority will be even aware of the importance of what Advent is all about – a reminder of our need for repentance and to be ready to greet Jesus whenever He returns.

The situation described by Isaiah 2500 years ago in today's first reading, might sound strangely familiar. As far as many people were concerned back then, God was hidden and not a part of their lives. Isaiah wished for a dramatic divine intervention, as in the days of old, to get people's attention: 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...' But, centuries later, when God did come down, in the person of Jesus, it was in a way the exact opposite of that. No tearing of the heavens, but a birth in a humble stable. Yes, there *will* be a tearing of the heavens in the future, but in the mean time we can surely learn a lesson from that less dramatic first coming of Jesus, as we think about how to do our work of preparing people for the End.

What is Jesus expecting us to do then? Well, I'm pretty convinced that He doesn't want us to be negative and just moan and tut! Jesus' ministry must be our pattern. Yes, he did miracles and performed signs, but the majority of His ministry was taken up with just spending time with the people who had no-one else to turn to – the marginalised and rejected. He showed them the love that they lacked, and renewed their sense of purpose. Also, He echoed the other words of Isaiah that we heard at the end of today's passage – he talked to them about God's nature as a loving parent - 'O Lord, you are our Father'. To be ready to greet Jesus on Judgement Day, He asks only that we acknowledge our sinfulness, repent and turn again to 'Our Father'. That, then is our message for today.

I believe that the best way forward for us, as 'prophets of the Most High', is to be constant in our concern and love for others, even those who are seen by the world to be unlovable. It is by reflecting the love that Jesus has shown us, that we will best carry on the work that John the Baptist started so long ago. Actions, as they say, speak louder than words. It's not by complaining about people's lack of interest in the things of God that we will change anything. Rather, it is by prayer and other practical ways that they will begin to notice the difference that a relationship with God can make in people's lives. Again, in the words of Isaiah; 'we are all the work of God's hand', and as such, as the great St Augustine said 'our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him.' We are challenged to help people to realise what they are lacking and point them to how they can fill that gap in their lives.

because we don't know how long we've got to do it. But, by gently reflecting the love of Christ we will most likely make the most powerful impact. Moreover, talking to people about why we do what we do, is the best way to get them thinking about the things of God.

So, let us pray that we can use Advent wisely, both for our own preparation to greet Jesus, and to help others do the same – especially those who as yet don't realise their need to prepare. As Paul tells the Corinthians, we have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind.

Like them, we are not lacking in any spiritual gift, so let's make sure we use what we have been given by God for His glory and the building up of His kingdom both now and in the future. Amen.

Now pause for your own reflections.

(L): We now affirm our faith in the words of the Creed:

All We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

(L) Now it is time to awake out of sleep,
All: for the night is far spent and the day is at hand.

(L) Now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed,
All: for the night is far spent.

(L) Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light,
All: for the day is at hand.

(L) Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh,
All: for the night is far spent and the day is at hand.

We now say 'The Benedictus' together:

All: Look towards the east, O Jerusalem, and see the glory that is coming from God.

1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦ who has come to his people and set them free.

- 2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦
born of the house of his servant David.
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦
to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all that hate us,
- 4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦
and to remember his holy covenant.
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
- 6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the
Most High, ♦
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
- 8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦
by the forgiveness of all their sins.
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
- 10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death, ♦
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All: Look towards the east, O Jerusalem,
and see the glory that is coming from God.

*Now we turn to God in a time of prayer, adapted from
Common Worship:*

Watchful at all times,
let us pray for strength to stand with confidence
before our Maker and Redeemer.

That God may bring in his kingdom
with justice and mercy,
that there may be peace where there is war
and a fairer sharing of the resources
that God has given us
let us pray to the Lord:
Lord, have mercy.

That God may establish among the nations
his sceptre of righteousness,
that the leaders of the nations may work for
the good of all and not just the few
let us pray to the Lord:
Lord, have mercy.

That we may seek Christ in the Scriptures
and recognize him in the breaking of the bread,
let us pray to the Lord:
Lord, have mercy.

That God may bind up the brokenhearted,
restore the sick especially those suffering
from the Covid infection,
and raise up all who have fallen,
let us pray to the Lord:
Lord, have mercy.

That the light of God's coming may dawn
on all who live in darkness and the shadow of death,
let us pray to the Lord:
Lord, have mercy.

That, all the faithful departed may find rest and peace
in God's Kingdom with Mary and Peter
and all the saints in light,
and that we may shine forth as lights for the world,
let us pray to the Lord:
Lord, have mercy.

We commend ourselves and all for whom we pray
to the mercy and protection of our heavenly Father:

Silence is kept.

Almighty God,
as your blessed Son Jesus Christ
first came to seek and to save the lost;
so may he come again to find in us
the completion of his redeeming work;
for he is now alive
and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen.

As Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven....

This hymn may be said or sung:

Lo! He comes with clouds descending,
Once for mortal sinners slain;
Thousand, thousand saints attending,
Swell the triumph of His train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Christ appears on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold Him
Robed in dreadful majesty;
we who set at naught and sold Him,
Pierced and nailed Him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
Shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of His passion
Still His dazzling body bears;
Cause of endless exultation
To His ransomed worshippers;
With what rapture, with what rapture,
With what rapture
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

Yea, Amen! let all adore Thee,
High on Thine eternal throne;
Saviour, take the power and glory,
Claim the kingdom for Thine own;
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.

Let us pray:

Almighty God,
as your kingdom dawns,
turn us from the darkness of sin
to the light of holiness,
that we may be ready to meet you
in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

O Lord our God,
make us watchful and keep us faithful
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord;
that, when he shall appear,

he may not find us sleeping in sin
but active in his service
and joyful in his praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(L) May God the Father,
who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son,
give us grace to prepare for life eternal.
Amen.

May God the Son,
who comes to us as redeemer and judge,
reveal to us the path from darkness to light.
Amen.

May God the Holy Spirit,
by whose working the Virgin Mary conceived the Christ,
help us bear the fruits of holiness.
Amen.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us, and
remain with us, today and always. Amen.

(L) Let us bless the Lord.
All: Thanks be to God.

All: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the
mercy of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory.
Amen.

Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

Reveal among us the light of your presence
that we may behold your power and glory.

A lamp or candle may be lit.

Blessed are you, Sovereign God,
creator of light and darkness,
to you be glory and praise for ever.
As evening falls, you renew your promise
to reveal among us the light of your presence.
May your word be a lantern to our feet
and a light upon our path
that we may behold your coming among us.
Strengthen us in our stumbling weakness
and free our tongues to sing your praise.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

That this evening may be holy, good and peaceful,
we pray with one heart and mind:

Silence is kept.

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,
so may your mercy come down upon us
to cleanse our hearts
and set us free to sing your praise
now and for ever. Amen.

*A Psalm is said: Mon St Andrew 87; Tue 74; Wed 77;
Thurs 40; Fri 17; Sat 27 ending with:*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

*Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between
the two readings we say:*

All Surely I am coming soon.
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

- 1 'Behold, I am coming soon', says the Lord
'and bringing my reward with me, ♦
to give to everyone according to their deeds.
- 2 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the
last, ♦ the beginning and the end.'
- 3 Blessed are those who do God's commandments,
that they may have the right to the tree of life, ♦
and may enter into the city through the gates.
- 4 'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to you, ♦
with this testimony for all the churches.
- 5 'I am the root and the offspring of David, ♦
I am the bright morning star.'
- 6 'Come!' say the Spirit and the Bride; ♦
'Come!' let each hearer reply.
- 7 Come forward, you who are thirsty, ♦
let those who desire take the water of life as a gift.

All To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb ♦
be blessing and honour and glory and might,
for ever and ever. Amen.

All Surely I am coming soon.
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Readings:

Monday Zechariah 8 v 20 - end; John 1 v 35 - 42
Tuesday Isaiah 26 v 1 - 13; Matthew 12 v 22 - 37
Wednesday: Isaiah 28 v 1 - 13; Matthew 12 v 38 - end
Thursday: Isaiah 28 v 14 - end; Matthew 13 v 1 - 23
Friday: Isaiah 29 v 1 - 14; Matthew 13 v 24 - 43
Saturday: Isaiah 29 v 15 - end; Matthew 13 v 44 - end

Gospel Canticle: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)

All Lord Jesus, you are the one who is to come,
the one whom we await with longing hearts.

1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on
his lowly servant.

2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the
Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his
name.

3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation
to generation.

4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered
the proud in their conceit.

5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting
up the lowly.

6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the
rich away empty.

7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to
remember his promise of mercy.

8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

All Lord Jesus, you are the one who is to come, the one whom we await with longing hearts.

Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the world and for individuals, the sick and the departed.

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

The Collect for this week:

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us
in great humility; that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Or on Monday – St Andrew's Day:

Almighty God,
who gave such grace to your apostle Saint Andrew
that he readily obeyed the call of your Son Jesus Christ
and brought his brother with him:
call us by your holy word,
and give us grace to follow you without delay
and to tell the good news of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

This hymn may be said or sung:

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.

Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.

