

**Sermon: 2019/12/01 (1st Sunday of Advent, Year A) - *Isaiah 2:1-5*;  
*Psalms 122*; *Romans 13:11-14*; & *Matthew 24:36-44*\_BTR**

[Invite children to the front. Step ladder]

Is it fun being short?  
Or would you rather be tall?  
(Poppy, for one, cannot *wait* to grow *up*.)

[Ask for a volunteer to come and stand next to you.]

Okay ["x"], how do you feel *right now*?  
(Standing next to me.)  
"Not too bad"?  
Ah, but do you feel *short*?  
And how is that?  
Being *short*.  
Does it feel... great?  
No?

But what if you climbed this ladder (here)?

[Help child up.]

Now, how do you feel?  
How has your *mood* changed by (suddenly) being so much *bigger*?  
And now you can reach this candy I have in my hand!

How is it, then, to be taller than you were?  
Is it exhilarating?  
Did you feel more...powerful?  
More special?  
Stronger?  
Yes?

Well, today we're still with *Isaiah* (although right at the beginning of his book).  
And *Isaiah* - the prophet - before he was (rudely) taken away by the *Babylonians* into captivity - lived some of his long life around Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah, (the remnant of David's kingdom of Israel).

And Jerusalem sat on a hill.

A hill called, "Zion."

And though to the Jews Zion was very important and sacred - because the Temple of the Lord was there, it was not, in actual fact, a very tall hill at all.

Pretty small, actually.

There were *lots* of bigger hills in the world; lots and lots *and lots* of bigger hills.

But God gave Isaiah a vision - and we hear it this morning - that, one day, in the *new* creation (after Jesus returns), Zion will be *re-made* into 'the highest of the mountains', and every person in the world will hear about how wonderful and majestic *and tall* it is. And so, like a lighthouse in a stormy, dark sea, *many* different people will be drawn to this 'highest' mountain to worship God there - and it will be a place of *permanent* peace and *huge* happiness.

And if we want to live there too - on the 'highest of the mountains', Advent is the time when, traditionally, us Christians try and *re-double* our efforts of demonstrating our love for Jesus.

Let's pray:  
Lord God, ...

[Dismiss children.]

When this sermon is finished - and you breathe a sigh of relief, we will stand - as according to our usual custom - like many other denominations, and *affirm* together - that means, *re-state*; or "strengthen our commitment to" - the *Nicene Creed*. (You can see it at the bottom of page three in the Order-of-Service.)

The Nicene Creed is a paraphrase, a summary, a, a... quick reference guide of those things that the Church has *always* agreed are the most *foundational*, fundamental truths articulated by the Scriptures.

This "quick reference guide," in other words, *defines* orthodox religion.

This "quick reference guide" "spells out" those things that make Christianity...

*Christianity*, and mark it off - "*ring-fence*" it(!) - from the errors of other faith-systems.

It was written down at a meeting of bishops - 318 of them - in the city of Nicaea in what is today, Turkey, but was, back then, Greek-speaking Asia Minor - a province of the Roman Empire, in 325 AD.

These bishops came from every far-flung quarter of the Mediterranean; even damp, draughty Britain;

and among their number was, of course, jolly ol' Saint Nick himself; in the flesh, before his irreverent makeover by the Coca Cola company.

Allow me to be clear: this holy company of men did *not* "invent" anything; they came as the representatives of their congregations, empowered, *commissioned* by the people - those disciples - that they served to merely *ratify* what had been taught and preached from pulpits since Jesus ascended and provided His Spirit at Pentecost.

If anything was a contrivance by those bishops, it was their agreement on the date of

Easter, which became a convoluted and confused affair.

But even this wasn't just "*plucked* out of the air": John's gospel in particular is clear that the Crucifixion took place at the feast of Passover, and "Passover" was supposed to be determined by the *Lunar* cycle.

The Jews themselves, however, had got into a disagreement as to at what point in that "cycle" they were supposed to observe that feast, and the whole matter is a mess really.

*But*, I digress.

So, to reiterate, the Nicene Creed was, then, no more than an aide-de-memoire - a (brief) "list" - of those *basic* beliefs that those bishops took for granted as emerging plainly from the pages of the Bible.

And if you would look with me (now) at it, you'll notice that I've laid it out for you in Trinitarian fashion, and at the bottom of the second paragraph concerning the Incarnation (at the top of page 4) you'll find these familiar words:

'He will come *again* in glory to judge the living and the dead...'

