

LINDFIELD UNITING CHURCH

(Sunday 27th Nov, 2002 1st Sunday in Advent – Year A)

Isaiah 2:1-5, Rom. 13: 11-14, Matt, 24:26-44

READY OR NOT, HERE I COME – sermon from Rev Neil Ericksson

Happy New Year! Yes, today is the first Sunday of the Church Year – Advent – the preparation for the coming of Jesus. We are entering Year A in the 3 year cycle of the Lectionary, which means most of the Gospel Readings this year will be from Matthew.

Today's reading is all about getting ready- being prepared for the arrival. I received a text message this week from friends telling me they are expecting a baby next May. The mother seems to be just over 3 months of Morning Sickness. Just as well she told me because they are moving house next week! There is much to do. There will be much preparation for the arrival of this baby because the mother has some serious medical issues and the doctor told her quite some time ago that she probably wouldn't be able to get pregnant. So for the next 6 months she and her husband will be doing much preparing, planning and praying. That's exactly what the Gospel reading today wants us to do.

This reading appears out of the blue and is part of the Gospel known as the "Little Apocalyptic" where Jesus speaks about what is going to happen in the future. Similar passages appear also in Mark and Luke. He tells the disciples that people will rise up claiming to be Apostles or even Christ himself. They will speak of the end of the world and lead many astray. He speaks of the tribulations of the last times and the coming of the Son of Man. In the meantime they are to remain faithful and believe only his words, "which will not pass away" (24:35).

When will all this happen? So many down the centuries have tried to predict exactly when this will be . They have all failed and they all will fail because no-one knows – not the angels, not even he. Only God knows. All we are told is that it will be at time we least expect it, therefore they are to live in preparation for it.

He uses the example of Noah. Only he knew what would happen but not exactly when. The people carried on with their lives. They thought Noah had gone insane, building a big boat in the desert but then the rains came and they were all swept away.

Then he tells two stories about people doing ordinary tasks and one disappears (the so-called "Rapture"). Then the story of a homeowner who would stay home to guard his house if he knew when the burglars were coming. All stories about being prepared. Personally, I believe these stories are just that – parables to make a point. I don't believe in a literal Rapture, where one just disappears and is taken into heaven leaving the others here waiting to be destroyed by some disastrous apocalypse which will destroy the world. Something may well happen that will destroy the world but it is more likely to be a meteor crashing into Earth, or a nuclear

war or another flood, this one caused by climate change. The point is, we are not to be like the homeowner (unaware and inattentive) who lets the house get broken into but rather to be always prepared in case it happens tonight. To live our lives as if it were the last day but not becoming paralysed with fear that it might happen today so I won't do anything just in case.

Apocalyptic passages are to not frighten us but to give us hope. If we are frightened or worried or angry or jealous – these are all related to the past. If we have hope – that is related to the future. I'm not talking about cheap hope – I hope I win lotto which has 1 chance in 3.5 million of happening, but a sure hope – a confidence in what will come to pass.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, about which we are reminded every Communion Service – is our hope. Because we know God loves us enough to send us Jesus (remember at Christmas, Jesus is the reason for the season) and his resurrection reminds us that God's intentions cannot be thwarted and that God's love is more powerful than even death itself, we can be confident that not knowing the future doesn't matter. Why? Because God knows it and God knows how to handle it and what to do with it.

I wonder if the so-called "second coming" hasn't happened already. Before you hang me for heresy let me say that it's worth thinking about that all the signs of the times that precede Jesus return, and what will happen at that time may have already happened. At Pentecost we see the coming of the Holy Spirit which empowers and commissions the Church to spread the good news to all the world. Certainly, the apostles, including Paul, thought it was going to occur in their life time. By the Time Matthew wrote his Gospel, Jerusalem had been overrun by Rome, the Temple had been totally destroyed and the Roman Empire was crumbling. Jews and Christians were being persecuted. The world as they knew it was falling apart. What was the Spirit doing that Jesus didn't do? The apostles were doing "even greater things" as Jesus foretold. I just wonder. Maybe worth a thought.

The Christ who is to come is the same Christ who once lived on this earth and is known in the gospel story as the friend and healer of those in need. Moreover, living in hope and looking forward to the future he promised, we insist there is more to the human story and God's own story than that which has been experienced already.

The hope we have is not personal only and is certainly not simply private. It is a communal hope. The church is a community of hope and responsibility in the world. Far from deflating the Christian faith from worldly care, turning attention to that which is beyond history, Christian hope can generate a commitment to the future and the public good of humanity in this world. The promises of God urge Christians to lean forward toward the future in its entirety.

AMEN