

A REFLECTION ON THE GOSPEL FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Matthew 24:37-44

(The author of this reflection is a friend of Fr Jock who lives in Northumberland)

Many cafes, restaurants and public houses rely on 'A' boards, those hazardous pieces of street furniture, designed to let passers-by know of what is on offer inside. So, we may be tempted by the offer of a free 'starter' when bought with a full priced item from the main menu or our attention be drawn to the forthcoming weekend entertainment. Two such boards recently caught my attention. One 'advert' carried the announcement: "Our beer is served colder than an MP's heart." Actually, it was a bit more specific than that but, as they say, discretion is the better part of valour, and I am nothing if not discreet! The 'A-Board' that wins first prize however, carried the following announcement: 'Tonight's AGM of the Clairvoyant Society has been cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances.' Most passers-by 'got' the joke and walked on by, chuckling to themselves (such a splendid word – 'chuckling'! Who among us has never delighted in the image and sound of a very young baby first learning the sound of their own laughter. How they giggle, chuckle and chortle. But I digress), Those who didn't walk on by, chuckling or not, stopped to take a more studied look and then looked inside the picture window of the pub in an effort to study in more depth. Various other posters, affixed to the inside of the window were diligently investigated and studied. Mission accomplished. Passers-by had been turned into potential customers. The A-Board strategy had worked. Who needs Saatchi and Saatchi?

Most of us have, at least once in our lives, wished we could see into the future. We have been offered two positions. Both have their pros and cons, have similar salary levels, but which one to take? Or the prospective son-in-law. You want happiness for your daughter and recognise she must make her own decisions, but there's something about him. You're not quite sure. You long for a glimpse into what will unfold in time. You want your fears to be misplaced but fear they will come true. Oh – if only you could see five years ahead. The future is one thing, the past is something else. We can all remember our past and often we look with great affection to the good old days. There have been many times when my life appeared to be falling apart. I had taken the wrong fork and found myself wandering aimlessly. Something or someone came along. I found the strength to get up, to find my feet, to start taking little steps. As I look back, I can discern that these were moments of real grace, occasions when God sent angels to be my companions on my journey, times when God held my hand even though I didn't realise it at the time. He was there in my past. I have no reason to doubt his presence in my future. Things are unfolding according to His plan, a plan I don't always understand and one with which I disagree. I convince myself that I know better, my plan is the superior. Always life and God have proved me wrong.

In the Gospel today, Jesus, speaking towards the end of his public ministry, urges his followers to develop the skills necessary to be able to read the signs, to be aware and alert, to look at what is going on around them and to "stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." Being able to read the signs ensures that nothing should ever surprise us, that we can cope with whatever life throws our way; that we can know and live the Serenity Prayer: *God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change.* Above all the Season of Advent allows us room to understand that simple phrase; *And it came to pass...*

The Season of Advent is important. It's a time for introspection. It's a time to take stock of who we are and where we are going. It's a time for looking back, to do our own archaeological dig, explore the artefacts and memories we find there, and understand how they are an intrinsic part of who we are and where we are today. We're preparing to celebrate and commemorate the Incarnation, the mystery of intense humility when God, in all his majesty, deigned to embrace human form - that moment in time when God reached out to us that we might be able to reach up to him. We do not choose him - He chose us and it's His choice that enables us to hope and enables us to say: *And it came to pass.*