

As you would expect I spend a lot of time with elderly folks within our parish who for various reasons cannot get out to church any more. And it's interesting in my conversations with them, we talk often about the good old days – the days of their past. It is very rare that we talk about the future. That might be because they know already they are in the latter stages of their journey here on earth. It could also be that they want to think more about the times when their quality of life was good and how they used that time.

It's then very interesting when I talk to people who are in their 30s & 40s, and their thoughts for the future, the plans they have, their next steps. And it would be unusual to hear them talk about the past.

The world in which we live today, and in particular with the heightened levels of crime, natural disasters, wars & rumours of wars, there is a greater sense in people that the future is uncertain, that we do not know how secure our future might be. And think about where we are at present with the increased COVID risks. Today we know more than ever the massive implications of things we do that affect all parts of the world.

When we think about the future, I wonder have we taken enough time to consider our Christianity before the future of our humanity; that we are people destined for more than this world, I wonder then how we consider our future? Too many people become so involved in the future in this world that they forget the future of eternity. Paul wrote to the Philippians (3:20) "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Folks, today as you know, it's the beginning of the Church year. And Advent helps us consider our future, for the preparation of the coming of our Saviour, first as an infant and again his coming as our righteous King and judge.

And therefore as we look to the future, Jesus' words in our Gospel reading help us consider 2 things. Firstly that the future is actually very clear. And secondly, we should cautiously recognise how our future can be tainted by the temptations of the world we live in.

The context of our Gospel reading is set in the final week of Jesus' life. The disciples are already aware that something is going to change in the near future. And Jesus tells them this parable: '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.'" His followers understand the seasons of nature, and therefore they should also look for the changes around them spiritually.

Then he gives them this encouragement: "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have taken place." When we come to this verse, which is also in Matthew, there are some that say that Jesus made a mistake. They say Jesus misspoke Himself, because certainly none of that generation is left today. They all have passed away, but the end has not come. They would be right but not completely right. When He talks about this generation, He talks about it in a specific example for them but also

in a more wider general sense. He was talking first of all very specifically about the fall of Jerusalem. Jerusalem fell in 70 AD. Jesus spoke these words about 30 AD, 40 years, or a generation, before the destruction of Jerusalem. So Jesus was in fact correct. But in a general sense when Jesus talked about this generation, He was talking about those who would see these very signs taking place. In other words, those that would see the beginning of the end of time would see the return of the Son on Man.

Jesus wanted his followers to remember what He wants believers to remember today, too. He says, "Be alert! See the signs that are all around us." Of course, we could list lots of signs in our world, couldn't we? When we look at the world today and when we look at what God says, we see them coming true day after day and year after year. From Matthew we read: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains"(Matthew 24:7-8). As we look at the world picture, we see that very thing. Just about every day on the news or around us we read and we see or hear whether we are going to war or not going to war. There are famines, and in other places there is flooding. So the signs are very clear on a global perspective.

Folks, our future in Christ is very clear indeed. And Jesus asks us, not to be surprised by the events around us, but instead to recognise that we are in a season where all these things are to be fulfilled to bring about a complete restoration of God's Kingdom here on earth. And so he tells us that more than anything we should "Be alert at all times, and pray"

So the future under Christ is very clear, but the future of the world is as Jesus said, very tempting, and we are to pray for the strength to escape it. He says, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." And again, just remember the context of when Jesus is saying this to his disciples. It's being said during Holy Week when Jesus would be betrayed, arrested and put to death. Certainly, his disciples were full of worry. Jesus also speaks of Dissipation. Dissipation means an indulgence in pleasures that will inevitably cause harm – remember Judas' desire for money.

And so none of us should be lulled into a false sense of security of thinking we are exempt in some way. We all have weaknesses, and Satan will do everything to distract us and make us think that it's not harming anyone. And so Jesus calls on us to be careful, don't be off guard, Satan is prowling. Lose your focus, and you lose your only hope in Christ.

For those that stay focused on Christ, then these words of Jesus were an encouragement too. He reminded them, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words will never pass away." No matter how much their future would change, God's Word would always stand. So stay true to his word, and stay focused on sitting in his word every day.

So Advent is very important. It gives us four weeks to concentrate on our Saviour's coming. He was born for our sins. Because we fall down that slippery slope of temptation and sin, we are just like everyone. And yet God offers us hope and comfort and encouragement. He is a gracious and forgiving God. Jesus reminds us that, yes, as often as we fail; the Lord is just as often willing to forgive. We need that assurance of his mercy and grace, don't we? We need it because our world is very tempting.

Jesus says to us, "Be alert at all times, and pray to escape, to escape this tempting world and its sinful desires; watch and pray to escape because the signs are very clear."

When we think about the future and passages such as this, it is very easy to direct our thoughts towards the wider issues across our world. We must acknowledge our need of the Lord to protect us from the darkness of this world. Our advent candle reminds us of his light shining in a dark world.

As we continue to watch on our screens the signs of the end of the age, let us be alert, praying for strength against all temptation to live by the world's standards. As we look through Advent, may we be people who stay focused on his coming, and our need to walk close with him.