

### Christmas Midnight 2009

Welcome again to our Christmas Midnight Mass. We are on the cusp, the cusp of Advent and Christmas. It is always my ambition to reach the last verse of our offertory hymn *O Come all ye faithful* just after midnight strikes. *Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning, Jesu, to thee be glory given; Word of the Father, now in flesh appearin: O come, let us adore him!* I think I've only managed it once in 22 Christmases as your rector and that was when I preached for a very long time. I'm not going to do that tonight. Midnight will, however, strike during the service and it will be Christmas morning when we leave the Church. Look up into the sky. You might see a star in the East or a sleigh drawn by reindeer. This year you might see snow. Anyway you will see lights in the windows of Cuxton shining in the darkness. Whatever you can see or can't see, when you leave this church tonight, it will be the magic morning of Christmas Day, the day on which the Son of God was born the Son of Mary, the day on which God became human so that human beings might become divine, the day on which it began to be possible for us to become the people we were meant to be.

The cusp of Advent and Christmas. So ends a long tussle between us clergymen and everybody else. We've spent the last few weeks insisting that it's Advent, not yet Christmas, resisting Christmas decorations and Christmas festivities, not least in the church, putting off carol services to as near the end of December as we can get away with and only very grudgingly agreeing to the even temporary appearance of such things as Christmas trees before Advent is over. No wonder everybody hates us.

Because everybody else is eager for Christmas and it can't come soon enough. Schools need to put on their Christmas shows before the end of term. Likewise their Christmas parties, if they aren't snowed off. Shops and pubs play carols and put up Christmas decorations as soon as Hallowe'en is finished because they want us to be full of the Christmas spirit – cheerful, generous and, above all, free spending. It's only the Church telling us that early December is far too soon to be cheerful and generous and to carry on being miserable for another three weeks. Normal people want Christmas to come quickly: family and friends, good food, a licence to enjoy yourself, presents given and received. What's not to like? Of course we are always reminded at Christmas of those somewhat patronisingly described as *worse off than ourselves*, but the Christmas spirit prompts us to do more even for them than we tend to do the rest of the year. Charities look forward to Christmas too. People even come to Church at Christmas, and in large numbers. Bring it on!

Actually, in a funny sort of way, Advent probably means more to children nowadays than it did when I was a boy. I've got vague memories of an Advent calendar in my first year at Junior School. You opened a fresh religious picture every day. Otherwise I can't remember anything special about Advent. I'm not sure that I saw an Advent crown (or Advent wreath as we called it then) till we moved into the new church at Wigmore, by which time I must have reached the ripe old age of ten or eleven - or nine if it was the old church, which it might just have been! Nowadays, of course, one aspect of Advent has been almost totally taken over by the commercial Christmas. Instead of beginning four Sundays before Christmas in recognition of the Christian year, commercial Advent calendars, for the

convenience of the industry, commence always on 1<sup>st</sup> December. Instead of religious pictures, the windows daily disclose a chocolate or some other kind of sweet, preparing children not for the coming of Jesus, but for their rôle as prime consumers in a festival of gluttony and greed which, it is hoped, will set the tills ringing and lift the economy out of recession.

Odd, really, that we've gone along with replacing the religious Advent calendar with its confectionary counterfeit. We are supposed to be worried about childhood obesity and the effects of too many sweets on our children's teeth. We claim to be concerned about the effects of over consumption on the climate of our planet. We always say that we would rather our children develop spiritual values than material values, to give rather than to receive. In the aftermath of the banking crisis, we are supposed to be avoiding unnecessary expenditure and repaying debt. Now the religious pictures you find in Advent calendars generally come cheaper than chocolate. They don't rot your teeth or fatten you up. They feed your soul rather than your stomach. They have a tiny carbon footprint. They tend to elevate our thinking to a higher moral plane, whereas too much sugar and too many additives just make us hyperactive and hard to discipline. So, if you really don't want your children to get fat, you really care about global warming, you want to save money, you want to discourage greed and encourage your children to develop spiritually, which do you give them? A religious Advent calendar or one stuffed with sweets? I believe that is what is described as a no-brainer!

I digress. I was trying to explain why we clergy care about Advent. Why not give in and start celebrating Christmas along with everyone else as soon as the tan fades from the Summer holiday? There is a somewhat crass answer, that, driven by commercialism and our undisciplined anticipation, Christmas would just get earlier and earlier. Without the fixed point that Christmas Day is 25<sup>th</sup> December, the feast would just move backwards through the Autumn as companies and shops tried to steal a march on one another. We've already lost the few days after Christmas for family and faith with the "January" sales starting on Boxing Day. Commercial interests will never forgo an opportunity to make money (how ever unseemly) and, in a country whose religion is shopping, hardly anyone will try to stop them.

