

Whoever Heard of Advent?

I'm not sure when I first heard of Advent. It wasn't a big deal when I was a child. I believe that we had an advent calendar in first year junior school with little doors to open every day until Christmas, each of which had a religious picture behind it. I can't remember an advent wreath in church until the early sixties. I think they were fairly new to England then. There was a lot of evergreen foliage around a ring with four large red candles, one of which was lit on each of the four Sundays before Christmas. I have an idea that it was hung from the ceiling and you had to stand on steps to light it, but I might be wrong. It was a long time ago and I was only a child. At some point (Sunday School? Confirmation Class?) I must have learnt that Advent Sunday is the first day of the Church's year. Advent Sunday is the nearest Sunday to St Andrew's Day, which is the 30th November and easy for me to remember as it is my birthday. This year I shall be 60 on Advent Sunday and all my friends reading this may take it as an invitation to join me to celebrate at Evensong at 6.30 pm at St Michael's, Cuxton, followed by a party in the church hall. (By party I mean pleasant conversation around a buffet and a few drinks, possibly with a little background music, not going on too late.) No presents please.

When I was a little older, as a teenager, I remember taking Sunday School myself and explaining that the name *Advent* comes from the Latin word for coming and, in Advent, we think about Jesus coming again at the end of the world to judge the living and the dead as well as preparing for the annual celebration of His first coming, born in the manger at Bethlehem.

I think far more people know that Advent is the period leading up to Christmas nowadays than used to take notice of Advent years ago. This is because Advent has been seized on as a commercial opportunity. The chocolate Advent calendar is one more product to sell in the orgy of commerce and consumption which is Christmas. In fact Advent is swallowed up (literally?) in the Christmas season with Christmas decorations, Christmas carol services and Christmas dinners filling all the first four weeks of December and sometimes stretching back into November and even October. It does seem to have been forgotten that Advent is supposed to be a time of reflection, even of fasting and abstinence, to prepare for the Coming of the Lord. In church you will find that theme in the readings appointed for Advent and in the fact that the liturgical colour is purple and in the choice of hymns and prayers. Outside church, it might seem like it is Christmas already from the beginning of December onwards and that eating your children's way through their advent calendars is just part of the Christmas festivities.

So why not? Does Advent have a point in its own right? Is it worth keeping as a preparation for the Lord's Coming, rather than simply being gobbled up by the season of Christmas? The theme of the Coming of the Lord is judgment. It is sheep and goats time. Jesus tells us (Matthew 25) that humanity will be divided into two. The sheep will be those who have treated other people well. The goats will be those who have shown no concern for others. On the Day of Judgment, it will turn out that the way we have treated other people is the way we have treated Jesus. What we shall receive on that day is what we would expect to receive if we have, on the one hand, honoured the Son of God, or if, on the other hand, we have abused Him by our ill-treatment of our fellow human beings, all of whom Jesus counts as His brothers and sisters. The Coming of the Lord is therefore something to anticipate with joy if we have faith and can look forward to entering into the joy of our Lord, but a cause for trepidation if we do not have that confidence. It is a time for reflection and repentance, for getting ready to receive the Lord with faith and hope and love. If not, what is the point of Christmas? How is Christmas good news if ultimately there is no justice? What does redemption mean if there is no such thing as God's mercy? Justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin and that coin is love and God is love. Advent and Christmas are not one, but two facets of the same indivisible and eternal truth.
Roger Knight, Rector of Cuxton & Halling.

Christmas Services at St John the Baptist Halling

Sunday 21st (Advent 4): 3.00 pm Carol Service, Crib Service and Christingle.

Christmas Day: 8.00 am Holy Communion.

Christmas Services at St Michael & All Angels Cuxton

Sunday 21st (Advent 4): 6.30 pm Nine Lessons & Carols.

Christmas Eve: 5.00 pm Crib Service & Christingle, 11.00 pm Midnight Mass.

Christmas Day: 9.30 am Family Communion.