

ALL SAINTS' DAY - Year A – 6th November 2011

[From 1st November] Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'" (Rev.21:3 & 4)

The Book of Revelation, the last in the Bible, is a strange piece of writing and not at all easy to follow. Its author, St. John - and there are arguments about just which St. John it is - has used many oblique references and metaphors from the Old Testament for instance, which are now obscure, but which would have been perfectly clear to the people to whom it was written. Some people have selected out certain of the more horrific passages as dire warnings to those who do not follow their somewhat convoluted evangelistic beliefs - their tracts are sometimes put in our letterboxes and they must be taken with more than a pinch of salt!

The great aim of this Book is to give reassurance of the joyful life of worship in heaven awaiting those who would follow Christ. We do not have to accept the details too literally. It speaks of a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and tribes, people and language, giving worship and praise to Jesus the Lamb of God, now exalted in heaven. Throughout the year the Church remembers and gives thanks for some of the great Christians whose lives have been devoted to God. Before the Reformation the Church in England, as in Christendom generally, had a great long catalogue of real and mythical saints, all requiring due respect and reverence to be paid. At the Reformation, the Church selected for special attention only those mentioned in Holy Scripture. These are called the "Red Letter" Saints Days. There is however a calendar of "Black Letter" Saints Days, which is a long list of Christian men and women whose lives have honoured Christ. This is to remind us almost daily that the work of the Holy Spirit in men and women crosses all barriers of time, geography, and race. When the Australian Prayer Book was prepared, a number of Australian holy people were included in its Calendar. William Grant Broughton, first bishop of Australia, for instance, and James Noble, the first indigenous Australian to be ordained. But in doing this it was not intended to suggest that this is all the holy people of God. We are not to forget those hidden but undoubted saints, who, since the days of the Apostles have served their Lord in this life and passed beyond it to be with Him in the next. All Saints' Day was set aside quite early in the Christian era as a day for commemorating and giving thanks for all those who loved and served the Lord in sincerity, and departed this life in the true faith of Christ. Over the years the idea of a saint has changed from being "a member of the holy people" to being someone whose response to Christ's call was especially noteworthy. But in the New Testament the term "saints" means the whole body of professed believers. It means "the holy people of God." We are wrong if we limit the use of the word to those who are deemed to be the elite of the elect – the spiritual aristocracy of the Kingdom of God. At least six of St. Paul's letters are addressed to "the saints". For example take his letter to the Christians at Rome: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." Or to the Ephesians: "To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus." And yet as we read those letters addressed to saints we could be excused for thinking they were addressed to sinners! As indeed they were.

All Saints' Day is the festival of the faithful Christian. It sets before us the triumphs of ordinary believers, and assures us that in Christ each one of us can rise by His grace to higher things. As we think of that tremendous

multitude whom no-one could number - each one having fought the good fight and conquered - we can find encouragement to struggle on, placing our trust in the same source of strength which they had. This day tells us of the great possibilities of human life. We are assured that we can reach up to higher things and higher standards if we will only live in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, constantly in touch with the Father through Jesus Christ. Yet even as we are encouraged, we are warned. While we admire the heroes of the past and are encouraged by the multitude, we are warned of the struggle and the strain and the suffering which may be the lot of a believer. But the victories of the multitude are rebukes to our faintheartedness, to our doubting, and to our pessimistic fears. We are assured that those things which are contrary to the will of God - the evil and vile things of this sinful world - can be overcome in the strength which God supplies. The saints were not born saints. They were men and women like us. They had similar trials and temptations. Using the pictorial language of the Book of Revelation: "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Rev.7:14) But sorrow and trial and tribulation alone are not able to cleanse and purify our souls. We **still** need to plead the Cross and Passion of our Lord, and to rely on His saving grace. Redemption is not something we can achieve by effort or suffering in our own strength and determination. "By His death on the cross and rising to new life, He offered the one true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for His people". as the Great Thanksgiving prayer in the new Prayer book expresses it. This is what that somewhat unpleasant phrase "washed in the blood of the Lamb" means - taking full advantage of what has been done for us, and on our behalf, while we were yet sinners.

The saints are not angels; they are not another order of beings different from ourselves. They are redeemed people, our comrades in Christ. We are one with them, joined in closest union by the bonds of faith and love. The Church is one. The saints are one, knit together in one holy fellowship. If we abide in Christ, nothing can part us from Him or from each other. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord", wrote St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. (8:38,39)

The source of true saintliness is the Lord Himself. The love that makes a Christian holy is the love that looks out from self and depends utterly on the Person of the Redeemer. What is needed is the power to put the ideals of love and brotherhood into active and effective operation. So in the Collect for All Saints' Day we pray "give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those inexpressible joys you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Saviour."

AMEN

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost -Year A 6th November 2011

Year A Responsibility: Canon Barlow

Today is the third Sunday before the beginning of the Season of Advent, which in turn begins the "run-up" to Christmas. Advent marks the commencement of a new Church Year, and on these last three Sundays we have put before us three parables from chapter 25 of St. Matthew's Gospel, each turning our minds to the need for preparedness, not merely for the presents and parties of Christmas, but for getting ready to celebrate the coming of Christ into His world. The first verse of the next chapter begins: "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples: As you know the Passover is two days away - and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

So we must read and hear these parables on two levels. Firstly we see the disciples being called to vigilance at the very moment when their Master was preparing for suffering and death: a situation which the disciples were most reluctant to face, with all the implications of what would inevitable follow. Secondly, Matthew, writing perhaps many years after the Crucifixion, was addressing the Church facing a somewhat different crisis: the question of whether the end of history – the Second Coming of Christ - will come soon, in their lifetime, or perhaps in some future indefinite time.

But today's readers and hearers know the outcome of the Church's early worries. We no longer fret that the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not bring about the culmination of history. Nor that the promised Second Coming is still in the undetermined future. Most of us are confident that the world will go on - even in spite of forebodings about nuclear weapons and Star Wars. Some even consider our era as still part of the age of the Early Church because there is still so much for the Church to do before the Lord's mission is accomplished.

Jesus speaks in these parables of the coming rule of God: a decisive action of God. This future event will highlight the difference between those who are prepared and those who are not. To illustrate this, Jesus told the parable, among others, of the wise and the foolish maidens who had been invited as the bride's companions to welcome the bridegroom when he eventually came, as an object lesson about the need for preparedness and vigilance. Five of these young ladies were foolish and had not made proper preparation; the others were able to joyfully participate in the wedding celebrations. Proper preparation is necessary for every important event of life - as young people doing exams about now are discovering. "The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' The Christian life is one of continual waiting for the coming of the Lord. He may come unexpectedly into our life at any time, and therefore we must be ready to welcome Him. We prepare ourselves by practicing the Christian virtues of love and forgiveness; of maintaining a clear conscience; of living our lives as best we can; and by seeking to worship Him Sunday by Sunday, opening ourselves to the influence of His Holy Spirit

As the psalmist says: "O God, you are my God - eagerly will I seek you. My soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you: as a dry and thirsty land where no water is." But most of us don't have that eagerness very often. To be ready means using our initiative. We are responsible for our own actions, and we should not continually lean on

others for help. Five of the maidens took flasks of lamp oil with them - just in case. Perhaps the others thought that if their oil ran low they could borrow some from their friends. Just as the wise girls were not able to give some of their oil to the others, so too we are not able to get a personal relationship with God via anybody else, and neither can we share our salvation with another.

We can demonstrate our committed belief to others - and we should. We may be inspired by observing the committed belief of another person. But we must cultivate our own faith and charity; seek the grace of the Holy Spirit ourselves. The five wise maidens went into the marriage feast. The five who went off to replenish their supply of oil were excluded. The parable of the workers in the vineyard, told earlier in St-Matthew's Gospel, assures us that it is never too late to accept God's mercy. But there must come a time when the work in the vineyard ceases for the day, and no more workers can be employed. There must come a time when the door to the celebrations is shut, when those who are unprepared are excluded. The final coming of the Lord to His people will show up the difference between those who were prepared and those who were not. What a tragedy if God should say to us: "I don't know you"!

