

## Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2020

### THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT



#### Acknowledgement of Country

As we enter this time of worship we acknowledge the custodianship of this land by the Kamilaroi peoples - the traditional owners of this land, and pay respect to their elders – past and present.

#### Call to Worship

Watch, wait, hope!

Even now, the tender leaves of peace may be growing on the trees of life.

Watch, wait, hope!

For the wonder of new love may be moving towards its birthing.

**The Christ will come. The Word of God will not fail us.**

Keep awake!

For the shadows of our doubts will be lifted

and the singing is sounding in the distance.

**The Christ will come. The Word of God will not fail us.**

#### Song *The advent of our God*

The advent of our God, with eager prayers we greet,  
and singing hasten on his road his coming reign to meet.

The everlasting Son was born to set us free;  
and he a servant's form put on to gain our liberty.

Let people now arise to greet their infant king,  
and gladly take with thankful heart the peace he comes to bring.

The evil flee away before the rising dawn!  
Let our old nature day by day God's image still put on.

Praise to the incarnate Son who comes to set us free,  
with Father, Spirit, ever one to all eternity.

TiS 271 Tune: 573 Charles Coffin Public Domain

### **Prayers of Confession**

Generous God there are times when we fall asleep -  
forgetting that you call us to watch and pray.

**When we fail to see the signs of your coming,  
merciful God, forgive us.**

Christ our Saviour, there are times when we are not watchful –  
and when we do not choose hope or  
plant the seeds of hopefulness.

**When we fail to see the signs of your coming  
merciful God, forgive us.**

Forgiving Spirit, forgive us, that in the rush of the Christmas season  
we forget to stop and listen for the sound of angel voices,  
we forget to stop and look for a star to guide us to the Christ.

**When we fail to see the signs of your presence,  
merciful God, forgive us.**

God over all  
Christ within us  
Spirit around us  
hear our prayer and send your messenger of peace  
to us and to your sleeping world. **Amen.**

### **Words of Assurance**

The promises of God are wider than the ocean,  
deeper than the earth and higher than the skies.

The grace of Jesus Christ will never fail us.

We are forgiven!

**Thanks be to God!**

### **Lighting of the Advent Candle**

(If you are at home, you might like to prepare a simple Advent wreath with five candles and  
light one over the next four Sundays and on Christmas Day.)

We shall light the Advent candles, praying that our preparation for Christmas  
may help us to look outward in love, and look forward in hope.

**Living Christ, light of the world, give us the warmth of your love.**

There are five candles.

We shall light a new candle each Sunday from now until Christmas.  
Candles are useful. They give light and warmth when electricity fails.

Candles are simple, yet ingenious. They show us the inventiveness of people in the past and connect us with generations before us.

Candles are special. In the dark, they give bright light and warm shadows.

Candlelight brings us together as we talk and laugh and listen.

**Living Christ, light of the world, give us the warmth of your love.**

In Isaiah, chapter 64, a prophet cries out to God:

*O that you would tear open the heavens,  
and come down, . . . to make your name known. . . .*

*You have hidden your face from us. . . .*

*Yet . . . we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

We light our first candle as a prayer for our suffering world,  
that God, who is often hidden, may be revealed to us and to all.

*(Light the first candle.)*

Living God, come to our world.

**When your face is hidden from us, help us, to trust your promises and wait in hope.**

**Song**    *Come and light the candles*

We have lit the candle on the Advent ring  
scattering the darkness till the world shall sing.

We are all God's people waiting in this place,  
knowing that in Jesus we shall see God's face.

Tune: TiS 600 (ii) from *Shine on, Star of Bethlehem*. Christian Aid

**The Epistle Reading**    *1 Corinthians 1:3-9*  
(A paraphrase by Nathan Nettleton)

We greet you as God's own children and wish you all the best — God's love and peace,  
given through the Lord Jesus, the Messiah.

.....I am forever thanking my God for you, especially when I think about what God's extravagant generosity has brought about in you since you entered into the life of Jesus the Messiah. Since you linked up with him your lives have become so much richer in every way; but most notable is the richness of your knowledge and of the things you have to say. Indeed, the truth about the Messiah has become more and more strongly a part of who you are, and of all you have to offer. Now, it seems, you are not short of anything. All the spiritual gifts are in action among you as you live in eager expectation of the grand finale when our Lord Jesus the Messiah takes centre stage. God is with you and will make you tough enough to hold the line until the end, so that you can stand with your heads held high on the great day when our Lord Jesus brings everything to completion. Jesus is the Messiah, our Lord, and God's Son; and it was into his shared life that you were called by God, who is worthy of all our trust, and who will never let you down.