Hearing these words as much as we do, they probably go in one ear and out the other.

They might sound *hollow*;

they might be *un*-interesting to you;

*un*-important;

of little consequence to your life.

But the fact that someone thought to bother enshrining them in our weekly liturgy; the fact that of the many things that *could* be said in the Creed, this line was felt essential... this should make us think again.

After all, I told you that they were committed (in ink) to the Creed in 325 AD - that's close to three-*hundred* years after Christ's departure, and a *great* deal had changed in those intervening years.

Unlike at the time of the events and the writing of the New Testament, which was in the *first* century, in 325 the Roman Empire was no longer pagan:

it had abandoned its ridiculous and colourful pantheon of mischievous, fickle, (fictional) deities like Jupiter and Venus.

It was also no longer seemingly invincible and self-confident, but had come under a lot of stress:

Throughout the the third-century, Germanic tribesmen had poured across its northern - Danubian and Rheinian - borders - groups like the Franks and the Burgundians, and they couldn't be dislodged by the Legions.

In Judea-Palestine, the Jews who *were* oppressed and beaten down in Jesus' day, rose up, years later, formed armies, and battled the legions; but they had been thoroughly defeated.

The Temple, newly *re*-built by Herod, was once again burned down.

And the peoples scattered and dispersed.

Most *to this day* remain outside of the Promised Land.

Many different Caesars had come and gone.  
*Some* had persecuted the Christians - fed them to lions.  
*Some* had become Christians themselves, like Constantine who supervised the (Nicean) Council I spoke about.

There had been multiple civil wars, coups, assassinations...  
All this had happened but Jesus hadn't 'come again'.  
And it would have been very easy to have just, quietly, "swept" the idea "under the rug"; to, discreetly, "shelve" it.  
The assembled bishops couldn't have refuted or denied it altogether, however:  
Just look at this morning's reading from *Matthew*, our Savior is *explicit* that though He would disappear to Heaven *for a period*, that that wouldn't be the end of His involvement with the world He made.  
(Verse thirty-six.) 'About that day and hour no one knows, ...but only the Father'.  
In other words, there *will* be a "day" and an "hour" when His existence will be made manifest and unmistakable to all.  
And it won't be, mind, for everyone, a happy occasion.  
Look at what Jesus compares His return to: 'the days of Noah'.  
That is a *terrifying* incident to evoke:  
the drowning of the continents; the destruction of nearly every living thing.  
And you don't need to accept that the story about the Ark and the raven and the rainbow was a literal historical happening.  
The point is this: Jesus, who *proved* Himself omniscient God by being resurrected *and by countless other incomparable miracles*, says that there is something *like* The (Great) Flood on the horizon of humanity.

But we needn't be afraid of it.  
When one moves house, what do you do?  
(What is the *main* thing that you do? The principal, task.)  
You clear out the old furniture.  
You clear out the old furniture to make way for bringing in the belongings of the new owner;  
the "new owner" *and* (H)is family - those who love Him and serve Him.  
And that is the reason for the season of "Advent."  
For the next four weeks we - and *millions* of others like us - are going to be encouraged to worry less about preparing for one day - the 25th, and to focus on how we might be better prepared for when the Lord - perfect and sinless - moves home for the last time - this time to stay.

(Assuming you're with me, then, that Jesus who *demonstrated* His trustworthiness even about far-fetched things - like that He would beat death, (which He did);  
and so assuming you think, then, He is coming, as He promised how *do* we "prepare"?  
Its an easy thing to say to do - and I just said it - but *how*?  
Well, may I suggest helping yourself to one of the Advent devotionals on my bookstore?  
That'd be a constructive place to begin for some of us.

May I suggest too, attending the Rite I Wednesday services?

And every Sunday as well? (Not just two out of three.)

But beyond these practices, let's go back to what Paul had to say when he described the Christian life to those first faithful in Rome:

He urged this:

'[L]et us live honorably..., not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.'

If those words *feel* to you as a rebuke - I know I've fallen short of that standard many times in my life, don't take them that way.

Don't receive them as *criticism*.

Instead, see them as a *challenge*; an opportunity. A...call to action. One that's achievable by us through the provision of the Holy Spirit to those who confess their need of Him.

He is the best gift-giver, and the one we *really* need at this special time.)

Let's take a moment to reflect.