

Advent – not so fast ...

In writing about these readings for Advent Sunday in our new cycle C – the Gospel of Luke – Ron Hanson starts with:

There's an old joke about a gruff Army sergeant who after roll call would pass along important news. Reading aloud several items, he then said: "Oh, Private Manion? Your folks' house burned down last night." The brutality of the announcement shocked not only Private Manion himself but also the company commander, and later the captain took the sergeant aside and counselled him to be more diplomatic and less abrupt when he talked about such personal things.

After the next morning's roll-call the sergeant again read out some new information, but then he paused and looked at his soldiers and said: "Everyone whose mother is still alive, take one step forward," and then as the company of men started to take one step forward, the sergeant shouted: "Not so fast, Kawalski!"

We have a "not so fast" in our gospel today. In fact at first glance, this year's gospel for the first Sunday of Advent may seem off-putting. In this season we expect to hear tidings of comfort and joy, and instead we hear Jesus foretelling future "distress among nations" and people fainting "from fear and foreboding."

We do not have to look very far these days to find terror and threats and evil doings of every kind, and in his prophecy Jesus warns his disciples and Christians now to apply the same awareness and caution to the end times, just as we have been forced to do in our chaotic world.

Each liturgical year begins with four Sundays of hope and expectancy. In our deliberate forgetting we build up again to the birth of Jesus so that we can again be excited and overjoyed by the miracle of the Incarnation, or in the grandeur of the opening of the Fourth Gospel that **"The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us."**

But not so fast – we are, at exactly the same time, urged to look forward to the calamities and dire straits that will presage the final coming of the Christ who calls himself in our passage today "the Son of Man." And we live in the faith that even now Christ with us and active in even the most humdrum existences.

We are told in the gospel to be vigilant and expect the unexpected even while we are encouraged to be patient. We are told to wait for Christ's return, not in fear and trembling, but in festive hope: **'standing up and raising our heads'** not with fear, not being afraid.

Being afraid is a horrible experience and it is a horrible reality for many people in our world today – and may be so for some of us here this morning.

What can help?

Jesus first talks about the signs of distress but then he does move onto a sign of hope – the fig tree.

It is so important to offer hope into the maelstrom of fear.

Here's another story:

Two friends were walking across a barren concrete wasteland. One commented on a single blade of grass pushing through a tiny crack. Years later, they returned to the site and found the sea of concrete now covered in a carpet of grass.

As we walk with people who are fearful, as we see people on the news in desolate situations ... what small signs or shoots of hope can we see? What would it take to nurture them and help them to grow? What has God placed within the natural world that we can partner with to bring forth good and hopeful things? And how might prayer that is alert to such things contribute to this?

To find and give hope in this way is part of what St Paul calls us to do in our epistle – it's part of love. It's part too of not rushing on this Advent towards Christmas too quickly.

In the coming weeks, may our focus not be entirely on our celebration of Christmas but also have space to bring love and therefore, hope, to people around us.

Prayer for the Blessing of the Cribs:

O Lord our God

we thank you for coming to share our life

born as a baby

and placed in a manger.

We ask that you would bless

Each home, school and church

to which these cribs will now return.

May each person who lives or works there

and each person who visits

be drawn through the crib and its figures

to experience your love and peace.

May your sharing in our lives

and our sharing in your life

be deepened during this Advent

and in our Christmas celebration.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus:

the Word made Flesh.

Amen.