

November 17, 2024 – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Readings: Dan 12.1-3, Ps 16, Heb 10.11-14, Mark 13.1-8

Some of my neighbours have already started putting up Christmas decorations. Yesterday, St Martin was celebrated in our village with two bands and a joyful bunch of children and parents walking through the streets with their lanterns and songs. And in the Netherlands many are starting to prepare for the upcoming St Nicholas celebrations. I am quite happy to be one of those for the first time since my return from the UK, where I kind of missed it. So this year, I am really looking forward to celebrate Sinterklaas once again with the families of two of my children. It is only understandable that we are looking out for the warmth of such celebrations and putting up the joyful symbols and extra lights attached to the upcoming feast days in these final weeks of the secular year and at the beginning of the new church year, starting with the season of Advent in two weeks' time. All of that offer a much needed contrast to the rather gloomy season we have now entered. Not only gloomy in terms of the shortening days, the falling leaves and the lack of sunshine. But also the doom and gloom that is connected to all that is happening in the world around us, close by and far off. We continue to witness those devastating wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, the effects of climate change such as recently in Spain, political turmoil in the US and Germany, antisemitic riots in the Netherlands. And on top of all that there was the resignation of our own archbishop Justin this week. A clear sign that, sadly, not all is well in the Church of England either.

So I guess for all of us, this is a time when we really need to hear all those comforting words from Scripture that we have just read. A time when we need to sing the kind of hymns that we have just sung, and will be singing during this service. A time when we need to come together on a Sunday as Christians to warm ourselves by our fellowship and by sharing the Lord's Supper. Encouraging one another never to lose hope. Strengthening our faith in a different perspective, a different take on our future. Our own future, being aware of the fragility of our own life here on earth, as well as the future of humanity and of this planet. Whenever we feel in a dark and uncertain place, we should look for ways to find again that peace and trust within ourselves that can only be found by staying close to God. And we are called to share that peace and trust within our families and communities, to bring it into our world, which is so much troubled at this time.

So let us just remind ourselves of the hopeful messages that today's readings offer us. From the book of Daniel (12.2) we had one of the earliest Bible passages giving us the promise of eternal life.

We have those beautiful words of Psalm 16, which often comes up in Compline, the church's office of night prayer: 'For you will not abandon my soul to Death, nor suffer your faithful one to see the Pit. In your presence is the fulness of joy and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.' And in Hebrews (10.23) we read: 'Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.'

And so, as Christians, we cannot only look our own death in the eye without losing hope. But we can also remain hopeful while taking in all the news of what is happening in our world right now. In today's Gospel reading it is Christ himself making this very clear to his disciples. At a time that was full of suffering and turbulence just like ours. At a time when Jesus foresaw that those immense structures of the temple would soon just be ashes and rubble. And the disciples slowly began to understand that what Christ would accomplish in his earthly ministry, would not immediately put an end to the world as they and we know it. We still have to face the fact that we live in this 'in between' time. A time when not all is well at all, though on a deeper level, paradoxically, all has become much better than it superficially looks like. Because Christ has indeed brought salvation to us by his death

and resurrection on which our hope of eternal life is now strongly founded. At the same time, it is also clear that we have not yet reached the end of times. We have not entered yet that new Jerusalem promised to us that we just sang about. That will only happen when Christ will come again. It could be today or tomorrow, but it could equally be centuries after we have passed away. But this promise should change for good our perspective on what we see and experience right now. The perspective on our own life that could end any moment and the perspective on the daily news that may disturb us. Regarding all of that as the birth pangs, to take up the image Jesus uses for it. Never losing hope on that final new birth in the future, and on our own eternal life. And so we sang: 'Exult, O dust and ashes! The Lord shall be thy part; his only, his for ever, thou shalt be and thou art!' Let this hope make us to continue to pray 'thy kingdom come', and to continue to work for that kingdom while we are still here. As the letter to the Hebrews (10.25) puts it: 'Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, ... not giving up meeting together all the more as you see the Day approaching.' Amen