By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all-sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Let us pray:

Loving God, at this time of crisis when so many are suffering, we pray for our nation and our world. Give our leaders wisdom, our Health Service strength, our people hope. Lead us through these parched and difficult days to the fresh springs of joy and comfort that we find in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Loving Father God be with us in our distress: with our families, friends and neighbours, our country and our world. Give health to the sick, hope to the fearful, and comfort to the mourners. Give wisdom to our frontline and key workers, insight to our government and patience to us all; Overcome disease with the power of your new life, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A Family Prayer

Loving God, you know us and all that we are facing. We thank you that we can come to you as we are – with all our fears and concerns, our difficulties and challenges. Please draw close to each of us and those we remember before you now. Bring to us your peace and comfort. And fill us with your Spirit that we may be bearers of your grace and hope to others. As a country protect us, encourage us and keep us. In the name of your Son Jesus we pray. Amen

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

May the Lord, when he comes, find us watching and waiting and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.

May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

SERMON FROM BISHOP ANDREW

Mark 13:24-end: The End of the World

Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

It's a common enough phrase, one that you and I probably use from time to time. There's been a minor disaster – not life-changing but annoying all the same. And after being upset for a while, we find ourselves shrugging our shoulders and saying something like this, 'Well, it's a pain - but to be honest, it's not the end of the world'.

And it's that phrase 'It's not the end of the world' that raises a big question every time Christians worship together on Advent Sunday. For if breaking that vase or spilling that milk or fluffing that audition or receiving that unfortunately worded email is 'not the end of the world', how, I wonder, do we think the world *will* end? What hope do we hold for the future of our planet?

All through our lifetimes, and way before that too, scientists, futurologists and science-fiction writers have had a field day trying to answer that question. In the 1960s and '70s, when I was growing up, the Cold War fuelled speculation of a nuclear holocaust in which Man would press the button of his own destruction – a possible scenario which certainly hasn't gone away in the intervening decades. In the 1980s, the threat of environmental catastrophe took centre stage: humankind again destroying the world as we know it, but doing so gradually, bit by bit, rather than in a sudden moment of madness – and again that debate has only sharpened as year succeeds to year. And in 2020, of course, the nightmare scenario of a global pandemic has come far too close to home,

reminding us again of the fragility of the human race, whatever our extraordinary abilities and extraordinary flaws.

The entertainment industry, of course, has profited from many of these ideas, with big-budget movies speculating on various end-time scenarios. Whether it's the aliens of 'Independence Day' – the virus of 'Chain Reaction' – the meteorite of 'Deep Impact' or the robotic world of 'Terminator', our fascination with the end of the world is big business. The film 'Artificial Intelligence', which was issued in 2001, just three months before 9/11, spoke of a world flooded and taken over by computers. Its footage included chilling scenes of a New York with the twin towers destroyed – perhaps the ultimate symbol, in producer Stephen Spielberg's eyes, of a world in crisis.

So what of the Church? Well, we haven't always had a good track record when it comes to our end-of-the-world speculations. It's partly that some of the Bible texts, especially the book of Revelation, are written in a form that is largely alien to us today, the coded language of the so-called 'apocalyptic' literature. It's partly too that this has traditionally been the province of fanatics and cults: ranging from the little man on the street corner holding up his placard: 'Repent: The End is Nigh!' to major sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses who've determined the date of Armageddon in advance, and have had to revise their theology when the date has duly come and gone. On one of my favourite walks from the village of Shere, we pass the so-called Catholic Apostolic Church, which itself was built on the principle that Christ would return in its founders' lifetime.

When life is tough for the people of God - especially in countries where there's poverty, oppression or persecution – thoughts about the end times (both personal and global) come alive in fresh ways. They're expressed in many of those beautiful spirituals that emerged from the horrors of the slave trade, including one that I regularly heard coming over the garden fence during my 12 years as a vicar in Twickenham: 'Swing Low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home'. But when life's going well, when people's focus is on feathering their nest in this world rather than preparing for the next, interest in such teaching usually wanes. And so we leave this area to the scientists and the novelists, to the film makers and the religious fanatics, rather than trying to understand what Jesus has to teach us on this extraordinarily important theme.

And that's a problem. Because if we don't understand where we've come from or where we're going to, it's likely to make us feel pretty insecure. If I simply believe that the world as a whole (and humanity as a part of it) was *created* by chance not purpose, as the result of an entirely random cosmic big bang followed by an entirely random process of evolution - if I believe that the world (and humanity as a part of it) will equally be *destroyed* by chance not purpose, or by the sheer stupidity of those who once considered themselves the apex of that random evolutionary process – then what's the point of it all? And while as Christians we may find it hard to enter into the strange imagery of the apocalyptic literature, just as future civilisations

will find some of our imagery very strange indeed, how important that we hold fast to this vital truth: that a God who is Love and Light was there at the beginning, and a God who is Love and Light will be there at the end, and you and I are called to a state of readiness as we await His coming.

