**Sermon Text**: Romans 13:11-14

**Occasion**: First Sunday of Advent, 27 Nov 2022

**Nearer When?**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our epistle reading from Romans 13 assures us that salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. And you might be thinking to yourself, “Of course. That is how time works.” Whatever we are waiting for will always be closer to us than when we began expecting it. As we move forward in time, the closer and closer we will come to the expected time of salvation. So, why would Paul feel the need to say this? Well, Paul is telling the people of his day (and the people of our time) that our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The salvation promised in the world to come is constantly moving closer to us. Do not despair over what is present now or whatever else may come. The salvation we find in Christ Jesus will come to us all the same, as assuredly as he came on Christmas Day.

Yet, it’s easier to prepare and take comfort in waiting for something when we know the day and time. We know when Christmas Day will come and we know the exact times to be ready for Christmas Eve service, family dinners, and phone calls with loved ones. We schedule these things and we can proceed step by step in order to be ready when they finally come about. But we do not know the day or hour the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, will return upon the clouds to deliver us from a world of sin and usher us into the paradise to come (Matt 24:44). In this respect, we become like everyone awaiting Jesus the first time he came down to us.

The Lord God promised the Messiah to save His people from their sins long ago—long before Jesus was born on Christmas. The first prophecy occurs way back when Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden of Eden. God proclaimed to the serpent, the devil, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.” (Gen 3:15) This is the first time God declares that there will be a Messiah to break the power of the devil. We also hear of the coming Messiah when God speaks to Abraham by telling him that through Abraham’s offspring will all the Lord’s promises be fulfilled. There is no plural of “offsprings” as St Paul points out in the New Testament (Gal 4:16), only a singular offspring. Through Christ alone will God’s promises of salvation be made. And there are more prophecies foretelling the Messiah in the Old Testament, like Moses telling of the Prophet after him who will speak the word of God (Deut 18:18), and Isaiah telling of the Suffering Servant by whose wounds we are healed (Isa 52:13-53:12). And there are many, many more.

Yet, for all these prophecies, no one knew the exact time the Messiah would arrive. And it was a long time to wait. From the creation of the world to a little over two thousand years ago? That is a fair amount of time. Even between a lot of the prophecies God gave there were long stretches of time. In between Abraham and Moses alone was 430 years (Gal 3:17). Imagine trying to prepare for Christmas—the worship services, food, family, and more, without knowing if Christmas was going to happen in your lifetime. It would be far more difficult to plan things. Yet, Christ did come in the flesh in the manger two millennia ago. He was our Messiah. He lived out his mission of proclaiming the word of God to everyone so all may know that when they looked upon his wounded frame at the cross, they would be delivered from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Our Messiah has come and he has freed us from our sinfulness that we might live eternally with our God. This note of salvation is not something we need to wait for because it has already come. This is why we celebrate on Christmas. We do not celebrate because it is an excuse to get together with family and share food and presents. We celebrate because our Lord Jesus Christ has brought about our salvation at the cross and we get to share this joy with everyone we meet.

So, if Jesus already won salvation for us upon the cross, then why does St Paul say, “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed”? This must mean there is something beyond the cross for which we are waiting. And in truth we are waiting. In Advent, we are not awaiting the coming of Christ in the manger as if that did not happen already. Christ has come, Christ has died, and Christ has forgiven us our sins. But Advent is also about waiting for when Jesus comes again in glory to raise the dead from their graves and bring all of his people into the paradise promised by him. We are awaiting deliverance from the evil of the world and the destruction of wickedness. And surely, Christ is coming soon (Rev 22:20).

But how soon is soon? We are not given much of a word on the subject. We know the signs of what is to come; the wars and rumours of wars, the famines, earthquakes and false messiahs (Matt 24:4-8). Yet these things have been going on since Jesus’ resurrection. Looking to the relation of the prophecies of Jesus’ coming on Christmas to when he actually arrived, we are seeing a scale of time on par with thousands of years. So, what can we say then?

We say that salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. No matter what happens, no matter what obstacles we face, we know our salvation is always closer to us than before and we are coming into the promised paradise of God. This is not up for question or debate. It is the word of the Lord which is given to us and He does not lie. Our Lord is the embodiment of truth (John 14:6). Your Messiah, the Lord Jesus, will come to vanquish the tribulations you face in the world, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:26). This salvation will be as total and complete as when the Lord flooded the whole world at the time of Noah to wash the stain of sin from the face of the earth (Matt 24:37-39). Evil will be taken away and only righteousness will remain.

We do not know exactly when we should be ready like we know we need to finish our Christmas preparations before Dec 25. But all this means is that we should be prepared at all times. We do not know the day or hour of when the dead in Christ will be raised and be changed, yet this promise is always right before us. It does not lie behind us in this world. This world is where we first did not believe before we were forgiven by Christ through faith. The world is where we will continually find sin and death. We should not look behind us as if the world can give us anything new. We should continue along the trajectory of all the prophecies concerning Christ from Eden to the manger and to the cross. The day is coming when the salvation we have received by faith in Christ will culminate in being free from sin—not just free from the guilt of sin, from which we are free now. The blood of Christ has scoured our very being from the guilt of sin. But we know we are still in sinful flesh and struggle with temptation. We look forward to when the flesh itself will be raised in immortality and finally have the remnants of original sin stripped from it.

So, knowing our salvation is close at hand, and that we already have the God’s unconquerable promise of salvation in Christ, let us not live in the sins of the world. We should not indulge in what the flesh desires to drag us into. There is quarreling, jealousy, lust, sexual immorality, and mindless self-indulgence of substances and media. Whatever sins you know you may be prone toward doing, take the necessary steps to cut yourself from them. There are programs, websites, and counsellors to aid you to stop doing what you are tempted to do. Vitally, there is the pastoral office, which I am occupying, which stands to counteract sin. There is private confession and absolution where you may confess your sins, have them consumed by the forgiveness of God, and find support and guidance from your pastor who is eager to help you. And you can even go to good friends and make yourself accountable to them, make sure they are keeping tabs on you to assist when you feel tempted. The Church—the assembly of all believers—is where we come together in the forgiveness of Christ to live in his holiness. This is where we go when we are in spiritual trouble.

We are not to remain in the sins from which we are saved. We are to dwell in the salvation Christ obtained for us at the cross. The fullness of this salvation is nearer now than when you first believed. It is nearer now after you have had the guilt of your sins forgiven and when the Lord redirected you to walk the path of right living. We do not know when the end will come, and this is probably for the best. Were we to know when Christ will return, we might indulge in sin until the last minute. How often have you put off to the last minute baking, shopping, or contacting someone when preparing for Christmas? How much worse would it be to put off preparing a place for Christ whom we are celebrating on Christmas?

Let us take heart that he has already secured our salvation at the cross and that we have the assurance that our sins are forgiven. Our Messiah has already come, born on Christmas Day, to take away our sins. So, let us look forward, not only celebrating what was accomplished at Christmas, but at what he is constantly doing for us: bringing salvation in heaven nearer to us every day in which we believe. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.