

CHRISTMAS COME EARLY

This week a friend of mine tweeted a photo of the first Christmas tree of the season, spotted through a window of a flat in north London.

I don't blame anyone for wanting Christmas to come early this year. The darkness of the early mornings and evenings seems a little darker, and the wind and rain a little colder – we need the comfort and joy of Christ's birth even more than usual.

But it's Advent rather than Christmas which comes early this year. Advent rarely begins on 1st December as the calendars would have us believe. This year it starts on 29th November, exactly two weeks from now, but the readings today already turn us towards the great Advent themes of judgement and salvation.

LOOKING FOR HOPE

The first reading from the prophet Zephaniah does so in the darkest of terms, his apocalyptic vision of death and destruction, offers little hope to us.

It's fair to say that Zephaniah is the bleakest of the prophets, there is only a distant glimmer of salvation on the other side of judgement. Like all the prophets his role is to make us feel uncomfortable with the status quo, in a year when most of us have been discomfited enough, we may not appreciate this, being uncomfortable enough, or we may feel that his extreme language exactly reflects how many of us *feel* in the midst of a crisis, but it isn't the whole story.

By contrast, St Paul in Thessalonians, picks upon the same prophetic theme of judgement on the 'Day of the Lord', but offers an altogether more hopeful message of salvation in Christ.

There is still darkness, but there is also light, *'for God has destined us not for wrath'* he says *'but for obtaining salvation'*.

It's a different story now.

WATCHING AND WAITING

In this unhappy year, which many of us would be more than glad to see the back of, it would be very easy to skip the season of Advent with its watching and waiting – indeed, most of the year has felt like an extended kind of Advent with so much wanting and waiting!

But Advent's emphasis on longing for salvation is more resonant than ever in the context of corona virus and the news of a possible vaccine, which like a distant light, is a glimmer of hope on the horizon, salvation from captivity and the promise of life restored.

But the Parable of the Talents reminds us that we are not to waste this time of watching and waiting but to use it well for spiritual profit so that we may enter into the joy of the Master.

LITURGY OF THE ORDINARY

This year, our Advent theme at St Michael's will focus on faith in the home.

One of the unexpected consequences of the pandemic and lockdown has been a renewal of domestic spirituality. Confined indoors for long periods many of us have learnt anew the importance of praying at home. Most of us have watched at least some services on line and the novelty of singing hymns to our computer screens!

Our Advent sermons and discussion groups will be informed by a book called 'Liturgy of the Ordinary' by the American priest Tish Warren. Each chapter takes a daily activity or routine and connects it with the liturgy of the Church and with a spiritual practice, so that we might become aware of God's presence in surprising ways and embrace the sacred in the ordinary and the ordinary in the sacred.

- So she begins with our rising each morning as a reflection of the new beginning of Baptism.
- How our morning rituals of making the bed and getting dressed parallel the rituals of the liturgy.
- How every meal is an echo if the Eucharist – our physical nourishment an expression of the spiritual food of the Eucharist.
- How the blessing and sending out at the end of worship, may find its expression in the sending of emails.
- How the simple act of pausing and drinking tea, is a moment of contemplation and thankfulness which can also be deeply prayerful.

The aim of this is to break down that most stubborn of myths that there is any boundary between the sacred and the secular. Something we see quite clearly in the life of Christ as both Son of Man and Son of God. Nevertheless, many of us struggle to connect our daily lives with what we do in church, and encounter God in the places that are most intimate to us – our homes and our hearts.

AT HOME WITH GOD

Advent and Christmas is already one of the times of the year when we are more used to expressing our faith at home. Advent Calendars and Christmas cards are daily reminders that God is at home with us and we are at home with God – but there is so much more we can do to extend this to every part of our lives and make our faith a daily reality.

This year and this Advent,
when we need the comfort and joy of Christmas more than ever,
so let us not rush towards that day without inward preparation;
for the greater our need,
so also the deeper our preparation should be.
For God desires to give so much to us,
if only we are ready and willing to receive.