

## **Advent Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2017**

+ Advent marks the start of the church's year and the start of the period of preparation, the need for readiness, that our Bible readings have been hinting at for weeks. And the collect for today, Advent Sunday, sets the scene:

*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.*

As the words of the Advent Sunday collect state, we're to be ready and prepared for two things: the time in this mortal life when Christ came to us in great humility – which starts with his birth in a stable, *and*, the lesser known focus of Advent, his return on the last day when he'll come again in his glorious majesty. Today's readings reinforce the Advent imperative – be ready! These are momentous events.

The OT passage opens with Isaiah's cry: 'Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down,' and in the Gospel Mark roars onto the scene like the lion that is his gospel symbol. *Be alert*, he warns. *In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and 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 they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.* Little wonder the recent readings have been cautioning us not to be caught unawares like the unready bridesmaids, to make sure our lamps are trimmed, full of oil, not to be the ones left behind 'sleeping in sin'. And then today's Gospel continues, with its warning that Christ might return at any time, no one knows when. It might be in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or a dawn. But on that Day of Judgement when Christ returns in glory the dead will be raised, the darkness of this present age will pass away, God's Kingdom will finally be established on earth and everything will be made perfect.

The opening words of today's collect are reflected in much of our Advent worship, full of symbolism as we strive to cast away the works of darkness, putting on the armour of light and new life. We'll experience this symbolic movement from darkness to light later today at the Advent Procession, when a chorister carrying a tiny candle, a pinprick of light, will process the length of the dark Cathedral. In the Eastern Lady Chapel behind me the choir's candles will be lit and the light glowing behind the high altar will symbolise the breaking dawn of a new age. Slowly everyone's candles will be lit, until the entire building is suffused with candlelight.

Over the next few weeks Christians the world over will build on this symbolic movement from dark to light. In the company of the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary we'll recall the history of our salvation as we move together from the darkness of unknowing to the birth of Christ, the Light of the World. In penitence we'll be reminded that through his sacrifice on the cross we are set free to shed the dark cloak of sin and become alive to new life, putting on the armour of light, a new beginning with echoes of our Baptism. And at Christ's second coming, on the last day, the darkness of the world as we know it will disappear and bathed in the light of Christ, we will rise to the life immortal, as all things are reconciled in God.

Our Advent task is to be ready for all this, as Isaiah says, God is our potter and we are the clay. We must be prepared to be moulded, to be transformed.

This is complicated, deeply serious stuff, and a million miles from the ways most people today choose to keep Advent. In a large department store last week the assistant at the till offered me the chance to buy a pampering Advent calendar at a knock down price. She assured me it was excellent value, each day would reveal another little box containing hand cream, a face mask, massage soufflé. Wouldn't it be lovely, she enthused, to enjoy these daily treats and spend Advent ensuring I would

be Christmas-ready, smoothly moisturised, soft-skinned, buffed and toned. Maybe, but as the old adage goes, you should never judge a book by its cover ...

Every year my Grandmother gave each of her grandchildren an Advent Calendar and I loved the ones she chose. There was always a huge dark sky - with plenty of glitter - and a mysterious shadowy stable with soft lamplight shining over the empty, waiting manger. Day by day the dark sky changed and grew lighter, as windows were opened onto the usual mixture of the sacred and the questionable: robins, snowmen, angels, bells, holly, even the odd duck and a reindeer. Then, on Christmas Eve the final huge window would be opened and at last the entire scene was revealed, there was a baby in the manger, the moment we'd been waiting for.

Fashions change and a recent newspaper article featured a Kindness Advent Calendar. The idea being that each window opened suggested an act of kindness: Put an extra item in the food bank. Allow a waiting car to go in front of you in a queue of traffic. Visit your elderly neighbour with a cake. It's a hopeful initiative in our consumer-led times. Let's see if it catches on.

The pampering Advent calendar I was offered the other day might have brought me to Christmas Day feeling superficially good, a skin deep improvement perhaps. But all those lotions and potions would have done nothing to reveal what really matters: my spiritual readiness to celebrate the birth of Christ, or my inner preparedness to cast off the works of darkness in penitence, anticipating the day of judgement. Few of us like the truth about ourselves, none of us is without sin and daring to cast off the works of darkness is revealing and potentially risky. God might tell us who we are – he might demolish the dark veil we throw up to cover the bits of our relationships with others and with God that we don't like. At times our lives are dominated by insecurity and fragility, but paradoxically the more we seek to defend ourselves the weaker and more vulnerable we become. Resolving to remove those defences, those barriers we have erected, enables us to become stronger. The triumph of Christ was his vulnerability. So opening the windows onto my soul will be challenging. Standing back, and looking at myself from another perspective will take courage; what if I don't like what I see?

In his letter to the Corinthians, St Paul gives us advice as we embark on the challenging and daunting demands of Advent preparation: I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus...He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Put another way, both St Paul and the Advent collect remind us that it's only through the grace of God that we will be given the strength to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. God's fingerprints are on our clay, he knows and loves us because he made us. Whatever is revealed we must trust that God will be with us seeing us for who we are, and loving us. Amen.