

Holy Trinity Headington Quarry 2/12/07 10.00am

Advent 1

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The opening phrase in the Collect for Advent Sunday sums up for me what Advent is about. "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light." Christian life can be thought of as a journey, a pilgrimage, from darkness to light. And while darkness may be a metaphor for many things (some which are not very politically correct), in Advent we physically do spend the majority of our time in darkness, as the days get shorter, night falls more quickly and so on. It's not an obvious time for celebration, and some of the time we might be more tempted by the prospect of hibernation.

But, fast forward to Christmas Eve and Midnight Mass, the midpoint of the longest, darkest night of the year (almost), and think of the opening verses of the Gospel according to John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (or whichever translation you prefer). Advent is the season of the light at the end of the tunnel, the candle shining in the darkness (first one, then two, then three), the star in the night sky leading the wise men onwards, until with the shepherds on the hillside, watching at dead of night, we see the wondrous light of the angels singing with joy to proclaim the mystery and miracle of the incarnation.

So that is what we are leading up to. And just as the great feast of Easter is preceded by the forty days of Lent, so Christmas is preceded by Advent – a time of preparation, of penitence, to reflect on what God has done, and also what we have done, and to make ourselves as ready as we can for the celebrations which are to come. And that's where one of the greatest challenges of the season comes in – because there are all sorts of things to prepare for at this time: end of term tests and reports, concerts and carol services, visiting relatives, Christmas cards and cooking (not to mention presents). This great rush can leave us little time to collect ourselves, to gather our thoughts, and take the opportunity to ponder what it's all about. In a newspaper last week someone suggested that the Church should move Advent back into November in order to stop it getting squeezed out by... well... Christmas.

But I think that this morning's Gospel has the answer to this. "For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day Noah entered the ark ... so too will be the coming of the Son of Man." All this busy-ness goes on all the time, and there's never a perfect moment to devote ourselves to higher things. And one of the lessons of Advent is to train us to wait, to wait for the true celebration, the one who is to come. In the section preceding today's reading from Matthew – the Gospel we'll be reading throughout this new Church year – Jesus warns his followers how false Messiahs will arise, and say "I am he", seeking to lead even the faithful astray. So learning to wait for the true Christmas, while an orgiastic travesty of celebration goes on around us, might be a part of this.

Yet there is a difficulty, a tension, which is expressed in Jesus' words "Keep awake ... for you do not know on what day the Lord is coming." We may know what day Christmas is: unlike Advent Sunday and Easter, it doesn't change each year. But Jesus is not talking about the Incarnation. These words are concerned with the Second Coming: "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father". So Advent brings out the paradox of God's kingdom being both now and not yet. God's reign on earth has already begun because of the Incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas: in his own body Jesus brings together human and divine; he demonstrates that we are reconciled with God – thanks to his love which is so powerful that it cannot be extinguished, even by death. We live in the light of this Good News. But we are also keenly aware of the ways in which our world falls short of the kingdom of God for which we long and which we believe is still to come.

So we pray at Advent: "Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light." And it's this "armour of light" which catches my attention. It sounds like something out of Star Wars or even Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* trilogy: a magical defensive shield that cannot be penetrated. We might think of Jesus' Transfiguration, or Moses' face glowing after being in the presence of God on Mount Sinai. And maybe that's part of it: through our prayer, through consciously recalling that we are in the presence of God, through coming before him in our worship, some of this force-field of holiness rubs off on us. We ourselves become lights in a world of darkness, beacons proclaiming the good news of God's love.

But I think there's even more to it than that – because there are two parts to this prayer: casting away the works of darkness **and** putting on the armour of light. The works of darkness are the things we would rather remained hidden. That's quite a good definition of sin, actually. Think of Jesus' words in the third chapter of the Gospel according to John:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest their deeds should be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been wrought in God.

So putting on the armour of light means not having anything to be ashamed of, to be able to have a clear conscience, to be, if you like, transparent.

And that is why Advent is a time of penitence. Because we can clear our consciences by repenting of our sins. The seasonal liturgy we are following for the first time today emphasises this: remember how we started by the font for the confession, to remind ourselves of the water of baptism which washes away our sins. And the more extended moments of reflection in the service also provide us with an opportunity to gather ourselves and our thoughts in the midst of the busyness that surrounds us. Of course, having the church open for *Soul Space* in Advent is another way of making this possible. So, as we sit in darkness this Advent waiting for the light that shines to blaze in glory, let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The traditional Collect for Advent Sunday in both the Book of Common Prayer and Common Worship runs as follows:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen