Are we ready? Through these weeks of the Kingdom season, we are challenged by the readings about being ready to give an account of our lives. It seems something of a double whammy, really, with Advent on the way, which we know is a season of preparation, to have this extra season of “preparation for the preparation” put in on top in the new shape of the liturgical year – but challenge keeps us on our toes, so to speak.

Times and seasons wait for no man – we are subject to them, and make our lives within their flow. Our visitors from the DRC this weekend have commented on our cold and wet weather – though they were not prepared to be fobbed off by us saying ‘you should have been here in the summer’. Terese was here in summer, for the global summit on ending sexual violence as part of war, and she declared it was no different then! Paul explains in the epistle this morning that God’s times and seasons, like those of nature, are in some ways similar – we can predict what will happen, but we cannot say exactly when.

What we are called to do, he insists, is to live our lives in such a way that if they are stopped for examination at any point, we will be ready to show that we are living for God, through and through. … not like the way some of us drive as we approach speed cameras, like the one going out of Coventry on the London Road – slow down, but otherwise drive well over the limit….

I find this a challenging message. Like most of us, I expect that I get it right some of the time, and less so at other times. But both Paul and Jesus in today’s passages say, be ready, be sure that you are working with the gifts, and the tasks entrusted to you – you never know when you will be called to give an account of what you have been doing, when the heavenly Offstead, so to speak, will descend on your life. I remember as a younger Christian those who challenged us by asking, “If it was a crime to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

This can all sound rather threatening, rather judgmental. Well, probably it is, a bit: and this is why. We live in times which demand a respond today – not just in some imagined future when all things will be brought to completion on the day of Christ. Right here, today, is also the day of Christ, when he is at work calling men and women to live their lives for him, and for others, just as Terese and those working with her are doing. In the DRC, there are terrors and abuses taking place daily which bear comparison with the terrors described in scripture – acts which we shudder to hear described. She is using the gifts and resources God has given her and those whom she leads to make a difference to people’s lives, right now in this world. You could say that in the Listening Rooms project which she leads, that she is bringing activities from darkness into light, so that they can be healed. The work is made possible not just by Terese but by the support she receives through CAFOD, the Roman Catholic Aid agency – others who are committing themselves here and now so that others can live the lives God chooses for them, and not the lives imposed them, clamped on them, by wicked acts of human beings.

We are called to our lives not just for ourselves, but for God, and for our brother and sister human beings. We are called to live in the day, so that what we do can be seen, and so that we will always be ready to greet and welcome God however he comes to us – in our prayers, in our Bible reading, in our worship, in the joys and sorrows of our neighbours near or far. And that is the moment where we open our hands to him, open our hearts and our minds to him, our souls and the whole of our lives, and say, “here I am Lord – this is what I am doing, this is what I have done with all that I am, all you have given me, all that you have challenged me with.” And what will we hear him say – ‘well done, Good and faithful servant?’ And if that’s not what we hear – what does it mean for those around us
whom God was counting on us to serve? This is not just about being accountable to God for our own lives, but for the lives of those whom our actions may release or imprison.

So when do we need to start putting things in order? There’s a phrase isn’t there – putting your affairs in order, if you think you may be going to die. It’s also said that we don’t really learn how to live until we have learned how to die - or come to terms with the reality than we are going to die. The time is now! If we are living so fully, so in the light of God, that at any point we are ready for that flow of life to be stopped, with nothing left to say that we should have said, nothing left to commit that we should have committed, nothing left to put right that we have not put right – then we are ready to die ... and ready to live!

As some of you know, I became a grandfather just three weeks ago. So I am somewhat familiar with the experience of waiting for labour pains. Ricarda and I had a holiday booked for a week to be down in Bristol to await Baby's arrival – we waited, we waited, we came back to Coventry. In the meantime, my daughter’s bag was packed, the room was ready, the arrangements were made ... and eventually the text came at midnight that she was on her way into hospital. Yesterday I drove over 200 miles to spend a few minutes with another relative recovering from surgery in the midst of treatment for cancer. We live our lives in the journey from birth to death – with little or no control over either, but with responsibility entrusted to us for what lies between – if we are to slice through at any point on that journey, like slicing through a stick of rock, what would be the message we would find written there? What is the word written through your life?

Are you, like a parent waiting for the birth of a child, waiting to give birth to some new work of God in the world by the overwhelming grace of the Holy Spirit? What sign of God’s presence and salvation in the world can you bear witness to through all that God has entrusted to you? Are you, like Simeon, waiting to give one more great act of witness before God calls you home in death?

This weekend has seen the anniversary of the destruction of Coventry, which left us, through the grace of God and the obedience of Provost Howard and his successors, with an incredible treasure to offer the world. This building has been described as ‘a casket of jewels’ – but the real jewels here are not the windows, or the sculptures, marvellous though they are, but the shining lights of God’s grace, made visible in lives healed and restored, relationships rebuilt, brokenness and despair turned to hope and celebration. The parable of the talents describes huge riches, beyond our imagination – a talent was twenty year’s wages for a working man! That’s the scale of the trust which God has placed in our hands here. I’m glad we have been able to use it to support, celebrate, and draw the attention of the world to someone like Terese – but we need to be challenged by it to. We are called to live what we have here – to live out the truth of peace and reconciliation, to shine as a reconciled and reconciling community. And to let that light shine throughout the world.

God is doing an extraordinary thing here in this city. Drawing Christians, and others, together to make a difference in the world – to make the world the place Jesus wants to find when he comes again. This is made possible by the Holy Spirit, who draws us into fellowship with God and each other, through the grace of Christ. We have a very particular part to play in that here in the cathedral – but our resources are still not adequate to the task.

A few weeks ago I was preaching about stewardship, and I am grateful to those who responded to the invitation and challenge to respond – and also, I must say, to those who responded to the challenge to make our offer of hospitality on a Sunday morning possible through volunteering for the coffee rota (it is through such selfless acts that the world is changed). However, in our Cathedral Chapter meeting this last week we were reviewing our financial position, and we still have a significant gap between the costs of what we believe God to be calling us to do here (including simply keeping this building open) and the resources we need to do that. I had just been looking ahead at the readings for this morning – well, you can make the connections yourself, I’m sure. We need to be putting all that God has entrusted to us, in our life together in the cathedral - or whatever community you belong to if you are a visitor here this morning – and in our individual lives to work for the building of God’s Kingdom. These are challenging times, and God challenges us to be part of building hope for the world. Will you play your part in that – and can you hear his words to you, “well done, Good and faithful servant”. It’s not easy – I know that, but allow him to help you, and help
us here, to be generous and open handed, so that by his grace, we may hear those words for ourselves and bring rejoicing in heaven, and on earth amongst who are touched by God's hope through our generosity. There is nothing quite like knowing ourselves part of God's plan for the salvation of the word – and specifically here, to know ourselves part of safeguarding this talent, this treasure, for future generations. It's a privilege, a responsibility, a challenge. May God help us to meet it.