

Lord Jesus, come and judge the world with mercy, and help us be ready for you, when you come. Amen.

- Which side are you on? It's time to choose!
- You would not be alone if there are some curious contradictions going on inside you, today, Advent Sunday.
- On the one hand you will be full of Christmas trees, who could not be, and the prolonged rain yesterday during the street fair. We have weathered it through the storm and now we have a few small things like a Fellowship lunch for 80, Messy Church and the Advent Festival of Carols before collapsing with a large drink at about 8pm.
- Coupled with this are the impending pressures that settle upon us at this time of year. Things to do, money to sort, cards to write. Christmas itself is only 3 weeks away. Whether for you it is a time of pressure or excitement, juggling family politics or coping with loneliness, it will be there, brooding in the background.
- Coupled with this is the uncertainty in the world today. What will happen with Brexit? And will it matter? No one knows. Saudi Arabia and Yemen seem to be the new melting pot for world powers to flex their muscles. Putin and Trump continue to be loose cannons. And who knows what's going on with climate change.
- And in the midst of all this, when all we really want is a few words of sympathetic comfort and some hope, floats Jesus saying things like, *'People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken'* It's just making it worse! What are we to make of it all?
- Come back with me to Jerusalem 2 000 years ago because if we think life is uncertain and pressured today, it was even more so then. I hope you have picked up that the Romans were fierce and uncompromising towards the Jews in their demand for stability in Israel, the country they had occupied, ... and the Jews were rebellious.
- This was not a happy balance and the Jews lived in constant danger of being punished for their continued mini rebellions as they sought a military Messiah who would save them, which of course happened in AD 70, just 40 years after Jesus, when Jerusalem was flattened and the temple was destroyed.
- *'People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.'* Suddenly these words start to begin to mean something.
 - Do you think people took them seriously when Jesus spoke then? Or did they think 'Yeah, yeah, it'll never happen to us.' Or more worryingly, 'Yeah, yeah, God will never let that happen to us. He will keep us safe', as they sang the 23rd Psalm?
 - Well probably, some did and some didn't. And some sat on the fence and worried about it!!
 - Which side are you on? It's time to choose!
- Next travel with me, just a few years later to when Luke was writing this Gospel, perhaps in about 80AD?
- The world was still a turbulent place. The first Christians were expecting Jesus to come back soon, but he hadn't yet, and life was continuing as normal whatever normal meant. And their friends in the town who were not Christians looked askance at the new Christian gentiles and asked them why they bothered. What difference did it make? Had Jesus done anything about the mess of the world they lived in? And what about their painful back complaint? Jesus hadn't cured that. Somehow it sounded hollow to reply that they felt closer to Jesus when they shared bread and wine. So close that they felt he was almost touching them. Somehow it sounded hollow to suggest that Christian faith offered hope and meaning in an often hopeless and meaningless world. Their friends just didn't, just wouldn't understand.
 - Do you think these new Christians were convinced by their pagan friends? Or did they realise just how life-changing it can be following Jesus?
 - Well probably, some did and some didn't. And some sat on the fence and worried about it!!
 - Which side are you on? It's time to choose!
- Finally, return to the present day, when people commonly ridicule faith in 21st Century Britain. Hasn't religion been the cause of more wars than anything else, they say. What about the crusades? What about all those Christians in America voting for Donald Trump? And why do Christians keep going on about sin? I'm a good person. I don't need to repent. And I certainly don't need to go to church to do so.

- It can sometimes sound hollow to point out the difference that Christian faith has made to the world. How it was because of Christianity that the slave trade was abolished, or education made available to the masses in Britain, or hospitals built throughout the world. And it can sound positively bizarre that we are influential in bringing earth closer to the Kingdom of God it should be. How it is because of Christianity that we have a Foodbank in Baldock and are resettling a Syrian refugee family. How there are Christians involved and influential in virtually every charity that is active in the town. How we have the only voluntary network for visiting the housebound and as far as I know the only charities for making grants to the needy.
- Do you think about that when people criticise you for your faith? Or do you lapse into silence and just think malevolent thoughts or mutter something about it not doing anyone any harm so please leave us alone.
 - Well probably, sometimes we do one and sometimes we do the other. And sometimes we just wish nobody knew we believed in Jesus!
 - Which side are you on? It's time to choose!
- Life was uncertain 2 000 years ago. Today's world is uncertain. *'People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.'* Suddenly these words start to begin to mean something. We cannot guarantee that the future is going to be rosy. Maybe Jesus really is coming back soon. Wouldn't that be great! Come, Lord Jesus!
- If you are anything like me you often have a foot in both camps. Too wedded to the world to be able to give up your creature comforts easily. Too wedded to faith to be able to ignore Christ. Sitting uncomfortably on the fence! Which side are you on? It's time to choose!
- There are three pointers from today's reading that are worth holding onto.
- First after the difficult words of Jesus *'People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken'*, there are some rather more hopeful ones: *'stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'*
 - That smacks to me of being proud of your faith. Standing up for it. Noticing the difference faith in Christ brings and rejoicing in it.
 - It speaks of knowing which side you are on. You have chosen. You are chosen and it's great.
- Second, notice the signs of the times. The fig tree is bearing fruit. Jesus said, *'Look at the fig tree and all the trees as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.'*
- After every period of stability, such as we have had in Britain for the last 70 years or so, there comes turmoil. Look at the signs of the times and be prepared. Jerusalem may be ransacked but surely does that not makes your faith even more eternally valid? If you are able to do that, you probably have chosen as well.
- Finally, a warning. It can be so easy to seek relief in numbing the pain rather than dealing with it. Seeking enjoyment in briefly escaping the troubles of the world rather than seeking meaning in trying to spread Jesus' love by caring for the poor, however hard that may be. The danger is that you are so deeply immersed in the lures of everyday life that you forget to notice what Jesus is doing. And which side have you chosen then?
- About this Jesus also has some words in our Gospel reading. *'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly.'*
- Advent is a challenge to wake up to all this. Advent is challenge to choose. Advent is a time to celebrate the strength of the faith we share and to be ready for Jesus to nudge you, so that those parts of your life where you definitely have a foot in both camps may be next on the list for his healing reforming nurturing Holy Spirit.
 - Do not waste the opportunity!
- And for my third and final finally? A rather beautiful blessing from our first reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. I'll read the words and I invite you to see it as a prayer.
- *'May the Lord so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.'* Have a great Advent. Amen.