"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." There is no condemnation of the sleepiness of the girls. The wise ones are not commended because they stayed awake all night: we are told they all became drowsy and fell asleep. They are commended because they were ready to play their part when they were needed. What the parable is declaring above everything else, is the necessity for alertness, enthusiasm, and integrity during the long hours of night and of seemingly unfulfilled expectation. To be ready and faithful despite the long delay in the coming of the Bridegroom. We can apply this in our own spiritual experience. There may be times when we feel alone and cut off even from God - will the Bridegroom ever come to us? The solution is to simply go on quietly and faithfully in the expectation that He will ultimately come, or return, into our lives. And of course, He will - even though He delays. The delay may be a testing of our faithfulness. It is faithlessness to give up and say: "He's never coming."

In an age so seriously devoted to the satisfaction of instant desires; where the deferment of pleasure, or the getting of things is not to be tolerated and even contrary to our human rights, we need to know this lesson - that though the Bridegroom delay, He will come. Our business in the Church is neither to become impatient with the Bridegroom - our Lord and Saviour; nor to be awake all night, busy-busy as if everything depends upon our performance. It is to be there, equipped, ready, trustworthy, and trusting, for when we are needed and called. "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." **AMEN**

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost - Year A 13th November 2011

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." (Matt.25:29)

It seems so very unfair! But because Jesus was never unfair or unkind; because our Heavenly Father is perfect Love and perfect Justice, we have to look more closely, and discover that love and justice which must lie behind the saying.

First let me re-cap the story, a parable told by Jesus to illustrate a truth. A wealthy property owner was going off on a business trip, or perhaps a holiday. To secure his wealth against thieves, he entrusted it to his servants, apparently leaving it to their discretion as to how they should look after it. To the first he gave five bags of gold - it seems that one talent equalled 300 denarii, and one denarius was a day's wage for a workman. So the servants were entrusted with quite sizeable sums of money: which really was the point Jesus was making, regardless of the actual amount. The servant entrusted with the five talents invested them, as did the second servant who had two talents to look after. The third servant, given only one bag of gold, one talent, buried his for safe keeping. No banks or safe deposit boxes in those days. Or stock markets either, come to that – the money must have been out on usury, at interest. When the master arrived home, the servants returned the money entrusted to them - the first two having doubled the sums in their care, the third with the excuse that he had been afraid to risk losing his. The first two received high praise for their initiative: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness." The third servant was chastised and cast into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth - a rather colourful phrase used by Jesus several times at the end of a parable to suggest absolute and utter rejection. For everyone who has will be given more and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

Today we use the word "talent" to refer to a person's natural gifts and abilities. And so the parable for us may be taken as a general exhortation to use and exercise our gifts and abilities - not necessarily our wealth and possessions, although it does apply in that case too. You know the saying "Money makes money", and it appears easy to build up wealth if you have some to start with - it's not necessarily so though, as recent examples in the media show! But any sporting person or musician will agree that unless a talent is constantly used and practiced, the gifts become lost, through lack of use.

On a fairly superficial level the parable is saying that we should use our talents, our God-given gifts and abilities to the glory of God and in the service of our fellowmen and women. If we don't, we deserve to lose them because that is what they were given to us. We may wonder why it was the servant entrusted with the one talent who buried it in the ground, and not the others with two, or five: Perhaps the master had a fair idea of what would happen, but still wanted the chap to have a chance at showing that he did have some initiative. It would seem that whereas the one who had five talents and the one who had two, valued their entrusted wealth highly and sought to

make the best of them, the other thought it was hardly worth working at, so buried it. Just as a talented person will make the most of his talents while a lesser talented person might let his wither away altogether.

