

First Sunday in Advent**27 November 2016**

*God be in my head and in my understanding
God, be in my mouth and in my speaking
God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.*

As always, it is a great privilege to be able to share some thoughts and reflections with others; thank you, Robin, for this opportunity.

As Jess pointed out last week, today/Advent Sunday is the start of a new liturgical year – and we go back to the readings we had three years ago and start the three-year cycle of readings again. We all know –we’re told often enough – that Advent means ‘The coming’. We don’t always remember that there is a three-fold meaning to the Coming of the Lord. Of course no one can forget the first coming of God on earth, at Christmas. If we have ever listened to the Collects and readings in Advent, we would know that this is also a season to remember that Jesus promised he would come again in glory to judge us. Both these have much written about them, and many impressive artistic depictions of them. But it is easy to forget the third aspect, with subtle, often implicit, references to it in our prayers and readings – the coming of Christ into our own hearts: for example today, ‘give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light’. Without this essential but simple message, the other two are diminished and lose much of their significance.

As the mystic Jesuit poet, Angelus Silesius, said,

“Christ could be born a thousand times in Bethlehem – but all in vain until He is born in me.”

“Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, And not within thyself, Thy soul will be forlorn.”

Indeed, when we sing ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ we echo this thought: *O holy Child of Bethlehem Descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born to us today.*

The four Sundays, or weeks, in Advent follow a sequence.

So on this first Sunday in Advent, we notice that the Collect is a general overview of the themes of Advent. Incidentally this is an excellent example of a tightly packed, scripturally based prayer – there is a piece about it in the November *Around Langley* if you are interested in finding out more.

The readings for today also embrace the general meaning of the season: Isaiah's vision is that of God establishing a new kind of nation where swords and spears are made into ploughs and pruning hooks and there is no more war – anticipation of what Jesus might have called the Kingdom of God. Paul says to the Romans that 'salvation is nearer now' and 'let us put on the Lord Jesus Christ', that is, welcome Jesus into our lives now; in the gospel reading, Matthew is clearly talking about end times; we don't know when it will be but we are to anticipate it and prepare for it.

Incidentally, we rely on Matthew and Luke for our Christmas stories because the other gospels start with Jesus' baptism, except for the short prologue in John's gospel. The special characteristic of Matthew's gospel is that it was obviously written for an audience with a Jewish background, to people who knew Jewish laws and Jewish scriptures. Look out for references to that in our extensive readings from Matthew in the coming months. Today we had a mention of Noah, who had listened to God and anticipated the flood, although he didn't know when it would actually happen; his audience would have known the story. The second coming is like that, he says, although even Jesus didn't know when it would happen. So today we have a conflation of the three meanings of Advent, past, present and future.

That is the first week. The candle we light is supposed to remind us about the beginning of time, the time of the Patriarchs, Abraham to David.

Then the theme moves on to the Second coming of our Lord with the saints in glory – and the candle is celebrating the prophets.

The third week is dedicated to John the Baptist waiting for Jesus.

And only then, just before Christmas, do we start thinking of Mary's waiting for the birth of Jesus.

Sue Lepp produced a book list as an Advent resource in the November *Around Langley*. She said her book for this winter was 'The Meaning is in the Waiting' by

Paula Gooder. I too had bought the book and had left it to read in Advent. Its focus is as in the title - 'Anticipation', or waiting.

Does anyone remember Credit Cards first being introduced? The advertising slogan was 'Take the waiting out of wanting'! We would probably find it hard now to understand that waiting might be a good thing, never mind the idea that the *meaning* is in the waiting. Nevertheless, today we in the church *are* entering a time of waiting.

But waiting for what? Waiting for Jesus to come into our hearts daily and waiting for the Day of Judgement – waiting for the present and far future we can make sense of, but what of waiting for the past? Can we wait for something in the past? Or, what do we understand by 'waiting for the Messiah, the promised one'?

At a very elementary level, we are waiting for Christmas – we are making cakes and puddings and mince pies and ordering turkey and even learning new music for Christmas services and so forth.

At yet another level, we are *remembering* what the first Christmas was like for all those who were experiencing it; not just Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and Herod and so on, but the whole people of Israel. We live through the words of the prophets who kept reminding the people that God promised to deliver them from oppression – at the time of their writing, maybe from the Babylonians. But at the time of Jesus' birth, they were clearly hoping for a Messiah to deliver them from Roman oppression, projecting forward the old prophesies a few hundred years.

But what about us, how do we wait for the past?

The commentary in Church Times this week tells us that Advent is a season when we wrestle with the idea of time itself. Well, are you up for some wrestling? That calls for some mental acrobatics doesn't it? But Paula gives us a new insight into history and time in her book. In case you don't get to read it yourselves, let me share it with you. It has resonances with today's Collect, 'now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility'. Notice, '*now*' present tense, and Jesus Christ '*came*' to us, past tense. So was that a grammatical error on Cranmer's part when he wrote the Collect?

We are used to thinking of time as moving in a linear fashion and always forward except in science fiction. So in history, we look back to events like wars or births or

deaths; and we look forward to our next holiday or the appointment of a new vicar, or the Queen's 100th birthday or whatever. But what if time wasn't linear, and moved in a circle? The history of God's salvation could be thought of in that way; God intervenes to save, to heal, to punish, to reconcile... throughout history (as recorded in the Bible, and as we may know ourselves, in our own lives and experiences). With a circle, you can get to the same point looking forwards and looking backwards.

I'd like to extend Paula's concept a bit further - to that of a helix or a spring. We think of salvation history happening in circles, but the circles move on, skewed backwards in time even. Each time we pass the same point, God works in us and we gain more insights into salvation. Like in a game of Monopoly - when you pass Go you collect £200!

Our Lectionary is also a great help to us in that: each time we get round to the same point we have all moved on along the spiral and we have more insights and deeper understanding about God's salvation acting in and around us. And as we wait 'for the past', for the coming of the Messiah, we are certainly looking for his birth in our hearts yet again.

One final thought about 'waiting'. It sounds like a passive activity – like waiting for the No3 or 7 bus in Langley – not a lot we can do about whether or when it arrives. In the biblical sense, waiting is more of an active process – we may be waiting for the Second coming or indeed the birth of Christ, but while waiting we can get glimpses of God's glory which, if we were not waiting actively, or looking out for, we would miss. So what we need while waiting is a heightened sensitivity alert – like in those security alerts we see, these days! Between the anticipation of something and before it actually happens, there can be a rich and blessed time. That is also what the season of Advent can be.

Even as we wait for your coming this Advent season, Lord, may we discover multi-faceted meanings of salvation. Amen.

Anna Thomas-Betts