

Advent Sunday – 28 November 2021

Have you an Advent calendar? I understand that Fortnum and Mason are selling an artisan crafted wooden one which plays a different carol every time you open a window. It's a snip at £260.00 – but no chocolate! They also have calendars with a different rum miniature and some with a different beauty product for each day. I think they are missing the point. The point about traditional Advent calendars with pictures is not that each time you open a window you get a chocolate hit, but that you catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

The ones I remember are from the sixties. They were encrusted with glitter, with children on sledges in bustling markets towns centred on Christmas trees laden with lights. There was always snow, and behind the blank windows of the snow-capped houses was another world, a different, foreign world where biscuits were shaped like hearts and red and white sweets were twisted into walking sticks. Behind the neat houses with overhanging eaves a different life was going on – children making presents, grandmothers knitting, rabbits pricking up their ears. Even the light was different. The paper was translucent so if you held it up to the yellow electric light of those days, the pictures glowed with light.

There were two worlds: the picture on the front and the one behind the windows. Each day as you opened another window you revealed a little more of the world behind the windows, until on Christmas Eve there was the stable, the reason for the heart-shaped biscuits, the knitting, the rabbit pricking up its ears and all the preparations which had gone before.

There is something in Advent about the uncovering of that different world. Advent is definitely time to make ready. I love the stirring up of Christmas puddings and cakes and if you read last Thursday's sermon in the bulletin you will find a prayer to say every day in Advent, particularly while baking. But Advent is also a time for looking, really looking at the world behind the windows, the world in which kingdom values are lived out – the world as it could be.

It could be a world in which hundreds of refugees arriving on our shores every week are not frightening or overwhelming or a 'political disgrace,' but welcomed as a resource of resilient people who have chosen this country at the risk of their lives. Who, given encouragement and education and resources would become architects and shopkeepers, lorry drivers and lawyers, parents and nurses. America shows us how generations of immigrants can build a nation. It could be a world in which those who leave prison, having served their time and paid their debt to society are supported with resources and counselling and housing and helped to find a job and start again to live a better life. Sadly, that is not the world we are living in at the moment. Part of the challenge of Advent is to see how it could be, how it should be and do something about it.

A second challenge is to see within the everyday, something of God. In St James's Square the leaves are finally detaching themselves from the plane tree and one by one they twirl to the ground. Like snowflakes they are all different, each one an insight into the mind of God. Or consider our glorious, changeable weather which yesterday took us from snow to blue skies within an hour. Its variability and

unpredictability is a reminder of God's marvellous creation. The smile of those whom we love, that is God's design too.

Even, and I don't say this lightly, the deaths of our loved ones are bound up with God. It is traditional, on the first Sunday of Advent, in this time of hope and revelation, to recognise and speak of death. We have Sharon and David in mind at the moment and many of you have private griefs. Somehow, God's power over death revealed in the resurrection has power over the lives of those we love whom have died. We can't understand how, any more than we understand how God directs every subatomic particle in the universe, but it is the nature of God's omnipotence to have power over time and death and yet be content to assume, as Jesus of Nazareth, the person of a powerless, unborn child growing in a young woman's uterus.

John Donne wrote something which may be helpful about how we as a church community can encompass the grief of the death of our loved ones. In meditation XVII of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* he writes:

'The church is catholic, that is, **universal**, [that's what catholic means], so all that she does belongs to all. When the church baptises a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to the head which is my head too, and grafted into the body of which I am a member. And when the church buries someone, that action concerns me. All mankind is written by one author, and is one volume. When a person dies, the chapter isn't torn out of the book, but translated into a better language, and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators. Some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and God's hand shall bind up all our scattered pages for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.' (*I have modernised some of the language.*)

I love that picture of Donne's that God 'writes' our lives, with our help, and they are not wasted at death but translated until in the last days which Jesus is talking about in the Gospel the true stories of our lives will be open to God and to one another.

When things are very bad, and a pandemic is raging; when the times are out of joint with unseasonal and wild weather; when floods and storms and snow are forecast; and we have lost those whom we love, then we Christians are to lift up our heads because beyond and behind and beneath this seeming chaos we live in God's times. The blank window of death which we see, has behind it a living promise of eternal life.

So, 'Stand firm. Lift up your heads. Cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light... because your redemption is drawing near.'