### **Introduction to the Gospel Reading**

This reading from Mark comes at the end of chapter 13 – a chapter which, after some introductory sentences, consists entirely of a long discourse from Jesus about the future which his disciples faced. To put our reading into some context I want us to note just a few things:

Firstly - Mark's gospel as a whole, deals with a worldview that is somewhat apocalyptic – that is, describing or prophesying the end of time. In dealing with this, the writer wants to give encouragement to his faith community who are suffering: with famine in the early 60s and with ongoing conflict between the Jews and Romans. There were some Jewish successes and in 69 Jewish rebel supporters tried to conscript the faithful, encouraging them to think of themselves as a sign of the messianic age that would be brought in by their success. Mark's community would have struggled with whether to join this movement or not. Mark portrays Jesus as very clearly saying that the messianic age would not happen in this way. In fact God's agent – Jesus himself, would intervene and make things right.

Secondly - this chapter in Mark assures the community that Jesus had accurately foreseen the trials they are experiencing – or had experienced in the recent past. He invites them to draw comfort and encouragement that Jesus locates these events in an unfolding divine 'programme' which will lead to the final triumph of God.

Thirdly - there is a two-pronged message: 1) maintain your hope – don't be dismayed if the Son of Man hasn't yet arrived and 2) as you wait for his arrival, make sure that you are watchful in the way you live your life.

– a New Testament scholar makes the following comment:

*What is described here in highly apocalyptic language is not, of course, to be taken literally.*

*But this doesn't mean that it has no relationship to reality. The gospel is attempting to describe a transcendent reality – the establishment of God's Rule on earth – and employing the only language suitable for expressing that reality: the language of symbol and myth. As myth, it is told as a 'story', an event that takes place in the future. Yet precisely as myth it gives assurance of what is already happening. This is because Jesus, as risen and exalted Lord, is not sitting passively at the right hand of God, but, through the Spirit, is actively exerting his messianic rule throughout the cosmos. The vision of the Son of Man this passage puts before the faithful is an assurance that, despite the cost of their discipleship and the remaining prevalence of evil, the divine victory already seen in the resurrection of Jesus is currently being extended on earth and will soon be seen to be definitively and universally in place.' (from 'Binding the Strong Man')*

### **The Gospel**    *Mark 13:24-37*

<sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

<sup>26</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

<sup>28</sup> “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup> “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

## Message

Looking around our world there are many parts of it that are enduring similar things to what Mark's community experienced: famine in Yemen and Ethiopia; ongoing conflict in many parts of the world; division within society – the political polarisation of countries like the USA where fellow citizens say hateful and untrue things about those who disagree with them; division within society between the haves and the have nots – a division that has increased during this time of COVID; to a lesser degree, difficulty within this congregation about how we might best move forward and what this might mean – doing things differently, and perhaps giving up some long-held, cherished traditions.

What does our passage have to say to us, Jesus' followers here in Tamworth?

As we briefly explore this question, I want us to think about what it means to live lives as watchful, alert Christians.

The definitions of watchful and alert include things like, being on the lookout for danger or opportunity, being vigilant or wide awake and being quick to notice unusual situations. Do these definitions help us in any way? I believe they do.

You know sometimes we can go about our daily lives as Christians with our eyes, ears, hearts and minds not always fully open to what's going on around us. For example: we can become so accustomed to seeing pictures of starving populations or images of war wreaking havoc on people on the other side of the world, forests and their eco systems being decimated by bulldozers, or walk by homeless people in our streets, that they have little impact on our sensibilities or our compassion. We can become apathetic and fail to see – behind those images, humanity crying out to be noticed. In other words, we become inattentive, heedless and negligent in our responses.

As Christ's disciples we are called to be watchful and alert to what is going on around us for, in the life of our world, we find Christ coming to us.

Christ comes to us in the outstretched hands of the beggar on the street. Christ comes to us in the breaking and cracking of torn forests and their habitat. Christ comes to us in the cries of the hungry and the dispossessed. Christ comes to us in the pleading of those looking for shelter from war and injustice. Christ comes to us in the cries of the hurting, forlorn and grief-stricken.

Down through the ages Christ has come – through his faithful disciples, to cast away fear, to bring light and life, to share in people's sorrow, to lift burdens too heavy to bear.

He has come in those moments of history when unjust systems – like slavery and apartheid, have been overthrown. He has come when Martin Luther King spoke about freedom for all Americans. He has come when comforting arms have enfolded those who are weighed down with sorrow. Christ has come when the unnoticed have been noticed by those who have taken the time to step into their shoes. Christ has come in the Black Lives Matter Movement where he has stood with, and alongside, those seeking justice. Christ has come when people have taken the time to sit and listen to another person as they've talked about their life and what's important for them. Christ has come and stood with those who seek justice for our creation. In all these instances – and many more, Christ has come.

Today we, Christ's disciples, are called to be on the lookout for the Christ who comes to us in many different guises.

We are called to be attentive to those people and situations where the suffering Christ is present.

We are called to be courageous in those situations where we might find opposition to the light that Christ shines on injustice and heedlessness.

