

Sermon – Advent Sunday 2017 Year B

Northleach

As a child I remember getting terribly excited by the arrival of the Advent Wreath in church and the lighting of a candle each week as we counted down to Christmas Day.

Advent is the season of expectation, of preparation, and for children especially, of patience too.

The word Advent comes from the Latin, *Adventus*, meaning coming, and Advent is the season in which we prepare for the coming of Christ, the incarnation of God in human form. I also like to associate the word Adventure with Advent – I'm not aware of any etymological link – but as we journey through Advent it does feel like we're participating in the greatest adventure of all time.

The season doesn't solely look forward to the birth of Christ, it also looks forward to Christ's final advent as judge at the end of time. The readings and liturgies of the church during Advent direct us towards Christ's birth but also challenge our modern reluctance to contemplate, confront even, the theme of divine judgement at the end of time.

This morning I'd like to present three different ways of journeying through Advent for you to think about. Each today has a home in the traditions of the church and are an equally valid way to approach the season.

In some sense the first is least appealing, but its themes flow through our readings, not least today, and explains the association that Advent has with the season of Lent, not least in the use of purple as the liturgical colour of both seasons.

The last four things – Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – have long been traditional themes for Advent reflections. Inevitably this emphasises the penitential nature of the season; a time for self-reflection; a time when we might plan to make changes in our lives that draw us closer to God and to one another. It is a sombre approach to Advent that fits neatly with our experience of seasonal darkness at this time of year, but which conflicts sharply with the secular world that throughout December is consumed by its appetite for celebration.

The second way to journey through Advent is through the themes of the Advent wreath. Introduced into this country from Northern Europe in the 19th century, Advent wreaths have now become very familiar parts of our Advent

liturgies.

Each of the five candles has a specific theme reflected in the Advent prayers that are said as the candles are lit. For this week the emphasis is on The Patriarchs, next week our attention turns to the Prophets of the Old Testament, and then onwards to John the Baptist, Mary and finally on Christmas morning, to Jesus.

The purple candles reflect the colour of the season and the white candle, of course, is for Jesus. The pink candle causes some confusion. This should be lit on the 3rd Sunday which is also known as Gaudete Sunday or Rose Sunday. This tradition has its roots in medieval times as a splash of colour was permitted into the otherwise restrained season of Advent and even today some clergy will replace their purple vestments for rose ones for this day only.

Each of the four Sundays in Advent can therefore remind us of those who prepared for the coming of Christ over many centuries. When we think of the Patriarchs, our thoughts turn naturally to Abraham and David; the prophets provide us the opportunity to re-visit the words of those who anticipated the coming of the Messiah and then we are drawn into the events of the incarnation themselves Jesus' cousin John, and Mary, who bore the light into the world.

The third way to journey through Advent is even more modern than the Advent wreath, and is the Posada, a South American tradition in which a travelling set of crib figures journey from house to house (Posada means Inn) in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

This year we again have two sets of Posada figures who will spend a different night or two at different homes in and around Northleach before returning here for the crib service on Christmas Eve. As Mary and Joseph arrive at each house they proclaim the imminent arrival of Jesus and ask for somewhere to stay. Now I'm not quite sure what the figures get up to as they visit each home, but I know they will be cared for well, perhaps listen to a story, join the family at meal times and find somewhere comfortable to sleep in a child's room or even a guest bedroom.

These are just three ways to approach the celebration of Advent. There are other ways too of course, and making Advent a time of personal study and reflection is one option. At the back of church I have laid out some of my own resources which you are welcome to borrow. Each has one of my visiting cards inside and so if you wish to borrow an item, please write your name and the name of the book on the card and return to me before you leave this morning.

In a moment we are going to pray a blessing for the Posada's as they begin their journey from church this morning all around the parish before returning here for Christmas Eve.

First though, a poem. This is called Every Evening. You may be familiar with the phrase 'be careful what you pray for'. This poem deserves a similar refrain: 'be careful what you wait for'.

....Come Lord Jesus....

May each of us experience the life transforming presence of Christ slowly entering our lives afresh this Advent. Amen.

And so to the Posada...

Let us pray....

Dear Jesus,
As our crib figures set out on their journey
may you enter the heart of each home they visit
and re-ignite in us our love for you;
may their presence tell your story
and may your story become our own, **Amen**