

(Also pre-recorded for online service)

Oakworth Parish Churches, Christ Church and St. John's Newsholme
Isaiah 64:1-9.

Mark 13:24-37

*Lord, may we be fully awake, ready to see you today, and every day.
Amen*

When I receive the church rota, I always find out what is coming, and when, to have control over it, hoping to be mentally prepared early, mostly hoping that the passage is an 'easy' one!

Even though I know from experience that every single time, God reveals the unexpected, affirming He knows better than us what he should be calling us to do and where! Yet I have the same initial attitude that I'm in control every time.

Focus

Today's gospel passage, so full of imagery and apocalyptic style, and steeped in Old Testament law and culture, yet modern and radical in Mark's time, in its focus on spiritual discipleship and absolute trust and faith in the power of Jesus, the Son of Man.

But - by way of understanding his ultimate sacrifice in servanthood, not by a human induced Messiah that is expected to wield power by violence or oppression, and only over *others*, not '*us*'.

Happy New Year everyone!

Today marks the beginning of Advent. The beginning of the churches' liturgical year.

For Christians, it serves to alert us, to remind us to be fully awake to the differences between challenges, even dark times we face, that can happen unexpectedly at any time, out of our control - and what it means to have a faithful, trusting, knowing relationship with Jesus.

A relationship that confirms a spiritually real presence in our hearts, minds, and lives, that is never to be reduced to residing *only* in historical stories in books.

Or in even the most magnificent of temples or cathedrals, which, just like the disciples, we are in awe of, and are grateful for the preservation of.

We know full well that they don't necessarily stand the test of human time, and could be destroyed, and have been, by human insistence of power, in so many cases brought about by violence and oppression, cruelly waged upon others.

The disciples, and Mark's church already knew this only too well. Jesus, is exasperatingly trying to focus his disciples, and Mark is also desperately trying to focus his Christians - 'back' to Jesus, rather than to lawful and materialistic things or a different Messiah being top of their list.

Even thousands of years later, our own past hindsight experiences reveal that we *will* find Jesus when we look back, we *were* more spiritually awake to the fact he *was* there, when we needed him after all, when we chose him first, above going our own way.

It is those experiences we comfortably share at our homegroups, those that pop into our minds during prayer times and worship services. We are focussed on seeing the real Jesus there, as opposed to reducing him to 'our' version when required.

Jesus' words never have 'passed away'! Verse 31 tells us 'heaven and earth, will pass away but my words will not pass away'.

Even amongst reasoned and proven science, space, and technological advances, during the most cynical times, and freedoms of choice to leave faith, devoid of physical presence, out of life completely, we still experience reasoned and proven stories of the power of Jesus in our lives. Light over darkness. Thousands of years later. How? Through his word. Jesus' good news.

But do we seek him, and see him in all aspects our daily lives, in an attitude of being open, to still learn something from him, to be led anew by him? Not just at times of focussed worship, but all the time? An attitude where we are there to listen to others with a view to possibly changing, admitting we were wrong?

That certainly seems to go against the grain of our society where we are encouraged to 'pick a comfortable side to slot safely into', discouraged to place ourselves amongst difference but rather encouraged to be sound pieces amongst like-minded people.

I have certainly seen examples at homegroup where we stop and listen long enough to others, and recognise God there, we see Jesus there. But is that because we expect to see him there?

Yet we still aren't awake, not in a constant attitude of readiness that is likened to a doorkeeper being on watch, where spiritual lives depend on us keeping 'fully' awake! A readiness, an alertness that isn't an easy option!

We still forget to do God's work during the mundane, the comfortable, expected, familiar times.

We know we *will* find him even more in those darker times. Yet we still aren't ready, as he's calls us to, be for when he comes back again. We are not to found asleep when he does return. If only we knew when it will be so that we can finally sort ourselves out just beforehand.

In the past I have joined in with the Leeds Film Festival.

In usual times, it involves hundreds of people buying tickets to watch vast genres of independent films, as well as a few classics thrown in, in many cinemas, all across Leeds.

My son and cousin – aptly labelled 'the geeks' in our family, have it on their calendar as the highlight of the year. When I took part, I was just a 'bum on the seat whose only expectation was to be simply entertained'.

My son and cousin watch up to 6 films a day, every day, for 14 days, which includes a whole night, aptly titled 'Night of the Dead'!

They are totally focussed on film, before food, before family, before sleep.

I laugh at my cousin as his eyes literally light up every single year when he gets his full diary of every film showing, at which cinema, at what exact time! It is like his bible of excellent news!

He needs several copies because he circles his plans, then changes his mind having realised it clashes with another better option! So much preparation, but he knows when and where his 'bible' is going to take him.

Many Film Fest goers love nothing more than apocalyptic scripts of epic proportions, the grander or more graphic, the better! They physically applaud that because they enter into the whole experience. They don't expect to omit the dark bits.

On entry to every film, you get a score sheet where you can rate the film afterwards, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest!

My cousin, to me, seems brutal as he leaves, giving a film a reluctant 2! "It was brilliant though", I say to him, giving it a 4.

The more I listened to my cousin, the more I realised he is viewing each film, with different eyes and expectations than mine! I look for the basic storyline, the actors, the hope of a 'happy ending'.

In comparison, my cousin sees the lighting, camera angles, direction, plot, script, delivery, costume, make up, the list of his scrutiny goes on and on. No wonder he regularly gives a score of 2.

What a year it has been so far! Many suffering huge loss and grief. As people do every year, yet we are more alert to it. We can't avoid entering fully into people's sadness. People need each other during uncertainty. The patience of waiting to hear what we are to do or not to do next is difficult. We see division in our opinions to laws and rules but unity to people's spiritual wellbeing.

Is it any wonder people have put more lights up than they ever have before, and earlier? Complete with nativity scene with the baby Jesus already in his crib, well before the expected 25th December celebration! Why wait after such a year?

It is one of the things we can feel in control of. Surely this year Christians have our excuse of rebelling against patient waiting and expectancy.

Whatever attitude or scrutiny we choose to approach our bibles and our faith with Advent helps us to remember our calling. To keep awake, alert and with urgency and priority to being ready when Jesus comes again, by active service and prayer.

We are to embrace the light of Christ and illuminate any darkness or pain felt by others with it.

Our Advent candles of Hope, peace, joy, love, are not only our weekly reminder of the light that Christ brings to darkness but of our calling as servants of good news, well worth savouring before celebrating on the 25th December.