

Let me begin by wishing you a Happy New Year – or a Happy New Liturgical Year, at least. Because today, as you will know, is the first day of the Church's year. But why doesn't the Church just change year with the rest of the world on the 1st of January?

Why do we bother having a so-called liturgical year anyway? What on earth is it, and wouldn't it just be easier to be led by world events or what we feel like and have readings and sermons which suited them?

Well without a doubt all of this might make life a bit easier, but it certainly wouldn't be particularly Christian. For the Church is called to be different from the society we live in – now, that doesn't mean pulling up the drawbridge, bolting the doors and only associating with those Christians who agree with us, but it does mean actively offering an alternative to the consumer-driven, money-centred, individualistic world we live in, an alternative which is based not on selfishness and suspicion, but on love, trust and faith. That the Church has a different way of doing things, then, should not surprise us.

But why have a liturgical year? Well, the pattern we have of celebrating throughout the year the main events of the Lord's life, those precious thirty-three years when God-incarnate walked this earth, allows us to observe and celebrate that whole life in the course of one Church year. This is how we on earth not only keep the memory of Christ alive in the life of His Church, but is also how, through the Holy Spirit, His life continues to infuse us and save us still. Heaven has stooped down to earth and our lives, all lives, life itself, have been transformed by the touch of God. This is what the Incarnation means.

Celebrating the incarnate life of Christ, then, is the most important way we have of showing the world that He is not dead and forgotten, but that He is risen, is alive and is reigning with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

And where better to begin that observance and celebration than with the time of preparation for the Incarnation at Christmass which we call Advent. In these great weeks before Christmass we will find it hard to fend off the temptation to start the celebration early. Indeed, the rest of society has started already – the Christmass lights are up and lit on Oxford Street, the Christmass displays are up in shops, the mince pies have been in Tesco's since Easter. But remember, the Church is called to do things differently.

The purpose of Advent is, as I've said already, preparation. If we do not prepare ourselves properly and if we start celebrating early then the festival of Christmass itself is cheapened. Like on Holy Saturday at Easter, there is a moment when, at the start of the Midnight Mass the party starts properly. And that celebration is all the more joyous for the anticipation.

But during Advent we are preparing ourselves for more, though, than Christmass day alone. Yes, we are preparing for the yearly celebration of the Lord's birth, and we must tell the world what this birth really means for humanity. But there is more to Advent than the 25th of December. For we are not only looking forward, so to speak, to the Coming of the Lord two thousand years ago, but also to His coming at the end of time.

We will hear the great prophecies of the Lord's coming from Isaiah throughout Advent, teaching us that the Lord Jesus is the long-expected saviour of Israel. But these readings from Isaiah will also paint a picture of the kingdom of God. As we have heard this morning, 'In the days to come the mountain of the Temple of the Lord shall tower above the mountains...all the nations will stream to it...Nation will not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' This vision

of peace and harmony and the reign of God is still indeed for 'the days to come'. The war-torn regions of the world, the persecution of Christians, the secularism of our society all tell us that there is a long way to go yet. Despite the Incarnation, humanity has still to turn to the Lord and learn to walk in his ways. This image from Isaiah, though, is an eschatological one – that it is to say, it tells us something about what the kingdom of God realised at the end of time will be like.

And today's Gospel too teaches us about the end times, about the return of the Son of Man, when all will be consummated and when we will face judgement – all this must come to pass before we are able to enjoy the full realisation of this coming kingdom of peace and justice. And the Lord tells us to be ready, for 'the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect'. The three parables we hear in the Gospel advise vigilance and diligence while waiting for the end. Most people, we are told, are unprepared, like the generation of the flood, which only Noah and his family survived. Many will be working in the field, but only some will be taken; the Son of Man will come like an unexpected thief. This is all rather shocking and quite frightening.

But if we do not wish to be overtaken on the day of the Lord, then we should take St Paul's advice in our second reading seriously. 'The time has come for you to wake from sleep...the night is almost over...let us give up all the things we prefer to do under cover of dark; let us arm ourselves and appear in the light...Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ.' We are children of light, not of darkness, for that armour which is the Lord Jesus, which St Paul speaks of here, is already given to us because we have been clothed in it in baptism.

With such an armour we should not be afraid of anything. But the gift of baptism demands something of us in return – that we should indeed live in the light and not in the darkness. With the rest of society, let us then celebrate Christmas with joy. But let us not forget that as Christians our horizon, an eternal horizon, lies beyond the 25th of December. 'Be prepared...for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.'

E'en so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.