

27th November 2022

Advent 1, Matins

Isaiah 52: 1-12 and Matthew 24: 15-28

Mother Emma

A few years ago, at this time of year, a member of my then congregation, smiling wryly, handed me a copy of a full page advertisement which he had cut from the "Metro" newspaper. It said in very large letters at the top, "Christmas is coming!" And at the bottom in slightly smaller script: "*Exclusively* at Marks and Spencers...!"

I can assure you that as I walked home in the holy stillness of midnight that Christmas Eve, and again in the radiant joy of Christmas morning, Marks and Spencers appeared entirely deserted. But they were right about one thing – for the next four weeks, Christmas is *coming* – it is not yet here.

Today we celebrate Advent Sunday, a season in which we are encouraged both to wait and to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. Many traditional Advent liturgies end with the words:

"May the Lord, when he comes, find us watching and waiting..."

But what are we waiting FOR?

The season of Advent has been understood in different ways at different times and in different places. Originally, it was simply a pre-Christmas fast, much as Lent comes before Easter, or indeed, in the Islamic faith, like Ramadan leading up to Eid.

We all know how much better food tastes when we are really hungry, and how much purer our rejoicing can be when we have experienced a time of solemnity and restraint, and the early Church encouraged a time of holy abstinence so that Christians could fully enter in the joy of the Christmas feast.

This continues to be the way in which Advent is understood in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, but in the Western Church, Advent also became a time of penitence as the world waited and prepared itself for the *Second* Coming of Christ, a solemn time reflected both in the purple vestments, and in our Gospel readings during this period.

Today in the secular world, Advent is simply a countdown to Christmas, with that strange combination of happy anticipation and stressful preparation, the balance of which shifts subtly as we move from childhood to maturity! But within the church, Advent is a season packed with imagery, with mystery, with hope and expectation.

We wait, not just for the joy of Christmas, but for the light of Christ's presence here on earth, which comes gradually, building up through Advent like the dawn at the end of a long night.

This morning we lit our first candle on the Advent wreath, and in our service here this evening, we shall begin in darkness, gradually lighting more candles to remind us of the light of Christ breaking into our world.

Christians are not alone in giving thanks for light in darkness at this, the darkest season of the year. Divali, Hannuka, the Roman festival of Saturnalia which also fell on 25 December, are all winter festivals which celebrate light.

But only for Christians is that light a vivid symbol of the physical appearance of God here amid the darkness of our earthly existence, whether quietly, in the form of a human child, or with power and glory at the end of time.

Dawn comes slowly, from the first glimmers of grey in the east to the full sunrise, and those rare occasions when one is able to watch it can be an intensely moving and uplifting experience. It gives us time to reflect on the wonder and beauty of Creation, and also to anticipate how we can use the day ahead.

In the service of Morning Prayer, said every morning in this parish, the season of Advent is remembered with this opening prayer:

“The dawn from on high is breaking upon us to dispel the lingering shadows of night. As we look for your coming among us this day, open our eyes to behold your presence and strengthen our hands to do your will, that the world may rejoice and give you praise.”

This prayer manages to encapsulate so many of the ideas of Advent – the light breaking slowly into the darkness, the waiting for Christ’s coming, and at the same time, the requirement that we too need to work at seeing God’s presence among us, and share with him in the task of bringing in his kingdom of peace and justice on earth.

We live in a society which is not good at waiting, but rushes forwards constantly towards real or imagined goals. In times of darkness and difficulty we strain for improvement and better and happier times, and in many situations we rush to change things for ourselves or others as quickly as possible in the way which seems best to us.

But Advent encourages us to wait and to experience the ongoing journey of the present moment. No-one living in our modern culture can experience Advent to any serious degree as a quiet, solemn, penitential period.

All of us are surrounded by Christmas decorations, Christmas music, Christmas cheer, Christmas Carol Services - and we cannot pretend that we do not have things to do to prepare for Christmas in practical as well as spiritual terms. But perhaps amid the hustle and bustle, we can manage to find a few moments for peaceful and prayerful reflection as the world rushes past us towards the exclusive celebration of Christmas at Marks and Spencers.

We can hold in our prayers those for whom this Christmas will not be one of unalloyed rejoicing, for the lonely, the bereaved, the prisoners, the homeless and especially those at war, and at this time, we may be moved to donate or to volunteer to help those in need.

We will be constantly aware of the goals of our journey, the feast of Christmas with both the joyful celebration of Christ’s birth, and the undeniable excitement of the secular trappings, - and also ultimately that day when God’s kingdom will come on earth. But the waiting and watching of Advent are about savouring the journey, the anticipation, the present moment in which we can become aware of God’s presence with us and contribute to the building of the kingdom, to preparing the way of the Lord.

May the Lord, when he comes, find us watching and waiting...