

St. Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor—First Sunday in Advent—2 December 2007

Revd Rob Lamerton

Isaiah 2.1-6; Romans 13.11-14, Psalm 122; Matthew 24.36-44

Advent means “coming” or “arrival”. The four weeks of Advent are a time of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Christ, as we think of the arrival of the one promised by God through the ages.

An Advent wreath is a visual way to move through the four Sundays of the season. The wreath's circle has no beginning or ending, symbolizing God's never ending love. Its evergreen symbolizes everlasting life, and holly reminds us of the crown of thorns with drops of blood.

Traditionally, the Advent wreath contains four blue candles, or three blue or purple and one pink candle that are progressively lit on each Sunday in Advent. If the pink candle is used, it is lit on Advent 3. In the centre of the wreath is a large white candle (sometimes called the 'Christ candle') which is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. The colour of the candles reflects the colour of the church season. Blue symbolizes hope and anticipation. Purple symbolizes penitence and is the colour for royalty. Pink symbolizes the joy of reconciliation and in some traditions is associated with the Virgin Mary. Certain themes are sometimes associated with each of the candles, such as hope, peace, joy, and love.

Advent has two threads:

1. the last things, the end of the world, the resurrection and the coming of a new age; and
2. prophecy of the coming of the Messiah, looking forward to his birth.

The coming of the Messiah in the beginning prepares us for the end and of all things. It is a time of *preparation*. As we prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, we prepare also for the coming of Christ among us and his changing of our lives day by day.

As part of our preparation, we make adjustments to our worship by removing some of the more glorious elements, like the *Gloria* and the hosannas, and adding some preparatory and penitential elements, like the candles and prayers

As we begin Advent, we embark upon a new year of worship. This year the focus is Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel is a manual of Christian teaching, particularly for a Jewish audience. Jesus Christ is Lord of the new community, fulfiller and fulfilment of God's purpose is made known in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is proclaimed as Israel's royal Messiah; God's purpose culminates in him. By his words, the true Israel, his followers, gain forgiveness and fellowship.

Much of the material special to this gospel is concerned with the Jews and fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. All the gospels mention Jesus' descent from David, but Matthew emphasises this by referring to it much more than any of the other gospel writers. The special aim of Matthew is to show that Jesus is a legitimate heir to the royal house of David.

All of today's readings have a special hope for the future. Isaiah's focus, some 500 years before Jesus, is Mount Zion and Jerusalem. Out from them will go instruction in the word of the Lord that will bring peace among nations. Psalm 122 delights in the temple in Jerusalem.

Paul, in the letter to the Romans, looks to a new day, the day of living honourably in relationship with God. Jesus, too, looks to a new age that will come to surprise people just as the flood had surprised the people of Noah's day. But this new age will not catch unawares those who are awake, alert and ready! So, the call is to be ready!

Think of the birth of children. You know for months that they are on the way, but somehow they suddenly seem to want to break out of the womb and into the world.

However, today's story is not about the birth of Jesus. Rather, it is Jesus' words about being ready for the new age, about being ready to respond to the opportunity to serve God at a moment's notice and in unexpected circumstances, about being ready to make the right choices.

We are challenged to ask:

- What will it be like when Jesus comes again in glory?
- How will the world change?
- How will we be changed by God's Power—the power of redemption, love, mercy and justice?
- How might we make ourselves ready?

So we turn our faces expectantly towards Jesus and watch for his power, a power that is among us now and it is still to come, secure in the knowledge that, just as we are his now, so he will claim us in his embrace of the last day.

As we ponder the "coming" or "arrival" of the Lord and the coming of a new age of his presence, we are asked to make choices about how we live and about how we might enable others to live more fully there are indeed many ways, but I bring before you today and through Advent the opportunity to participate in a couple of ways:

- through a gift of money to the Northbourne community Centre Christmas celebration; and/or
- by giving to the programs of the Christmas Bowl which supports, for example, work in the Solomon Islands.

The Solomon Islands Christian Association has a significant position in Solomon Islands society. It provides a focal point for information coordination and dialogue on national and human development issues, including HIV/AIDS.

A recent vision seminar was attended by 75 church leaders and workers. It aimed to engage churches in the fight against HIV/AIDS, which is accepted as the next big threat to the nation. Malaria is the major health concern—the Solomon Islands have the world's highest incidence of malaria.

A policy has been developed by the churches to help to balance the teachings of the Bible and the social issues which result from sexual behaviour.

Church workers have been trained to educate people about prevention of HIV/AIDS and how to care for people living with the disease.

Thirty-four people from ten national churches have attended a training of trainers program—most had a high awareness of HIV and they were encouraged to begin programs in their local communities. Improvement in literacy is a key part of the program.