

Advent Sunday: Death

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This year, the theme of the sermons during Advent are the traditional themes of death, judgement, heaven and hell, the four final things. With today, Advent Sunday, being the first day of the Church's new year, it seems a little strange but today we begin with death.

Death is a fearful subject – we don't like to talk about it, we refer to people who have died as 'passing away', or 'those who we see no more', we try to run from it, buying no end of products to make us look younger but death is a reality that we all, young or old, sick or in good health, must face. Death is something that has or will affect us all in one way or another – deaths reported in the news, of natural disasters, wars, famines, the death of a loved one, and our own death, expected or sudden.

In the Gospel reading today we hear the story of the bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom to enter to wedding feast. 5 of them are prepared and have enough oil for their lamps, they can endure the wait, but 5 of them are unprepared – their oil runs out before the bridegroom arrives, they go to buy more, they miss the bridegroom and are shut out of the feast. This fear of being unprepared may be part of our fear of death – our Christians lives may be seen as continual preparation for this moment – a preparation for coming face to face with our maker for judgement. Will we have done enough, whatever that may mean, to prepare for when we die and leave our mortal selves behind us and we fall back into the hands of the God who created us?

However, the call to 'Stay awake! For you do not know the day or the hour' is a pressing call for our lives everyday - it calls us to be prepared and to watch and wait for the coming of the bridegroom – the coming of Christ to his Church even before our death.

As human beings, we are naturally aware and perhaps fearful that every 24 hours we come closer to meeting our maker – but in Advent we are reminded that our maker comes close and meets us through the birth of his Son. God, in Jesus is born of a woman, he experiences human life in all its pain and sadness, he experiences death, the death of his friend Lazarus and weeps, and by his own very human death he transforms it so that death is not the end – Paul says in his letter to the Romans 5:5 – 'For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his'.

The Christian belief is that death is not the end – but even so we, like the bridesmaids with their lamps, are called to be prepared at some point for death, and always for Christ's coming amongst us – but how can we do that?

It is written that Abba Arsenius, one of the desert fathers in the 4th century prayed to God asking what he could do to become sinless and prepared to meet God – the answer he heard in prayer was 'flee, be silent, pray...' – for the desert mothers and fathers, there was a strong belief that we should die to ourselves and all the things that separate us from God to make us become more aware of the presence of Christ, in ourselves, the world and in each other.

Today sees the beginning of Posada, the journey of the figures of Mary, Joseph and the donkey around the local area visiting many different people and homes. The slogan for Posada is 'making room for Christ this Christmas' – people are encouraged to stop, to make space, gather together, to pray, and remember the Christmas story ... a story that both leads us to embrace the humanness of our lives, even to death, and to look beyond to where God meets and transforms that humanness. The posada prayer says 'Your birth in Bethlehem draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth' – reminding us of the transforming power of God, where darkness becomes light and death becomes life.

So, we are encouraged in Advent to prepare, to stay awake to when and where we may meet Christ, to take time, to be silent and to pray. On Tuesday there is a quiet day in church where all are invited to come for silence, prayer and reflection. During Advent, prepare to meet your maker and be reassured, that as John Henry Newman says, life is short, death is certain but through the story of Jesus Christ, his birth, God made man at Christmas, his death on the Cross and his resurrection, the world to come is everlasting.