In Jesus' own time, He was issuing yet another warning to the Jewish people. In religious terms they had so much - they had the Law and the writings of the Prophets They had been privileged to be the Chosen People of God. And because of that, they were also called to great responsibility. They were to reach out in God's name to others. They had had great experience with the One True God, and they were expected to share it with others. But they were unwilling to do that. They were afraid that the purity of their faith might be contaminated by any contact with the heathen. They would not have anything to do with them except on terms laid down by themselves - conditions which any self-respecting Gentile would find hard to fulfil. They would not accept their responsibility; they were like the man with the one bag of gold which he hid in the ground in case he lost it. The message was also for our Lord's disciples. After Jesus had ascended into heaven, the task of carrying on His work and of preaching His Gospel belonged to His followers. They were to "go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature." Much had been given to them, and much would be required of them. They would have to give an account of their stewardship in due time. And of course the message is also for us, who profess and call ourselves Christians. The gifts that God has entrusted to us must not be hidden, buried in the ground, but exercised and shared. They are to be used gladly in God's service, even if we think them to be minor. Our lives are to be open to God, and so to others.

The rebuke of the returned master in the parable - "You wicked, lazy servant!" - tells us that Christ expects us to work at our gifts, our talents, whether we have few or many. He gives an equal reward to the one who has few talents but uses them well, as to the one gifted with many. "Well done, good and faithful servant!" The final criterion is not human success, but whether in our efforts we are working to please God, using the gifts with which He has endowed us. The theme placed before us in our worship these last few Sundays of the Church's Year, and next Sunday is the last - is watchful preparedness. Today's extract from St. Matthew's Gospel follows on from last Sunday's parable about the unprepared bride's maids. The final verse from last week was: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." And today we continue: "It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them." On his return he commended the wise servants and condemned the unwise one. We may well equate that master with Jesus Christ: the departure, Christ's ascension; the delayed and unexpected return, Christ's Second Coming, the date and time of which is unknown. The reward of the faithful servants: "Well done, good and faithful servant come and share your master's happiness" suggest our hope of eternal life in the presence of God. The punishment of the wicked, lazy servant: "Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness", suggests eternal separation from God – a situation we do well to strive to avoid. It seems that one of the problems which St. Paul had to deal with when he wrote to the Thessalonian Christians, was that, believing as some did that Christ was about to return almost immediately, they assumed that they could sit back and wait for Him! Paul disillusioned them, emphasizing first that we cannot be certain when Christ will return; and, even more vital, that we must work to fulfill His prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as in heaven." "But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled." (1Thess.5:5,6)

AMEN

Christ the King / Reign of Christ - Year A 20th November 2011

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Then the king will say to those at his right hand: Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matt.25:31 & 34)

The last Sunday of the Church's Year was once known as "Stir up Sunday", from the opening words of the old Collect: "Stir up we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people..." The implication was that having come to the end of the long Season of Sundays after Trinity, we needed a stirring up of our wills as we began again the Ecclesiastical round of worship. The revised lectionary with its 3-year cycle of Readings, has a much more high-minded theme for this last Sunday, pointing not at ourselves and urging us to do better and stir our lazy selves, but pointing to Christ, reigning as King. In the Old Testament, "King" is one of the more common titles for God, in the psalms especially. For instance: "The Lord is King, let the earth rejoice." sings psalm 97. There are these lovely lines in psalm 84: "The sparrow has found her a home and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young: even your altar, O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God." And in psalm 10: "The Lord is King for ever, and ever." Psalm 24: "Who is the King of glory? The Lord of hosts - he is the King of Glory." To quote only four.

When we turn to the New Testament, we cannot help becoming aware that at the centre of our Lord's message lies the kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. How many of Jesus' parables begin: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like"? About a dozen actually, but there are very many other references to the Kingdom throughout the Gospels. In the Gospels Jesus is set forth as King particularly at the beginning and at the end. The message to Mary at the Annunciation about the Son she would give birth to is: "The Lord will give to him the throne of his father, David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever." The Magi come seeking the Holy Child with the question: "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?"

At the end of the Gospels Jesus is presented again and again as King. When He entered Jerusalem for the last time, the people saw in His entry the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Zechariah: "Behold, your King comes to you." And the crowds greeted Him with the shout: "Blessed be the King who comes in the name of the Lord." It was on the charge that He claimed to be King that the Jews brought Jesus to Pilate. They threatened Pilate: "If you release the man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a King sets himself against Caesar." When Pilate offered the mob the choice between Barabbas and Jesus, he said: "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" And when the soldiers had tormented Jesus - as a mockery of His Kingship with a crown of thorns and ragged purple robe - Pilate presented Jesus to the people saying: "Here is your King!"

