

Advent 1, Matins

Isaiah 1: 1-20 and Matthew 21: 1-13

Mother Emma

Perhaps you were, as I was when I first looked at today's readings, a bit discombobulated by hearing what seems to be the Palm Sunday Gospel as our introduction to the the holy season of Advent. As our thoughts are being turned to Christmas, first by the decorations and music all around us in the shops and streets, and then by the beginning of a round of Nativity Plays – our own Sunday Groups at the Eucharist this morning among them - it feels confusing to be drawn from images of the baby Jesus in the manger to contemplate the adult Jesus entering Jerusalem ahead of his Crucifixion.

A child might point out that the donkey is the connecting feature between the two stories. Our donkey in the Nativity Play this morning proclaimed proudly, "I am Joseph's donkey. I carried Mary all the way to Bethlehem", and here in our reading from St Matthew, we find Jesus himself riding a donkey into Jerusalem. There are children's stories which imagine that the one donkey is the grandparent of the other, telling the narrative from their perspective.

This may be fanciful, but there is a compelling message for us to absorb here; that in the days leading up to the Incarnation, and then to the Crucifixion, we are reminded that Jesus came to earth and ended his earthly existence both recognised as a King, and at the same time, embodying humility and fellow-feeling with the ordinary people he came to serve and to save.

The words *Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass*, might refer equally to Palm Sunday or to the Son of God, still within Mary's womb, approaching Bethlehem, where he would be recognised by the Magi as a great King. Jesus manifests in this gospel reading the humility we await in the Christmas story, but there is another facet to the passage, which is more strongly linked with the weeks of Advent which we enter today.

Advent is a time when we not only await the coming of the baby Jesus, born in our hearts anew each year, as our Advent wreath prayers said this morning, but also the coming of Christ as King and Judge at the end of time.

It is a solemn time of penitence and preparation; a liturgical season in which our readings and prayers encourage us to look more closely at ourselves, considering how our thoughts and actions might be judged in the light of God's glory. The prophet Isaiah does not hold back in the verses of our first reading from condemning his people who have turned away from God: *A sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters, they have forsaken the Lord.*

Such harsh passages are not often emphasised these days, especially in more liberal churches, and yet the Book of Common Prayer which we use in three out of four of our Sunday services here at St Mary Abbots, also does not shy away from reminding us that we are all sinners who need to be redeemed by God. We have just confessed: *We have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which ought not to have done, and there is no health in us.*

Given this opportunity every week to consider our own faults and weaknesses, we can be grateful that we may also receive absolution, but this is not granted without an element of repentance and

a commitment to a new way of life. Isaiah tells his hearers: *Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, plead for the widow.*

The season of Advent offers us the opportunity to reflect, to be honest with ourselves about the extent to which we say these prayers with sincerity and integrity and about our own desire to amend our lives, “to do well” and to live in the light of God’s coming. We are constantly reminded during Advent of the words of Peter: *“God hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”*

This evening, at the beautiful Service of Light, we shall hear the music and readings of the Advent liturgy read as the candles are gradually lit in a darkened church, reminding us that although we live in the darkness of the world, God’s light is always to be found, and we, as his people, are invited to reflect that light and glory.

Many people have commented to me recently that the world feels especially dark at present. We see the horrors caused by acts of terror and of war, watch the suffering of those affected by natural disaster, and even here at home, are conscious of so many still badly affected by the cost of living crisis which has driven people out of their homes onto the streets, or prevented them from being able to feed their children or to heat their homes. There is a sense of foreboding as we hear threats from around the world of darker times to come. Yet Advent urges us to translate our fears into hope, our timidity into action, our guilt into penitence and our anger into compassion.

All of us are, as the BCP liturgy says, *“miserable sinners”*; we constantly fall short of the glory of God, yet the coming of the Christchild enables us to turn to him and be forgiven.

Fr Evan said recently in a sermon that he is glad that it is Christ who will be our judge, because the Gospel reveals so much about his character of love and compassion and justice. Advent reminds us to await the Lord’s return in glory to judge the quick and the dead (as we say together in the Creed each week).

It also offers us the chance to bring our own failings, our weakness, our fear and our despair before Christ now, and to experience something of the forgiveness, hope and encouragement which we pray will be ours at the end of time.

Amen