

ADVENT 1 2011: YEAR B

Two of the three passages from Scripture which we've heard this morning are, we would have to say, quite overwhelming. I'm thinking of verses from Isaiah 64, and from today's Gospel, St Mark 13. There's magnificent poetry in that chapter of Isaiah: *O that you would tear the heavens and come down: or again: we all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities like the wind take us away...* but its imagery of the majestic Creator, the potter, alongside the sinful humanity, the clay, paints a picture of humanity as frail and insignificant, the poor and sinful child of an Almighty Creator. Then we hear in the gospel of the powers of the heavens being shaken, heaven and earth passing away; and don't we feel something of a threat in those later verses? *Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come...* the master of the house may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. We mustn't lose this dramatic intensity of the Advent season, its theme of judgment on a communities and individuals who think to make themselves like God...for they will fade like a leaf: or who close their eyes to the values of the kingdom and sleep the sleep of the self-obsessed. Yes indeed, Advent invites us to a new self-awareness, and a sharper consciousness of God's will for us and the world.

Having said that, and while encouraging Christians, especially those who claim a Catholic heritage, to ask themselves whether it might not be through the Sacrament of Reconciliation that we find this new self-awareness and sharper consciousness of God's will, I'd like this morning to lower the dramatic temperature somewhat; I'd like us to reflect on the very last sentence of the OT lesson, on the last sentence of the Epistle, and on the fact that Jesus in today's gospel illustrates what he has to say about being awake and alert by speaking of a household. So: at the end of the OT lesson: 'Now consider', prays the prophet as he asks the Lord not to remember iniquity for ever: 'now consider, we are all your people'. And at the end of the Epistle: 'God is faithful, and by him you were called into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord'. In the Gospel: to be ready for the coming of the Lord, is like being members of a household who are on the alert, awaiting their master's return. To sum up then: we are all your people: we are called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ: we are members of a household awaiting our Master's return. It isn't to play down the dramatic urgency of the Christian calling to say, at the beginning of a new Church's year, that we need a firm, foundational understanding of what it is to be the people, the fellowship, the household of God. If the world at large speaks of New Year resolutions, it's for the Christian to make Advent resolutions. And so I make no apology for drawing your attention to what I've written about in the short Advent letter you've received today in the pewsheet. We met as a household in October; we signalled that we have aspirations. Now we begin to see if it's possible to make realities of those aspirations. The *first* is that the church building should be kept open for a longer time on more days of the week. I've really appreciated the weeks of the Charity Card sales here...to find that this holy place isn't a fortress. A Christian household should be given to hospitality, and a Christian church should be open to provide a context for seeking after God, sharpening sensitivities for the holy, understanding ourselves as children of God...so that we do not fade like leaves in obsession with fading pleasures. So, let's see if we can raise a team of people to help to keep the Church open, and Elizabeth Prior will be our monitor! There'll be a list on which you can indicate your willingness to help. *Second*: the ministry of healing. Jesus, the head of our household, brought his healing touch and his listening ear to so

many that he encountered. We are called to continue this aspect of his ministry as a natural part of our life as his household. It's a ministry which takes many forms; it's one which many of you exercise in visiting the sick or the lonely. But there it also takes particular sacramental forms...and of those I'm going to speak on a Sunday morning in January, before initiating a simple practice of those forms at the Wednesday Mass once a month. This too is a means of deepening our awareness of both our need for God, and of how to open ourselves up to Him. *Third, fourth and fifth*...all these aspirations are to do with how our household is to live not just to itself. If the Lord tears the heavens and comes down, if he comes suddenly to this temple, will he find us introverted, turned in on ourselves? So Fr Gunter is offering (and this is *number 3* on my list) to help us with communication with local schools, so that we might build on the possibilities presented by the completion of the bells project. Here, in this building and its history and its ethos, are gifts for the wider education of young people, seen not as pew fodder, but as God's children who have something both to receive and to give through encountering this household and fellowship. *Fourth:* just as individuals are invited and expected to contribute to the needs of their household, so the household itself must be ready to open its purse for the sake of others outside its doors. This year, the PCC has agreed to make donations not just to local charities, but also to two whose focus is on work overseas: the Calcutta Relief Service, working among the marginalised in the slums of Calcutta, and the Papua New Guinea Church Partnership, supporting the Anglican Church in PNG, where vital work is done in education and in supporting victims of AIDS, as well as directly for a Church in which people will still walk miles and miles to receive sacramental ministry. We shall hear first hand of both these organisations during next year. *Fifth:* how is our household to be physically available to the community which has its being in this neighbourhood? This is the huge task of opening the doors in a sense which keeping the church open only symbolises...discerning those who will work with us for the renewal of our buildings and our campus. Come, Lord Jesus: so we pray in Advent. Come and dwell in this place, come to renew it in every sense. Come, so that we may not be found sleeping, but a people, and a fellowship and a household ready to welcome you, in yourself, and in our fellow men and women.