On the mob's demand "Crucify Him, crucify Him", he asked "Shall I crucify your King?" Finally it was as a broken and discredited King that the crowd jeered at Jesus on the cross: "He is the King of the Jews - let Him come down from the cross and we will believe in Him." It really is extraordinary how the King theme runs strongly through these last hours of Jesus' earthly life. By contrast, there were others who used the term as a confession of faith. There was Nathanael, who, when he was compelled to believe in Jesus, cried: "Rabbi! you are the Son of God! you are the King of Israel!" James and John sought places of honour when Jesus came into His kingdom.

And even on the cross, the penitent thief cried: "Jesus, remember me when you come in your Kingly power." In the Book of Revelation, one of the titles given to the triumphant Jesus is "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Having taken some time and only a selection of incidents to stress the Biblical recognition of Jesus as King, I want to speak of three aspects with regard to His Kingship.

There is a very real sense in which the idea of Kingship was a temptation to Jesus. He knew quite well that the Messiah for whom men were looking was to be a warrior prince, who would smash His enemies and the enemies of Israel, and take a throne of power. It was precisely with this idea that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, when he offered Him all the kingdoms of the world if He would fall down and worship him. The temptation returned after the feeding of the 5000, when some wanted to make Him king whether He liked it or not. There is no doubt that Jesus was tempted to be the kind of king for which the nation was waiting..

The second aspect is the difference of Jesus' kingdom, summed up by this verse from St. John's Gospel: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." (18:36) The kingship of Jesus was based on the royalty of sacrificial love and nothing else. The only throne He would ever occupy on earth is a throne in the hearts and minds of men and women who freely and joyfully enthrone Him there. He knew the temptation to found His kingdom on power; but His Kingdom is eternal because He founded it on love. The crowds shouted: "Come down from the cross and we will believe in you." It was precisely because He did not come down that we believe in Him. It is the fact that He died for us and for all mankind that we give Jesus His place in our hearts.

The third point is probably the most important. On earth, Jesus was really only the Crown Prince, the Heir Apparent. For Jesus, the real and only King is God the Father, and it is to God the Father that the Kingdom belongs. "Your kingdom come," He taught us to pray. Not "My kingdom come." The ascription at the end of the Lord's prayer: "The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours," might not be part of the original, but nevertheless it is certainly a correct interpretation of the mind of Jesus. St. Paul, in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus saw the Crown Prince, after His apprenticeship on earth, being set in the highest place of honour by God the Father: "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the ages to come." (1:21) And he prayed that the Ephesians, and us by extension, may receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know Jesus, that we may know the hope to which we are called and the riches of his glorious inheritance and the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

Then we may hear those welcoming words when we front up on our Judgment Day: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." AMEN

First Sunday of Advent - Year B 27th November 2011

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come." (Mark 13:33)

In four short week's time we will again be celebrating the Festival of Christmas. Christmas stands for the coming of Christ into the world that He died to save and rose again to rule. We who are Christians know that very well, and we look forward to celebrating it. We know very well too that Christ comes continually into the hearts of those who are ready and prepared to receive Him, and Christmas simply focuses this fact by emphasizing it on a particular day.

There is another aspect which many of us tend to overlook or play down, and which the world out there, which so happily celebrates Christmas, seems to totally ignore. That is, that the Christ who came into the world helpless and dependent, sooner or later calls us to an accounting. If Christ really is Lord of all, then His world will be judged on His terms - the realization of which should bring a sobering aspect to the traditional thoughtless celebrations.

The Church in its wisdom has provided us with a Season for preparation so that we might properly prepare to celebrate both the first coming of Christ into His world, and also to be ready for His promised second coming. Anything which is worthwhile requires preparation. For today's service preparation was necessary, and because people felt that a service of worship is worthwhile, the church has been cleaned, brass polished, flowers carefully arranged, pew notes printed - and even this sermon had to have time and thought put into it.

