

Sunday 10th December 2023; Advent 2. Benefice Holy Communion Ampleforth

We come today to the second Sunday of Advent associated with the second candle on the Advent wreath signifying Peace. It is also known as the 'Bethlehem Candle'. It is also associated traditionally with John the Baptist following on from the prophets, particularly Isaiah. In today's Gospel Mark begins his account of "the good news of Jesus Christ" with words to bring excitement and wonder but also a sense that something potentially disturbing is about to happen. He introduces us to John the Baptist, a Wildman in animal skins proclaiming in the wilderness a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. With John's voice Mark then sets the stage for the dramatic entrance of the "one who is more powerful".

January may be coldest month in the northern hemisphere, but December has the winter solstice, least daylight, and most night-time hours. From now until December 21, the days will grow shorter, and we'll be waiting with increasing expectation for the light to return and days to grow brighter. Without the clear nights to reveal the moon and stars, December is as dark as it gets. This makes it both a surprising and wonderful time for the light of Christmas – and for the season of waiting we call Advent. The season bids us to mark the days and make them count, to relearn a pace of life that is more unhurried, and more human during December's consumer chaos.

Advent, then, is an opportunity, not an obligation – an opportunity to focus on Jesus. Here at the outset of another December, we might consider three factors to take up some initiative to point ourselves and others to Christ.

First, your own soul, your spiritual self, your link with God. How might this new and brief season be an

opportunity to tend to your own heart and faith and seek to warm your soul during the darkness of December? What fresh initiative might you take in personal devotions or your spiritual habits to both quiet your soul in all the noise, and lead you into a new year, with spiritual fulfilment rather than discouragement and disenchantment?

You might consider some Advent reading of Scripture – in the birth narratives of the Gospels, or in Isaiah (the great Christmas prophet), or working through the minor prophets, or even the book of Revelation. This time of year, many reach for Advent devotional books. Or you could ask yourself, has some particular means of God's grace been absent from your life in recent months so should I take steps to re-engage?

Secondly, we also need to find an outward expression of that which was at the very heart of that first Advent, to proclaim 'God is with us, Emmanuel!' Advent marks the greatest missionary act in history: God himself, in Christ, came into our world to dwell among us and save us from our sins. There is no better time than Advent and Christmas to speak boldly of Christ's love and seek to show it through acts of love. We are all challenged to follow John the Baptist's example and prepare the way of the Lord in our lives once again, renew our search for purpose and meaning, and go into the world to work for God. If we're busy, stressed and overwhelmed by all there is to do in our lives, we may be challenged to clear a space, for God to reach us, so we can reach out in His Name, create a 'space for grace' from noisy busyness and to listen for that still small voice speaking peace on earth.

Advent is your invitation to make much of Jesus in your own heart, in your home, with our church, and in our

world or we might be energised by an exciting urgent voice telling us to ‘ Make way’ and get up and do something new to bring God’s kingdom nearer, to be prophetic voices in our day, called to “comfort and speak tenderly” to God’s people in preparation for the day when the glory of the Lord will once again be revealed.

Whatever God’s challenge to us this Advent, whether it’s unexpected and scary or reassuring and gentle, one thing we can be sure of is that if we allow, through each of us, it will be coming from a God of goodness and love who wants only to see and deliver salvation for His Universe. Thanks be to God. Amen.