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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Advent Sunday ~ December 3, 2017

“Watch out” – sorry if that shout may have momentarily caused you to think a) that you were having a heart attack or b) that your Priest has gone mad – but that is really what this exciting season of Advent is all about. There are lots of different themes running through today. It is the Church’s New Year. We start a new Lectionary, concentrating this year on Mark as the lead Gospel – and yes, there are only 21 shopping days to Christmas. Of course it is true that we have to battle to get a balance between the many demands placed upon us all as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Saviour – but Advent is a wonderful season, rich in imagery about light and darkness, about preparing to celebrate the coming of the Saviour. Here at Christ Church we are looking forward to Christmas – with our worship planned so that we can welcome all, both stranger and friend, to celebrate the birth at Bethlehem of the Prince of Peace. Advent is an exciting season – and a full one too.

And with not just 21 shopping days to Christmas but also with 21 praying days to Christmas, the Bishop of Chelmsford is encouraging people to consider their preparations for Christmas in ‘slow motion’: to create time amid the Advent rush to rediscover the real joys of the festival by taking time to look afresh at how to prepare, and wait patiently, for the celebration of Christ’s birth. The Bishop writes: “We hope that people will be reminded this Advent that waiting is not a waste of time but, as we see in nature, a time of change, growth and transformation. Advent is the season in which the church celebrates waiting as an essential part of human experience – it is much more than the countdown to Christmas or the season of shopping. Reminding people that having to wait for what you want isn't always a bad thing.

Today, on this first Sunday in Advent, there is the chance to begin to pause and slow down – and to contemplate what we are about – though as we heard in the readings, the news could be interpreted as anything but good. Paul’s’ letter to the Christians in Corinth is full of the confidence of knowing that the life of Jesus in us has power to keep us strong to

the end and keep us in what is right and good. Then today's Gospel has Jesus speaking to us of real and serious things. Treating us with respect, Jesus does not gloss over the costs and dangers of following. He warns us so as to prepare us, and we need to take note. We need to "watch out" and "wake up". Even though Jesus is not certain of times and dates, he is concerned to pass onto his followers, with some urgency, the need to "watch".

OK, so what is the best way to do that? Well perhaps the best way of making sure that we stay ready is by keeping our eyes open – our spiritual eyes. That means keeping in touch with God on a daily basis. We need to get into a habit of praying, of being still before God every day; not just once a week on Sundays but at all times of every day. Sensible people always check the weather forecast every time they set out to go somewhere, so they are prepared. We need to check with God what he might want us to do before we make decisions or speak to people or whatever. Then we will find that our faith will be living and active, growing as we grow, and keeping us alert and available, so that whenever Jesus comes again in glory, we shall be ready to welcome him with joy.

And one last thing. We need to keep our heads. We need to keep calm. We need to be firmly rooted and stable. Headless chickens are not helpful in today's mad world! The old wartime message "KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON" has been emblazoned on everything. That original message encouraged many during the war years – and there is a real sense that such a message is just as relevant to everyone today.

May this Advent season be for all of us a rich time of waiting and watching as we prepare in our many different ways to celebrate the birth of the Son of God, the Prince of Peace.