We are called to be quick to notice what's going on in the lives of those people with whom we rub shoulders on a daily basis.

We are called to be wide awake to what Christ might be doing outside the four walls of our church and join him in his endeavours.

Let's be watchful and alert for Christ who comes to us in the ordinary, everyday, mundane things of life.

The parable at the end of our reading says: 'Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Jesus can come to us at any time, in any guise, in any situation. At this time, when we are celebrating Advent, let's keep awake. Amongst all the Christmas preparations, amongst all the tinsel and wrapping paper, amongst all the eating and drinking, let's keep awake so that we might recognise Jesus when he comes to us.

### Prayer

In our secret yearnings we wait for your coming,  
and in our grinding despair we doubt that you will.  
And in this privileged place  
we are surrounded by witnesses who yearn more than do we  
and by those who despair more deeply than do we.  
Look upon your church and its pastors in this season of hope  
which runs so quickly to fatigue  
and in this season of yearning which becomes so easily quarrelsome.  
Give us the grace and the impatience  
to wait for your coming to the bottom of our toes,  
to the edges of our finger tips.  
We do not want our several worlds to end.  
Come in your power  
and come in your weakness  
in any case  
and make all things new. Amen

from *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, Walter Brueggemann

### Some Words to Ponder *Christ will come again*

Christ will come again, God's justice to complete,  
to reap the fields of time and sift the weeds from wheat:  
then let us passionately care for peace and justice here on earth,  
and evil's rage restrain with love, till Christ shall come again.

Christ will come again and life shall be complete.  
The waters from the throne shall wash the nations' feet:  
then let us passionately care for health and wholeness here on earth,  
and ease our neighbour's pain with love, till Christ shall come again.

Christ will come again, and joy shall be complete  
as flames of lightning love bedeck the judgment seat:  
then let us passionately share the whole great gospel here on earth,  
until all things attain their end, when Christ shall come again.

**Prayers of the People**  
(Prepared by Robyn Hely)

Ever-living, ever-present God,

We have experienced significant changes this year, in the ways we have had to live daily, in our physical contact with others, our church, and the loss of what has been comfortable and safe. How will we find our way forward? Where will we go when uncertainties bar our path? The temptation is to do some to fix it, to ease our pain and feelings of entrapment and get back to the way things used to be. We stumble in the darkness groping for answers to all the changes. Let us remember the words of a poem said by King George in his 1939

Christmas broadcast at the outbreak of war: 'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, Give me a light that I might tread safely into the unknown. And he replied: 'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God and it will be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.'

Our hope is with you, O Lord. You do not undo our lives. You redeem us and give us hope in the future. That hope is in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. Advent is not about losses, but the coming of what will be. The presence of Christ is the ultimate answer to every prayer and to every advent in our lives. So let us be alert. Expect Christ to be among us today. Rejoice in his presence among us. He comes to us full of grace and truth. May our actions honour Him, our words praise Him, our thoughts marvel in Him and our spirits adore Him.

Ever-living, ever-present God,

You are with us. We come to you this day knowing that we are to be sent out into your world to be your church in new ways. If we are resistant to change Lord, hear our prayer of confession and bless us with your forgiveness. Grant us patience and resilience – for we are committed to care for each other as we care for ourselves. May we be ever alert to your calling and plans for our future. Make us aware of our strengths as well as our failings.

Make us aware of our community around us, our environment, our world. Help us to discover new ways to share why we live our lives committed to sharing the promises of the gospel.

Hold fast, all those in need of your love at this time – all who suffer anguish and helplessness.

Holy God, You encourage us when doubtful, to draw closer to you. Allow us to recognise your Holy Spirit as our guide, comforter and companion. So with the hope you instil in us and when the time is right, we will return as your church, as your faithful community, celebrating our resilience and knowing we are stronger than ever, to continue your work wherever we may be and in whatever way you lead us.

We give thanks, our Heavenly Father, for being with us now – in this church, on-line or in our home. Be with us always. We ask these things in Your precious Son's name who taught us to pray: Our Father in heaven .....

**Song**     *Come to be our hope, O Jesus*

Come to be our hope, O Jesus, come to set your people free.  
From oppression, come, release us, you alone give liberty.  
Come release from every prison those who suffer in our land.  
In your love we find the reason still to live and understand.

Come to build your new creation; show the way of servanthood;  
give new life to every nation, changing evil into good.  
Come and open our tomorrow for a kingdom, now so near.  
Take away all human sorrow, give us hope against our fear.

TiS 688 Tune: 93 Jaci Maraschin Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

### **Commissioning**

Do not delay.  
The day of the coming of the Christ is every day,  
so walk forward in Christ's way.

### **Blessing**

And may the Christ be seen when you look behind you,  
the Spirit be found walking ahead within your hopes  
and the eyes of God, the Creator, look with love over all creation.

**Amen!**