

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 3rd December, 2017

Welcome to Worship

10.30am Advent Service led by Rev Andrew Robinson

Including the Blessing of the Sheep

6.00pm Town Close with Ron Kirk

A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

At dawn, let us watch for God and celebrate a new day.

At noon, let us watch for God and give thanks for all we are and have.

At dusk, let us watch for God and embrace the darkness of night.

And now, let us watch and wait for God as we worship.

Living God, as we light this first Advent candle,
and the first flicker of your coming is kindled in our hearts,
may the flame of our desire for justice and peace
burn deep within us, releasing in us
the transforming power of your Holy Spirit;
and may your kingdom come.

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 64 v1-9 Praise & Prayer

“For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.”

Psalms 80 v1-7, 17-19

“Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself.”

1 Corinthians 1 v3-9 Thanksgiving

“He will keep you safe to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Mark 13 v24-37 Signs of the End of the Age/The Day and Hour

Unknown

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back .. do not let him find you asleep.”

Being Who You Are Called To Be

In this week's reading from Mark we hear Jesus telling the disciples to keep alert for the coming of God. He encourages them to read the signs of the times. But no one knows the day or the hour, so they are to keep awake at all times.

This week's reading from Isaiah speaks directly to a world longing for restoration. The Israelites have been in exile and dreamt of 'home' in earlier chapters. Now, arriving home, they discover that 'the land of milk and honey' needs rebuilding. Their once great nation has been reduced to ruins and the memory of their greatness haunts them.

What does God's faithfulness mean when the world has been turned upside down? Isaiah offers a striking response: 'we are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand' (v.8). Despite the anxiety the people face as they return to their former

lives, God is (still) the creator, the maker, the poet. When the people cry out in their distress, God's answer is simple: be faithful, be watchful as I am faithful and watchful and you shall be changed.

Similarly, in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul writes to a community in conflict. His opening remarks remind this fractured community what really matters: grace and peace offered in Christ Jesus. And, he says, true and hopeful waiting is based on the reception of spiritual gifts. The community of faith is always a community first – we never have to be faithful alone. We are called by God to be our true selves in community.

This reading from Mark is striking for its apocalyptic images. Jesus' words would have been as startling to his early followers as they should be for us. This passage invites us to consider what watching and waiting for the return of Christ in his glory, for God's hope and grace, means in a time of unknowing and conflict. Its answer – despite the fearsome imagery – is strangely reassuring. It reminds us to 'Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come' (v.33).

It may seem odd to say that Jesus' words are reassuring. In any situation, most of us would prefer to know what's going on, rather than be kept in the dark. We prefer to be insiders, rather than outsiders. Yet, Jesus reminds us that when it comes to discerning God's timetable, the only way to be an 'insider' is to trust. In short, Jesus makes a call to individuals and the community of faith simply to be who we are called to be. We cannot know God's plans or timetable. We can get on with living faithfully. And this is liberating because it means we are tasked with being people of love, grace and openness. We watch, but we do not obsess about the 'end times'. Indeed, God's faithful people should not be an apocalyptic sect obsessed with the 'end times'. Tempting though

that may be, the real challenge is to model Jesus' way of faithfulness: showing service, demonstrating love and grace. Yet, while avoiding obsession with signs, we are called to be alert to God's work in the world. However, to watch for the breaking in of God's kingdom, and to be ready to act, takes time and patience. Jesus' original audience probably expected their world to change within a few years – perhaps for the Roman occupiers to be expelled or, after the resurrection, for a new world to be made in their lifetimes. We, 2,000 years later, perhaps expect too little. Living in the internet age, we should be aware that watching without participating can have voyeuristic overtones. For example, when 'watching' the awful experiences of other human beings as they flee war-torn homes and go into exile, we can easily forget their humanity. They can become 'objects' rather than 'subjects'. But to be 'watchers for the Lord' is to be called into relationship – with all. We must be alert to God's grace and, indeed, God's suffering – in all. One of the challenges Jesus makes in calling us to 'watch' for the Lord is to be alert to God's presence in all we see – and to make a proper response.

The readings are linked by a call to be watchful and alert. God's good news is on its way, but it has not reached fulfilment yet. Our part is to be not passive observers but active agents in bringing about God's kingdom.

A Sending Out Prayer

In the name of God who calls you to be his disciple,
who cherishes you as a precious child,
who invites you to be part of his kingdom work:
be bold, be blessed and be yourself.

Amen.