

Address for 28 November by Nigel Guthrie

I seem to be getting the tricky apocalyptic readings this year and I'm not sure we really need them at the moment! With a new rampantly infectious variant of Covid in the offing not to mention the approaching climate crisis it feels rather as if we are living through one of these purple passages of scripture.

As I said just two weeks ago when we read from Mark chapter 13 many early Christians were expecting Jesus to return at any time and bring in the end of the world. So, there was an urgent need to be prepared. But you may also remember the warning against predicting the time of the end, or the return of Jesus – which is only for God himself to know. Perhaps it is because of this warning to be prepared that 'death', along with 'judgment, heaven and hell', became the 'four last things' traditionally tackled during the Advent season.

Many of our regular worshippers have been shocked and saddened by the death of Mollie Curry who was so alive and so active here in the days before her accident. Such a death shakes us up horribly. When someone we know and love dies so suddenly, it is a sharp reminder that all of us should live in a state of preparedness. As Christians we should not fear death because it brings with it the hope of resurrection and the knowledge that we will be completely united in the love of God. But should be ready for it, as far as we can be. I remember my Scottish grandma saying 'If we're spared' before looking forward to any future event. And she had a point, of course, in that we never know what tomorrow will bring. But being prepared shouldn't lead us to a gloomy or pessimistic outlook on life. Rather it should lead us to take practical and spiritual steps to see that we live without regrets and keep our affairs in good order. And practical steps are very important. Each of us should have up-to-date will and those of us in the later stages of life are well advised to have a 'Power of Attorney' in place as well. Tina and I have discovered the value of these when helping to look after the affairs of our elderly parents.

But looking again at this passage from St Luke I was especially struck by the relevance of the spiritual advice which Jesus gives to his disciples which I can't say I had particularly noticed before. He says "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and

that day does not catch you unexpectedly as a trap.” Jesus is urging his followers to live positively so that they are not unduly weighed down.

One of the most serious problems raised by the pandemic is the significant rise of mental ill health in people of all ages, and one that is especially concerning in younger people. The scale of the problem is reflected in the rise of antidepressant prescriptions in this country from 4.8 million in the years 2015-16 up to 6 million in this current year. Even before the pandemic it was thought that about 1 in 6 people were suffering a degree of mental ill health at any one time, with as many as 2/3rds of us suffering at some point in our lives. And there’s no doubt that drink, drugs and worries of various sorts contribute very significantly to our mental ill health, as well as insecurity, poor housing and poverty which are often linked factors.

Clearly there is big difference between someone who is feeling sad, or very anxious or struggling to cope and another person who is hospitalized with a serious breakdown or feeling suicidal. But all of these conditions are distressing and need talking about. We need to ask for help and support when we are struggling and it is surely much to be welcomed that there is now much more open discussion about mental ill health than in the past. And recent advice is pointing us all to ways in which we can proactively look after our mental wellbeing. This goes hand-in hand with an acknowledgement that prescribing medication without other therapy or treatment is not always satisfactory.

So taking regular exercise, keeping in touch with friends, having plenty of sleep and not drinking too much alcohol are all good things which we can do to help ourselves. And if we are inclined to anxiety or depression we can access the resources of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy through our local health services and this can often help us to recognise and manage our symptoms. I realise how hard it can be to know what to say to someone who is struggling but one of the most valuable things we can do is to give time to listen to them. Sometimes this is the very best gift we can offer to a friend, colleague or family member, something which is really beyond price. The gospel truth that we are each known and loved by God and forgiven by his grace is life affirming for us. Having a faith and coming to church is undoubtedly a factor which helps many people cope during difficult periods of their life as well as celebrating good times. And we are now offering prayers in the Lady Chapel after our morning services which you may wish to access for additional support. And St Michael’s Church continues to host drumming and guitar groups run

by the Devon Mental Health Recovery. But perhaps there are other things which we could be doing as a church community to offer support to those struggling with poor mental health. Why not talk this over with others you know here if you have a good idea?

Jesus urges us to guard our hearts so that we are not weighed down by bad habits or worries. His concern for his disciples is not just that we should be prepared for his second coming but that we should be living well in the present. Or as the post-communion prayer set for today puts it 'make us watchful and keep us faithful that, when he shall appear, he may not find us sleeping in sin but active in his service and joyful in his praise.'