**Jeremiah 33: 14-16**

 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

**1 Thessalonians 3:9 - end**

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

**Luke 21:25-36**

 ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

 Then he told them a 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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

 ‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Back round once more to that old cartoon that crops up every year about now: Look busy! Jesus is coming!

And the gospel reading this morning – not to mention the one we heard last week – seems to back that up.

*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the seas and the waves...* There is certainly any amount of distress and confusion among the nations right now – not just over Brexit, but look at all the upheaval in the United States; look at the threat of North Korea; look at famine and war and migration and lack of trust all over the world.

But what does any of this have to do with Advent and Christmas? We have Advent candles and Advent calendars. Some of you, like me, bought and collected your Christmas trees at the school fayre yesterday. And we sang Christmas carols last weekend at the lighting up of Brentwood. Oh, and I have received two Christmas cards already.

Some people’s thoughts have already turned toward putting up the Christmas trees and decorating their homes. Not mine I have to say. But over the course of a period of less than four weeks, Christians will gather in all manner of special services, and everywhere we go there are reminders that Christmas is coming. Many, even on this first Sunday in Advent, would rather cut straight to the chase and hear a story about Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. So, why does the church encourage us to consider this apocalyptic passage from Luke today instead?

Well, first of all, the church understands that many of us need a bit of a jolt awake at this time of year. It is all too easy to become distracted by the shopping, the even more than usually stressful traffic jams, and the endless opportunities to eat and drink – with the result that we are in danger of missing out on the peace and goodwill stuff. So not ‘look busy – here comes Jesus, but more wake up and don’t miss Jesus completely’ is the primary message of this Advent season.

The whole season of Advent is a spiritual wake-up call. It invites us to look back certainly. Later this morning I will be talking about the family tree of Jesus – that is the Jesse tree half-built down by the lectern there. The Jesse tree encourages us to look back to the Patriarchs; the people who formed Jesus’ roots; God’s people from the earliest times of God’s people.

But we also wait for the incarnation; the birth of God in human form, that happens every Christmas – the fulfilment of God’s promises to humankind.

And even as we are doing that, we also look forward. We have just come to the end of the Kingdom season – that short period that takes up most of November – when we think of what it means that Jesus should be our King. What it means to be sharing the responsibility of ushering in the kingdom of God. The completion of which will come about with the return of Christ himself.

And both Matthew and Mark remind us that we cannot know the time of that coming. About that day and hour no one knows, they say. Not even the Son; but only the Father.

But all that doesn’t mean that we are not living in what the Bible calls ‘the last days’. In a sense, we absolutely are. Think about what I said earlier about the distress and chaos in all corners of the earth. Jesus warned his disciples that life would be difficult for all who sought to serve God in his time, and that is no less true today. We have been living in the last days for nearly two thousand years.

Yes, it is not ours to know the time or the place of Jesus’ return. Therefore there is no point fretting about it. What we can do is to continue to look for signs of the coming kingdom. I saw a different sort of Advent calendar the other day – a countdown measured in random acts of kindness. In the midst of human tragedy, in the midst of wars and rumours of wars, in the midst of oppression and poverty, we look for signs that God’s kingdom is coming in all sorts of tiny ways - that is the real message of Advent.

This Jesse tree will look back at the Creation. In the beginning God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Where was God? In the darkness. Moses went up into the darkness that covered Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Where was God? In the midst of the darkness. On Easter morning, while it was still dark, Jesus rose from the dead. Where was God? In the darkness.

Advent is a season in which we remember that we are a people of hope, even in the darkness. We are an Easter people, but we are also a Christmas people. When we begin to feel that we are – the whole world is - lost in the darkness, Advent reminds us that we are not alone. I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my hope.

When someone brings about a small act of reconciliation, God is in there. When someone shows kindness to a stranger, God is in there. When someone drops a coin or a coffee into the lap of one who has neither money nor coffee, God is in there too.

We prepare for Christ’s coming – regardless of whether we are thinking about his coming as the baby in the manger, or whether we are thinking about his coming again at the end times - by living out our faith each day with a sense of hope and expectation.

The run up to Christmas has changed. What started out as a season of hope and promise and joy and peace has turned over time into a period of stress, traffic jams, and shopping lists.

But what if we prepared differently this year? What if we bought one fewer Christmas gift this year – the candle that won’t get lit, or the knickknack that will end up on the next Tombola stall – and gave the money we didn’t spend to someone who really needed it? Or swapped that candle for a couple of items the foodbank is really hoping to receive this Christmas?

What if: we make a pact to buy less but give more; or we offer reconciliation or forgiveness to someone we struggle to love; or … something.

Your pew leaflet reminds you this morning to be alert – as the gospel also did. Maybe it’s just our strange family sense of humour that always makes the response to that: Britain needs lerts… 😊

***Let us pray***: Gracious God, for this season of Advent, we are grateful. Wake us up. In the midst of the busy-ness of this season, help us to hear your voice, seek your presence and serve you in both word and deed. This we pray in the name of Jesus, who was and is and is to come, the Christ.

**Amen**.