I remember when they asked me to look after my nephew Joe. He was one year old at the time. That was twenty one years ago but I can still remember this awesome responsibility. They had one of those baby slings and showed me how, if I took Joe out, I could tie Joe in the sling in front of me, clicking into place the straps of the harness so that he couldn’t slip or fall but was held against me. And so carrying Joe like this, I took him out for a walk, like countless mothers or fathers do feeling as though the whole world was watching me and rejoicing with me at the beauty of this child entrusted into my care. But as I walked along Kensington High Street I began to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of it. What if anything happened, what if I should trip or slip or fall. I remember the infinite care with which I crossed the road. Joe was sleeping warm and quietly in his sling and then the terrifying thought entered my mind that perhaps he was sleeping too quietly. Perhaps it’s too cold for him, or too hot for him, perhaps pressed against me he can’t breathe and that is why he is so silent. Fears of death, fears of judgment. I become so anxious, that I ended up stopping, undoing the sling, waking him up with a start-so he cries – just to see he is alright. I was a beginner but how many parents have in similar ways acted out similar hopes and fears for the child they adore. Perhaps this is a symbol of what Advent is – Advent, the life of God entrusted into our care. And present in that coming, that incarnation are the hopes and fears of all the years - will we be worthy of that calling, will we be found wanting?

The Advent readings contain both warning and threat. Christ demands, “Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home he puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be in watch. Therefore keep awake - for you do not know when the master of the house will come.” There is an awareness of a coming future but also that the readiness, is needed here and now. Think of that image of a child carried - the whole of your future and the child’s held in your arms - a future which demands an absolute attentiveness to the present. Don’t ever think those demands are too great - it’s like telling an aircraft pilot to stay awake during take-off - you’ve got a lot of life depending on you. It’s like telling a driver not to answer his mobile phone while driving the car you’ve got lives other than your own, depending on your attentiveness.

The Advent Booklet is called: “The End of the World” and in it you will find reflections on what are known as the four last things - death, judgement, hell and heaven. “How miserable is that,” you may think. Not much joyful expectation. We might rather wait for Christmas in that nostalgic kind of way - Christmas trees and fairy lights and winter wonderlands, preparing Christmas pudding, and nativities with shepherds with tea towels on their heads. We don’t like to think of life dependent upon it. I remember Archbishop Rowan Williams asking this question: “If the world were to end tomorrow how would you live today?” I mean how do we live in preparation - how would we prepare ourselves to meet God here and now? What choices will we make?

In the apocalyptic visions of the conflict between good and evil which have filled our readings during the lead up to advent we have been confronted by terrifying imagery. It is a vision of time and space beyond human comprehension - a universe in which we are no more enduring than grass or a leaf that fades. Today Mark’s Gospel picks up the imagery of Daniel Chapter 7: “The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers
in the heavens will be shaken. Then you will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds.” All material things will pass away, even earth and all the stars in the sky will one day pass away. This apocalyptic language predicts a time of trial and tribulation when all of life is threatened. Mark writes for a young Christian community, itself facing judgment, persecution and death. It is here at the very point of our overwhelming that Christ will come riding on the clouds of glory. That is the Gospel’s promise that somehow he will lead us through death into new life. That creation in its death-throes is in fact a new heaven and a new earth in its birth pangs. It is not in our power but in our overwhelming that God is revealed. We cannot create ourselves. God calls forth creation out of chaos. And we, as the prophet Isaiah says, are the clay - the dust that can be reformed when warmed and shaped by the potter’s hands, re-thrown, remoulded, re-fired in his image. Have you noticed who it is who will be the bearers of Christ to the world? It is the uprooted, the stateless, the shaken, the lost, the overwhelmed, who will become the people of God - a young women without reputation, or status, or husband or power is going to be the one who will be the bearer of Christ and in blood and water and in the poverty of a stable she will give birth to the child of God who will redeem the world. Where does God want to make Christ’s dwelling place? It is the clay of our own flesh and blood humanity into which God breathes his life.

When will we see the Coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of glory? No one can answer that for you, each one of us must be awake, alert, ready, for this world is pregnant with God. Christ is both beyond us, calling us into his future but he is also with us now. Where is he? Well look for him in the same places that you see him in the Gospels - among those most in need. Look for him in the depths of your own weakness and vulnerability - look for him in your own overwhelming - for we too are the broken vessel that the potter longs to remould.

I wonder when you have seen the Son of Man here and now? Last week I watched a documentary that some of you may have seen. It was Panorama Frontline, shot at an Ebola Treatment Centre in Sierra Leone. It followed MSF doctor Javid Abdelmoneim, on his month-long volunteer posting to the centre, treating some of the tens of thousands of people who have contracted Ebola. The documentary is truthful, restrained, and meticulous - it does not turn away from the reality of death.

It is filmed with a specially adapted camera fitted to Dr Javid’s goggles, one that can survive the chlorine sprayings and sluicings, as part of the good doctor’s 20 minute decontamination procedure every time he leaves the enclosure, full of his suffering and dying charges. We watch, along with him, as the disease plots its course through people of all ages, through families, through children and through entire communities and we follow the bodies to the unceremonious decontaminated burials. I was expecting to be shocked and I was. There was nothing false here. Nothing dramatized for the camera or hidden from it. Just life and death side by side, stripped of all facades and all camera dressing. Yet despite the tragedy that we are witnessing I am overwhelmed by the realisation of human goodness - caritas, charity. We see a young child being carried to the treatment centre by her father. She is not much more than a year old. Both are thought to be infected with the virus. The child first but the father too through carrying her. We watch him nurse his daughter with such care. It looks as though they will pull through and then suddenly the child’s father dies in the shower room. His body is wrapped in plastic and taken away for burial. The baby is alone. The doctor looks at her through the wire fence. He cannot re-enter the contaminated area because exposure time is limited. And then we see a little boy, no relation to the girl, also with the virus - no more than 5 or 6 years old himself - he picks up the child and nurses her on his hip and comforts this orphan baby and another parentless child. It makes you weep for humanity. He is carrying her and I remember carrying Joe with the same care. There is such incredible beauty in this child’s action. In the place of death he is giving out life. I see our humanity here. A divine humanity that is Christ-like in this child and in those doctors and health workers risking their lives for the life of others - and in the patients who have faced their own death and the death of their loved ones and have survived and can still sing and dance and give thanks. Here is death, judgment,
hell and heaven side by side. All of us will one day die. All of us will be judged by the way we treat our neighbour, all of us face the darkness of hell but also carry within in us the life of heaven. All of us will one day meet our maker but I wonder how many of us will recognise Christ’s presence here and now in the tribulations of our own lives and allow this Son of Man to remake us?

We do not have to be in Sierra Leone to know the coming Christ. He is coming soon but he is also already here and now among you in this church today and as you go out into the street and as you travel home today he will be with you too. He is waiting like the potter for the time that the clay is warmed and soft, soft enough to formed and moulded in his hands into the chalice of his forgiveness and love.

Let us pray
O Friend of the forsaken and lover of the unloved. Make us bearers of your presence to all. Come Lord Jesus that our own poverty may be your dwelling place which you will transform with the love and light of heaven.