Proper preparation for anything does take time and thought and energy and can be quite costly to the pocket too. Our preparation to celebrate the Birth of Christ is costly too. We like to use that time to express our love for our family and friends by giving them gifts. We like to have a family meal with a few more of the extravagances than usual. I would hope that you are willing to be a little more extravagant too in the time you set aside for worship, and for visiting people you know who are shut in through age or infirmity, or whose Christmas celebrations will be shadowed by the loss or absence of loved ones.

Christmas was a costly time to God: He "so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son". It is rather sad and quite ironic, that the world which the Son of God came to save is so busy preparing to celebrate the event, that little or no time is given to spiritual preparation. There is so much to be done: the presents, the Christmas cards, the cooking, the so-called Christmas parties, and all the other things which just have to be taken care of in these last few weeks tend to crowd out worship and prayer and Bible reading. We should pause in the midst of the feverish activity and ask if it all really helps us prepare to receive the Lord Jesus Christ into our hearts. Or helps us to be prepared to render account for our lives and for our society as a whole, if the Second Advent should happen at this time. I fear it works the other way, and obscures the whole point of the Incarnation. We may be sure that many people hide from such serious considerations behind a welter of activity, tinsel, and wrapping paper. The call of Advent is urgent: NOW is the time. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. NOW is our salvation nearer than when we first believed. If we do not face our need for spiritual readiness, when the master of the house comes he will find us asleep; when Christ comes to transform us, He will find us unresponsive. When

Christ comes to our world He will find it so much at cross-purposes to His will that it is incapable of understanding His message. Advent therefore is a Season of call to spiritual awakening and awareness - which of course is not limited in reality to just the four weeks prior to December 25th. As we awaken to Christ and become aware of Him, we catch a glimpse of God Almighty. Jesus introduces us to God's plan for individual life and for the true nature of society.

Yes, Jesus was born as a baby; carried on a loving and sympathetic ministry; and died a cruel death at an early age. But this young man has the keys to life and death: eternal life and eternal death. In meeting Christ we are brought face to face with the love of God who cares enough for us as to share our human limitations and problems to the full, and to endow our frail humanity with His divine glory. He became man so that we might become in truth and reality sons and daughters of God. When we know Jesus as the Christ, we are meeting the person who points out the terrible contrast between what we really are and what we could be. We are faced with the choice of meeting life on His terms, to the death of our own self-centredness, or of continuing with merely living a meaningless and pointless existence. When we meet Jesus as the Christ, we meet one who is the Lord of all society and all human institutions must be measured against His standards. Are we prepared to meet such a Person? Are we prepared to work and give and serve sacrificially so that others may have the opportunity to meet Him?

When we meet Christ we know ourselves to be in a state of conflict between our higher and our lower selves; we swing between complacent optimism on the one hand and despair and resignation on the other. But we also know that despite our continual reluctance and sometimes downright rebellion against God's loving purposes - despite our divided lives - God sets a higher estimate upon us than the world can ever match. We are worth the gift of His Son. We are worth saving. We are worth forgiving. We are worth loving, incredible though that sometimes seems. Yet God created us free creatures. We can reject the gift and the saving and the forgiveness and the love. We have that freedom and capacity. But you would not be here this morning unless you were exercising your freedom, to reach out and accept God's gift of His Son, His salvation, His forgiveness, His love. You know that you and I and all of us here need Christ in our lives. You know too that so many people "out there" need Christ in their lives too, but are either not prepared to admit it or do not know how to open themselves to Him.

The Church is the fellowship of those who are ready and willing to acknowledge Christ as Lord and Saviour, and ready and willing to let God use them in His service. Advent is a Season of preparation, not merely for a season of celebration and gift-giving, but of preparation for the remembrance of Christ's First Coming into His world and preparation in all urgency for His Second Coming. But contact with Him will be missed if the preparation is not adequate or sincere. We who meet Him and accept Him and receive Him find the real meaning to our lives, in that God says we are worth the gift of His Son - and that knowledge saves us from both self-satisfaction and despair. **AMEN**