

Advent 1 sermon by Andrew 1 Dec 2019 Getting ready or being ready?

Isaiah 2: 1-5; Matthew 24: 36-44

Therefore you must be ready. It makes me think of the Boy Scout motto: Be prepared. Only in my case being prepared means almost the opposite of what Baden-Powell meant and Jesus too. Being ready, being prepared, for them means ready for action now, like athletes poised for that split second when the starting pistol fires. It's that kind of ready: bang, we're off!

But for me being prepared, being ready gets totally bogged down in getting prepared, getting ready. Just ask my family what it's like to go on holiday with me and they'll tell you that it really would be better just to knock me unconscious and abduct me if you have any hopes of going anywhere fast. I am an obsessive checker of passports, tickets, insurance, maps, phrase books and a medicine bag that's the equivalent of a small Boots the chemist. I'm one of those people who, if the last trump sounded, I'd still have to go back and check that the gas was off.

So I do getting ready, but being ready – that's different. Jesus, of course told other parables of readiness. Possibly my favourite is the one with the ten sensible (if sanctimonious) bridesmaids and ten totally ditzy ones. The sensible bridesmaids know they need to be ready for the arrival of the bridegroom now or at any time when he might arrive. They're prepared, they're ready. So when the bridegroom arrives, with typical male thoughtfulness at midnight, their lamps are trimmed, their oil is full, and most importantly they don't miss the party.

The B team bridesmaids, however, were probably so busy doing other things to get ready for the party that they miss the most essential thing of all – they are lamp-bearers for the bridegroom. Their lamps should be ready, but they're not and so they miss out. And they find themselves, like the man in the field and the woman grinding corn, suddenly alone with that ghastly feeling that they've missed something, and that the something they've missed now seems like the most important thing in all the world.

Now Advent definitely carries the risk of finding ourselves among those B team bridesmaids. There's a lot of rushing around to be done, organising things, buying things. There are people to send cards to, or not send cards to. There's the headache of what you give to the person who seems to have everything. It's the very kind of headlong rush and frenzy that Noah's neighbours were probably caught up in when suddenly they found their feet were getting wet and maybe silly old Mr Noah wasn't so daft after all.

Now none of this is to decry the festive spirit which is fun and warm-hearted and in some ways brings out the best in us – a kind of crazy overflow of generosity spilling out of love. But at the same time, we don't want to miss the spiritual party to which we're invited, which is an invitation to open our hearts to the possibility of something new.

Maybe whenever we see another M&S Christmas ad, instead of fighting the urge to throw something at the telly, perhaps we should even just for a split second hear not just that annoying voiceover that says "This isn't just whatever...", but *the* voice that says "Be ready".

Because the Incarnation did not happen because God thought we needed another public holiday. The Incarnation happened because we do not, of ourselves, know the way to Zion. We're all searching for Zion – our personal place of peace and of peace for the world, and in our busyness it constantly eludes us until a star comes to rest over the unlikeliest place on earth and we see it. Jesus will spend his life trying to lead us there, saying “don't be anxious, don't gather into barns, make sure the treasure of your heart is a treasure that will last, be ready.” And he'll die, as he was born, trying to show the way.

What I'm suggesting is that for the necessary journey of Advent which is doing all those things we do to get ready for Christmas, we make a parallel journey of the heart. What do I really want?

And the answer isn't the latest gadget, nor any other thing we might set our hearts on. For most of us the answer is that we actually want the abundant life that Jesus promises, and we want a life beyond fear.

We want that for ourselves, for our own conflicted hearts; we want it for our families and we want it for everyone caught up in the horrors of this world from Syria to London Bridge; we want it for the kind of country we'd like to be where love and justice and peace might be more evident, rather than all the arguing and posturing we're seeing right now.

This is the kind of world for which God asks us to be lamp-bearers, with our oil flasks full, ready not for some future coming, but ready right now. In Advent, every one of us, in our own way, we open our hearts to say “Come, Lord.” Come now. I'm ready now. I long for you now. I long for your kingdom to come in me today. I'm not getting ready. I am ready. And I'm ready now. Amen.