That's the message of today's gospel reading from Mark chapter 13; but while the film 'Artificial Intelligence' chose a burnt-out Twin Towers as a symbol of apocalyptic disaster, the equivalent in today's reading was the Jerusalem Temple, whose imminent destruction Jesus foresaw.

The Temple in Jerusalem, of course, was far more than a potent image. It was seen as the place where God dwelt, where heaven and earth met, a forward-looking signpost to the Creator's ultimate intention to bring the two together. Its destruction, in that sense, *would* be the 'end of the world', certainly the 'end of the world as we know it'.

Earlier prophets like 2nd Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had had to interpret the destruction of the first Temple, King Solomon's Temple, in their day. As Isaiah reflected on the 'holy and beautiful house destroyed by fire', in today's Old Testament reading, so he recognised afresh his fragility and that of God's people: 'we are the clay and you are the Potter'. Jesus was now doing the same for the second Temple, which had risen from the ashes in the days of Ezra, Nehemiah and Zerubbabel. And so Jesus predicted that the Temple would be destroyed, and carnage would ensue, and all within a generation; and sure enough, that's just what happened, so that by end of the first Jewish-Roman War in 73 AD, more than a million Jews had died from starvation or the sword, and their beloved Temple had been burnt to the ground, never – thus far at least – to rise again.

But the destruction of this Heaven-and-Earth building heralded something bigger still. As Jesus sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Temple, he spoke of an indeterminate period of human history in which there would be wars, earthquakes, famines, and growing intolerance and persecution. He spoke too of strange teachings springing up, of an increase of wickedness and a growing hardness of heart. There's nothing here except a brutal realism, which reminds us that Christian hope must never be confused with naïve optimism.

Yet the great thing about this chapter is that there's hope here, too: indeed, the best of all hopes. When Jesus talked about wars, earthquakes and famines, we might have expected him to say, '*These are signs that the world is about to die.*' Instead, he said, '*All these are the beginning of birth pains.*' When Jesus used the apocalyptic language of the sun and moon being darkened, and stars falling from the sky, we might have expected him to go on: '*And so the world will be burned to a crisp.*' Instead, he said, '*At that time... they will see the Son of Man coming... with great power and glory.*'

That imagery of 'birth pains' seems to me particularly powerful – or 'pregnant', as we might say! Because while I've only experienced birth pains at second

hand, as a hapless husband whose hand is being squeezed to a pulp, others of us will have faced the full force of what Jesus is talking about. But what's the result of all that pain? In all but a few tragic cases, a beautiful, precious baby. And the pain of the world: the sickness and suffering that is part of life on earth, not least in this Corona year, is like that too, says Jesus. It's not just chance or bad luck, or a sign that God is nasty, or that there's no God at all. It's rather the labour pains of the new creation – the new heaven and new earth - that God is bringing into being through His Spirit and the return of His Son.

About that return, Jesus says, *'No-one knows about that date or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father'*. But while the details are uncertain, the key thing for us is this: that quote, we need to *'Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come'*.

So here's the main point of the Bible's teaching about the end of the world. It's not for entertainment, with the book of Revelation representing the ultimate disaster movie. It's not for speculation, with the Bible as a kind of Enigma Code which needs cracking. No, Jesus' teaching is there both to encourage and to challenge.

The encouragement, which we all need right now, is this: that whatever the future holds – whatever *our* future holds - God is in control. That's not an excuse for apathy or fatalism, of course, just letting the world around us go to seed. Far from it. But it is a reason for hope, a hope based fair and square both on Jesus' teaching, and on his death and resurrection from the dead. Jesus can't be accused of wishful thinking in Mark 13. He predicted that things would get very dark indeed: but he also said, *'These are the beginning of birth pains'*.

Life isn't meaningless. The existence of our planet isn't down to pure chance or blind Fate. So our lives aren't meaningless either: we were brought into this world for a purpose, and our calling is to discover that purpose and to live it out, however fallibly, in the power of God's Spirit.

And what's the challenge? It's simply this: that we don't know when the end of the world will come. We don't even know when the end of *our* world will come. So we need to be on our guard - to be ready at all times to leave this life and to meet our God. We need to be keeping our relationships pure, our hearts free from bitterness, our ambitions set not on building our own little kingdoms but on building the Kingdom of God. And I'm not being morbid here. I'm not suggesting that we follow some of our gloomier Christian ancestors and ask for a coffin for Christmas to remind us of our own mortality! But I am wondering, 'Are we ready to meet with God? Are we confident of our eternal destiny?'

The truth is, you see, that it *is* possible to be confident: that it is possible to know that whatever the future holds - whether we live to the ripe old age of 107 or whether I walk out of my home this morning and fall under a number 35 bus - our loving God will be with us into all eternity.

To close with the promise of St Paul from our epistle reading today:

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful: by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

To Him be the glory, Amen.
