

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, you know my heart, teach me to listen. Lord Jesus Christ, you know my heart, teach me to hear.

Amen.

Good Morning and a most happy New Year to you all! Our liturgical calendar has rotated its clock and we are now onto year B in the season of Advent. A good solid year indeed of much to learn, relearn and hear anew.

For those who may be new tuning in, my name is Caitlin Dawes and I am a member here at Saint Matthew's Browns Pointe. I am in formal discernment for the Holy Orders and as a part of

my discernment and formation, I am given the opportunity to practice preaching. So thank you Fr. Kendall for the invitation for this wonderful opportunity of growth!

Today marks a new year in our liturgical calendars. One wouldn't grasp that from the readings today though. Full of abrasive and powerful language that imposes onto the mind darkness and difficulty. Pain and suffering. Not necessarily the fireworks we will see and hear on December 31st at midnight to ring in the New Year. Rather, these readings compose the imagery of an apocalyptic time. Everything is going terribly wrong. The world in distress from

war and shifts in power, people are sinning and God; where is God? Hidden from us and angry because we are so focused on fighting with each other than learning to love one another. God watches us all in despair and disarray. This was the feeling that our authors of antiquity felt, and rightly so.

To take us back in time, the prophet Isaiah writes in his 66 chapter tome the experiences of the difficult times of the Israelite people. After what seemed like a sustainable period of peace, Tiglath-pileser III of the Assyrian Empire became king in 745 BCE igniting what would be over 200 hundred years of conflict within

Judea. Invasion, conflict, conquest. A typical attribute of war in biblical times, was to deport those who lived on the land one conquers and enslave them within the conquering empire. We know this as the Babylonian Exile in 598 BCE enforced by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar; who sacked the city and destroyed the First Temple. A fundamentally important piece to Jewish religion and identity at this time. After about 100 years in exile, the Babylonians are defeated by the Persian king, Cyrus in 539 BCE. The people of Israel return only to find a shell of a city, and a temple destroyed.

As much as it is easy to recollect dates in a short history lesson, it is important to inquire into the essence of what life was like. To feel like a hot potato between the superpowers of the time, tossed about in jest and political gain. Easily thrown away as collateral without second thought. I feel that burning rage and fear when Isaiah cries out to God, “that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.” An image of an enraged mother getting the attention of her misbehaving children. The kind of attention that hits you at your core and makes your stomach drop. Isaiah was calling for God to not forget God’s covenant with God's chosen

people. Forgive us, Lord, for our sins, because why else would you allow all this terrible stuff happen to your chosen people?, and show our enemies that you will strike fear into their hearts so that justice may flow in the promised land again. Similarly in the Psalm today, the author beseeches to God to be a shepherd to his people. The three tribes listed, Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, were deep in turmoil and disunification. The solution, the author desired, was for God to stir up God's might, throned upon the cherubim to strike the hearts of these tribes and unify and restore the land of Judah. Again a powerful image of unfathomable

strength that paralyzes those in earthly power to return to God obediently.

This historical context gives much insight to today's Gospel lesson in Mark. The pretext is that Jesus is warning his disciples that others will come before the public in his time and declare themselves as a prophet and a messiah.

Which is why Jesus begins our lesson with a biblical prophetic portrayal of God's coming in judgement as a reference point: the world is in absolute despair that even the stars are falling, and God will come down from heaven in great power and strength by moving the four winds. Jesus is connecting what his disciples learned

growing up hearing in the books of the prophets and what the Jewish community expected the messiah to be portrayed as in Jesus' time.

This gospel lesson is even a perfect fit for today's context. Our very own country feels most divided. Rioting in the streets and secret police causing much political unrest. Domestic terrorism. Wrought with war against an enemy now for 19 years. Failing at keeping our country alive from a global pandemic. Where was God in all of that? When will God come and show his strength and put fear in our enemies and bring justice to this land? Will Jesus show up driving a tank on Pennsylvania Avenue or a

submarine fleet along our coasts and finally unite us in peace?

No. This is the misleading narrative Jesus is informing us about.

Instead, he gives us a parable to explain God's coming in judgement. That of a fig tree.

Something that is subtle, without notice will be overlooked. That when the fig tree branch is ready, and summer is here, then new growth will put forth its leaves. Let me say that once more.

That when the fig tree branch is ready, and summer is here, then new growth will put forth its leaves.

Then we will know that God is near and at the gates. A fig tree cannot produce new growth simply without work. One must put in the tender love and care to promote growth.

Yes indeed, we are the fig trees. We must prepare ourselves, and soften our hearts for the coming of Jesus. Mystic, author, and Saint, Julian of Norwich captured perfectly in her book, “Revelations of Divine Love,” in her sixteenth revelation, “that the Blissful Trinity, our Maker, in Christ Jesus our Savior, endlessly dwelleth in our soul, worshipfully ruling and

protecting all things, us mightily and wisely saving and keeping, for love; and we shall not be overcome of our Enemy (p.37)." From the very beginning God has dwelled within us. Endlessly. Never leaving. Has never left us. Will never leave us. Each and every one of us created in her image. We just need eyes to see that the blissful Trinity was already there.

This is the season of Advent. The season of a great coming. Jesus encourages us to keep awake. And my God, I have never felt so exhausted by such a request. But Jesus doesn't mean, pick up some redbull or other fancy energy drinks at the corner store and pound

those back till Christmas Eve. No, he means for us to take this time to work on our relationship with our Creator. To soften our branches and create in us a larger space within our souls for God to dwell. This takes practice. This takes discipline and cannot be learned over night or even in one season of Advent. But rest assured, Jesus affirms us that this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Until your branches are ready. You and only yours. Not comparing yourself to others and their progress. Your relationship with God. So stay diligent, give yourself some grace and my goodness take care of yourself, tend to your

branches so that when summer is here you will be ready to bear new growth.

Which is immensely easier said than done. How would one go about that? For each person their path with Christ is different and unique to them.

But there are ways to start, so I would encourage you to pick one that makes most sense to you. Or try one and then try another.

Making space within your heart is like a muscle that needs to be worked to be stronger.

Take time within your day to just sit with God. Some would recognize this as meditation. Try three minutes. And then extend it to five. Have a conversation or focus on a prayer that is close to your heart. Another start would be to give

thanks in the morning for a new day. Or at the end of the night give thanks for the day you had. Try starting a journal and write to God like you would a best friend. When something difficult or stressful in your life occurs, practice giving it to God. Focus on the amount of time it actually takes for you to do so. Each of these starters are awesome tools to utilize during our time of anticipation for Christ's birth and beyond in our church calendar. Tend to your fig tree, and remember to turn to God when you feel your branches hardening again.

Amen.