



**GRAY'S  
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## **Sermon at Gray's Inn Chapel on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023 – Advent Sunday**

**Revd Stephen Baxter**

**Text: Mark 13:24-end**

In the run up to this Advent, I've received quite a few social media messages promoting Givent...an Advent calendar with a different miniature bottle of gin each day. It may be that I am on the list because I've separately searched Advent and gin on Google and the internet elves have helpfully assessed that Givent neatly meets my yearnings.

Unsurprisingly, I haven't been selected for promotion of the calendar by the jewellers, CW Sellors weighing in at £24,000 but still a snip compared to the most expensive Advent Calendar, the Octagon Blue set of 24 numbers carved in diamonds and retailing at £1.7 million, excluding VAT.

Advent calendars, which originated in nineteenth century Germany were designed to build up anticipation as we look forward to Christmas Day. Those that produce daily gin or jewels seem to go against the principle of savouring the waiting and looking forward.

Advent and its spaces are precious times that are increasingly squeezed by early arrival of Christmas celebrations. I'm not one of those who bang on that Christmas actually starts on Christmas Eve and that Christmas Carol Services should only happen from then on. It is a privilege that at carol services through December we welcome new or rare visitors looking for inspiration and the real meaning of Christmas.

But it's important not to peak too early with celebrations and to flop over the line of Christmas morning, exhausted by it already looking forward to getting the decorations down. We need a steady Advent pace.

Snatching Advent time, space, reflection is crucial to build up anticipation of welcoming anew the light of the world and our Advent perhaps needs to happen in parallel alongside developing Christmas activity, especially in this City where Carol Services have already kicked off prior to the start of Advent.

Advent is a crucial time for reflecting on the context of Christmas in what Eric Milner White so elegantly describes as the "loving purposes of God". In Advent, looking forward is not solely to the arrival in the manger in Bethlehem, but looking forward to the completion of God's loving purposes. Something, as a church, we perhaps don't do enough of through the year.

The birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension of Jesus Christ have transformed billions of lives across two millennia...but as we look at the world we see shocking suffering and darkness in stark contrast to what we might hope the reign of the Prince of Peace, God's King, might bring.

Advent is a time to linger a little with the prophets, especially Isaiah. The book of Isaiah, sometimes referred to as the fifth gospel, is probably a compilation of the prophetic writings of a number of authors over perhaps three or four hundred years from 800BC. Although there are different authors,, there is a consistent projection of hope and ultimate deliverance from current travails and trauma.

But as the prophets peer into the telescope of time looking forward to ultimate perfection, they don't provide a timeline of or distinguish between the different stages of God's saving activity for his people ... release from crushing exile in Babylon...the appearing of Emmanuel, God, with us, the suffering servant and finally the ultimate new creation. – the perfected idyllic new creation that Isaiah looks forward to and describes with glorious poetry... the sting taken out of creation on God's holy mountain...the powerful and the vulnerable...hunter and hunted are at peace. The KJV translation that we heard gives that wonderful word cockatrice...a mythical

serpent-like creature with a cockerel's head---all psychedelic images of terror will be pacified.

The passage we hear from Mark's gospel is the last teaching before the account of the last week of the life of Jesus. Jesus prophesies his coming in glory on the cross (before this generation passes away) and his coming again to complete his Father's loving purposes when heaven and earth are joined and creation is perfected, as the author of Revelation tells us.

The imagery of the end times in Mark is challenging for us as it is in Jewish apocalyptic language, conforming with the prophetic writing such as Daniel – not a language we are familiar with. We don't know the format of the end times and as Jesus emphasises we cannot know the timing.

That hasn't stopped many people estimating the Second Coming, including some who should have know better:

Jehovah's witnesses: 1975 6000 years since creation (also 1941)

Rasputin – Russian mystic and lover of Russian queen (Boney M) – 23/8/2013

Nostradamus, beloved forecaster of the Daily Mail. - 1999

John Wesley - 1836 – cf Rev 12:14

Charles Wesley – 1794.

Despite the emphasis by Jesus that we don't know God's timing, many keep assuming that the end of the age is just around the corner. As Diarmuid MacCulloch points out, one of the big themes at the Reformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth century was that the last days prophesied by Jesus were about to happen soon. This was one of the reasons why aspects of the Reformations were rather bloody as participants wanted to get things set up right, as they saw it, before God returned.

Belief in the imminence of the End Days has also informed the views of the Evangelical right in North America with knock-on influence on US politics. According

to the evangelical right, ecology and environmental concerns should not be a priority since the end of the world is nigh.

Our call is to be active – vigilant...not sleep-deprived or over-frenetic but watchful for opportunities... we don't know God's timing of when Jesus will return or when we will meet him in the full brightness of God's presence when we enter the next phase of our journey. Our role is be watchful for signs of the new creation breaking out in this world – and look for opportunities to create flashes of the new creation here and now remembering that as Isaiah points out key features of this perfect creation are justice for the poor and peace with wild nature. Care for the marginalised care of ecology and the natural world are priorities.

We should also bear in mind the last teaching in Matthew before the passion narratives

where Jesus emphasises that small acts of mercy – personal interaction – connection – relationship are fundamental features of serving him – of our worship. The small but crucial things that bring light...cups of water, providing clothing, visiting the lonely, welcoming the stranger, the outcast...small crucial gestures through which we channel the love from God.

As Mother Teresa reminds us we may not be able to do great things - We can only do small things...with great love. May we have a fruitful advent.