However, there is a much more important reason for hanging on to Advent. Advent means coming. It is about the coming of Jesus, His coming again on the last day to judge the living and the dead. We say it in the Creed, but we don't realise what we are saying. However, this world will come to an end. We don't know how or when, but one day this material universe will cease to exist. Every one of us will die. There is a last day coming up for each one of us, a last day of our lives, a last day for the universe. On that last day, we shall be judged according to our works. On that last day, Jesus. Advent is about the coming of Jesus. He came into this world at Christmas. He comes to us in our daily lives in all sorts of ways: in other people, in the wonders of the world, in prayer and meditation, in the pages of the Bible, in the worship of the Church and especially in Holy Communion. Jesus comes into the world at Christmas, the Son of God born the Son of Mary. He comes into this world, *which was made by him*, every minute of every day. *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

I rather like the Christmas song Mary's boy child. *Long time ago in Bethlehem, so the holy Bible say.* I think I've still got the record, though I can't play it if I have, because I haven't got a gramophone and, no, I don't want one, thank you. That's why I got rid of the one I did have. But in Christmas without Advent there is a danger that all this, what we are celebrating now, can seem like a *long time ago in Bethlehem*. 2,000 years is a long time. Bethlehem is a long way away. The Christmas story is a lovely story, but how relevant is it? We tell it every year. We rejoice in it every year. When you reach a certain age (say mid 50s!) you come over all emotional when you celebrate Christmas. But, if it all happened a long time ago in Bethlehem, what difference does it make to life in Britain in C21? If it happened to a virgin mother, a Galilean carpenter, peasant shepherds and exotic magi, what can it mean to people like you and me, our neighbours, the people we work with and the people we play sport with? What is more, Bethlehem in the time of King Herod wasn't much like the scenes portrayed on most Christmas cards or in the vast majority of nativity plays. Even if you went to Bethlehem today, it isn't much like it was when Jesus was born there. For one thing, there's a whacking great church where the inn used to be. In fact there are two churches, because people can't agree to worship together. The present day inhabitants of Bethlehem are more Arabs than Jews and they are mainly Christians or Moslems, two religions which didn't even exist when Jesus was born! There are plenty of modern hotels and there is no shortage of room at the inn because tourists have been frightened away by the threat of terrorism. For the same reason, modern Bethlehem is the wrong side of the security fence which the Israelis say is necessary to protect them from the Arabs and the Arabs say makes it very difficult for them to get to work or to carry on the trades which sustain their livelihood. It is too easy to think of biblical Bethlehem as a kind of myth, somewhere that exists more in our imaginations than in the real world.

So we can love Christmas without letting it make any real difference to our lives. What about, though, if we think about the implications of the coming of Jesus – *that God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that, whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life?* We might have trouble grasping this for the same reason that children tend to prefer chocolate Advent calendars to the real thing. We live in a world which only takes seriously the material. We value things in terms of their monetary worth. We value people in the same way. We're told that a mother bringing up her children unpaid isn't really working. We're told that we need to pay members of parliament a good salary or good people won't be prepared to stand for office. We're told that, if bankers don't get their bonuses, they'll go and work in some other country where their worth is recognised in their financial remuneration. We spend a lot of effort on earning money. We spend a lot of effort on looking after our houses, our cars and all our possessions. We enjoy expensive holidays. We spend time and money on clothes and cosmetics. We're not so very different from the pagans of biblical times who, we are told, worshipped silver and gold. We worship the things we create, rather than the One Who created us.

If we are of our world to the extent that we believe that worth is much the same thing as price, or if we only claim to care about spiritual values, being generous to other people and saving the planet, but actually live as if what really mattered was looking after number one,

we will find it hard to grasp the significance of the coming of Jesus. Christmas matters so much because God is all in all. Everything derives its existence from God. Everything depends on Him. God is the reason for everything, the purpose of the universe.

The Christian religion is that we are made in the image of God, that we are made to be loved by God, to love God ourselves and to love one another. That describes what we are meant to be. Our lives are fulfilled in eternal love. We cannot be satisfied with anything less than perfect love. That is why material things always let us down. We want something. We strive to get it. When we've got it, we want something else. We are never satisfied and we never can be satisfied by anything less than the love of God. Occasionally I see hundreds of people on a Sunday morning assembling in a field at some unearthly hour for a boot fair. Of course, they can't get to church because 9.30 is far too early on a Sunday morning! Yet, for all their getting up early and haggling over apparent bargains, they will never find fulfilment in trade or in striving for material things. Human beings can only find their rest in God. Can I promise that you will find God if you come to church? That might depend on the spirit in which you come! So long as we fail to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves, we are not the people God created us to be. We are not at peace with ourselves, with other people; we are not at peace, indeed, with the cosmos. We are alienated from God, Who is our peace.

Anyway, human beings are free to choose. You and I can choose to accept God or to reject Him. Apart from Jesus, human beings reject God for much the same reason as children choose the chocolate Advent calendar. But, even though we don't love God, or love Him enough, God loves us. God comes to us in Jesus. He comes to us at Christmas. He comes to us in our daily lives. We should invite Him in! He will come to us on the Last Day. We shall be judged according to how we have loved. If we love God and we love other people, we keep God's commandments, our lives are characterised by our *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law*. If we reject God, if we don't acknowledge our heavenly Father, we don't know His love for us, we don't recognise our essential brotherhood with all humanity, we alienate ourselves from life and this is sin and *the wages of sin is death*. Jesus comes to us with the offer of forgiveness, the offer of life. If we accept Jesus, if we put our faith in Him, there is atonement – at-one-ment – we are at one with Jesus and at one with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, at one with all God's people. We know God and to know God is to have eternal life. And if we know that we have eternal life our lives on this earth are transformed.

Christmas, then, requires Advent, a time to meditate on the coming of Christ and to prepare for His coming by faith and repentance. In the light of Advent, we celebrate Christmas, the incarnation of *the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world*. As the song says, *And man shall live for evermore, because of Christmas Day!*