



Sermon preached by Revd John Proctor on 30th November 2025¹

Readings: Isaiah 2. 1-5; Matthew 24. 36-44

Advent Sunday

A preface to the readings

If any of you are wearing bifocal glasses this morning, you are well equipped to enter into the mood of this Advent season. You can see at two distances: raise your eyes and look to the far horizon; lower your gaze and focus things close at hand – the book on your lap, a letter you are writing, the dashboard of the car.

Advent is a bifocal season. Obviously, it's a run-up to Christmas, preparing us in spirit for the great festival ahead. Advent calendars, Advent candles help us to think this way. That's the near focus.

Advent is also a season of hope, for taking the long view, and looking towards the far horizon of God's dealing with the world. What the Advent Collect calls the coming of Christ, the day of judgment, the hope of resurrection. What one of our hymns describes as 'the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.'² What one writer speaks of as 'unimaginable wholeness ... the undoing of cancer, the dismantling of racism, the delivery of justice for the victim and vulnerable, the regeneration of dead coral reefs, the end of global pandemics, the vindication of the falsely imprisoned, the tears of children giving way to laughter, the death of death.'³

But even wearers of bifocal glasses don't look through both halves of the lens at once. How can we deal with two focal points in Advent? Perhaps because of this. God has touched our world in Jesus – physically, lovingly, personally, painfully. That gives us hope that God has not finished with this earth, and God will not finish with it. There is fulfilment ahead. The coming of Christ at Bethlehem testifies that this world matters to God, and in a world that matters to God, we shall live in sure and certain hope.

Sermon: Changing landscapes

'The mountain of the Lord's house shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it' (Isaiah 2.2).

Our planet is constantly changing, in two different kinds of ways. One is a steady, consistent pattern. The turning of the earth gives day and night. The movement of the moon about the earth brings tides. The orbit of our world around the sun shapes the seasons of the year. The patterns repeat. We are used to them: day after day, month by month, year on year.

Then there is another kind of change. People who know about the way land is made, about rocks, earthquakes and oceans, have traced in some places a shifting of the continents. Gentle this is not, for the forces that bring it about are very powerful. But gradual it certainly is. The planet is in no hurry. As part of this movement, a range of mountains in New Zealand has been getting taller – by a quarter-inch

¹ A good deal of this sermon has also appeared in *Sermons for the Christian Year* (John Paul, the Preacher's Press).

² A C Ainger, 'God is working his purpose out' (*CH4*, no.235).

³ T H Warren, *Advent (Fullness of Time series)* IVP, 2023, p21.

per year. This is not a hasty process. There is no urgent need to redraw the maps. But we cannot stop it; it will take its own course.

Now transfer that thought into a different realm, and think about God's involvement and purpose in our world. In that realm too, two kinds of process are under way: one is rhythmic, steady, consistent; the other is a purpose with direction and destination, unfolding surely but not hastily. As with land, so with the Lord. Two kinds of spiritual process are going on in time.

One is a repeating process, with patterns and rhythms and cycles. Sunday by Sunday the church gathers to celebrate the resurrection, by worshipping in the name of Jesus. Generation by generation the church teaches the faith, hands on the good news, and raises up new believers to trust and serve God. Year on year the church celebrates the great festivals of the gospel, Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, and round to Advent.

Today, on Advent Sunday – the beginning of the Christian year – we start a new turn of that wheel. But it is a rolling wheel. There is a destination; there is hope. Under God, the wheel of history is not simply pivoted at the middle, turning endlessly round. But it has purchase, it grips, it moves forward across the ground of time. Gradually, under God's gentle but ceaseless grace, there is a rearranging of the landscape. 'The mountain of the Lord's house shall be raised; all the nations shall stream to it.' And that is a picture, a parable, of what God might be doing. Using an image from geology – the shape of the earth – to tell of theology – the involvement of God in the world.

So as Christians we practice pattern, repetition, order. We also believe in purpose beneath that pattern, in direction, in hope. Watch someone knitting, and you see repetition. Stitch after stitch, row upon row, it seems never-ending. But there is purpose beneath. There is meaning to the movement, there is a steady coming together of thread and design, and eventually the worker's skill shapes a garment into new life.

The Bible speaks, not of endless repetition, but of purpose and vision, of shape and design, of patience and justice, of hope and a bright horizon. The world goes forward, under God and to God.

'The mountain of the Lord's house shall be raised up.' Isaiah uses words to paint a picture. The point is not that Jerusalem – the mountain of the Lord – will physically shift. The point is that the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus, will draw the world.

Nations shall come like rivers – not flowing uphill, but reaching upward in faith. The hope of scripture is that the good news of Jesus Christ will cross the earth and beckon the peoples. Part of God's shaping of the landscape of history, is that the world will be drawn. 'The scandal of particularity' it has been called. The magnetism of Israel's God, Isaiah might have said. On Advent Sunday we declare the church's hope and the hope of the world, that the future belongs to Jesus Christ.

But along with the shifting landscape of history, comes an inner change, a rearrangement of the landscape of the human mind. The text speaks about new learning. Have you ever been taught to do something differently? The sports coach says, 'Don't hold the ball with these fingers, or throw it like this, or kick with that action.' The choir leader tells you to alter the pitch or mood or pace of a piece of music. Then two things start to happen. You begin to do what you've been told. At the same time you need to unlearn the way you've done it before, adjust habits you had formed, and reprogramme some corners of your mind, to stop you slipping back into the old ways.

Is this what it means, when it says, 'He will teach us his ways ... and nations shall not learn war any more'? The rising of the mountain of the Lord will ask us to rearrange the way we think. God longs to teach the world a deeper commitment to reconciliation, a greater love for peace, a fuller desire for

honest and harmonious dealing between neighbour and neighbour and nation and nation.

God's ways, the gospel's ways, the way of Jesus, wait to claim our minds in ways we might never guess. God looks at the way the world thinks, the rivalry that sours the lives of nations, the pride and pushiness that so often divide neighbour from neighbour, and God longs to alter our inner landscape.

'Swords into ploughshares,' says Isaiah. It sounds too good to be true. Yet there are corners of the earth where people starve because ploughshares are turned into swords. Too many young people leave the land to bear arms, and not enough food can be grown. Advent says it will not always be this way. In God's time, in God's purpose, the Prince of Peace will reign.

One thing more to say, from our gospel reading: 'you do not know when your Lord is coming' (Matthew 24.42). You never know how fast God is working. Watch a knitter briefly, and you may not know whether the garment is nearly finished or barely started. Watch history, and you cannot read from it the mind of God. You never know how near you are to a moment of change, of possibility, of transformation.

Observe the movement of the continents, and it seems painfully slow. Yet if you live in an earthquake zone, it must feel very fragile, as if at any moment the land could change. Of course that is a destructive picture. But there is a constructive picture to set alongside it: what the church calls the Advent hope, the coming of Christ; what Isaiah called the rising of the mountain of the Lord.

History moves slowly, imperceptibly forward. Yet the times are in God's hands. There is a suddenness to set alongside the slowness. And between the suddenness and unpredictability of God's timing, and the pattern and steadiness of the world we know, stands the sureness of the Advent hope. The nations will know. The peoples will learn. Our own ways of being and knowing and thinking and living will be overtaken by the peace of God, and by the ways of Jesus Christ. The landscape of the world will change.