

## Advent Sunday 2023; Benefice Holy Communion, Stonegrave

As we come to Advent, we come to a busy time for most of us. On one level it marks the beginning of the frantic run up to Christmas, buying presents, food, and drink, writing cards, getting fuel in. Those who follow Advent in this way start celebrating Christmas until Christmas Day, when all the pent-up Christmas energy is released. For many, it ends there but, spiritually, Advent is something far deeper, it is the season of light and dark, a time to remember that the world is not as it should be, that there is pain, grief and darkness that needs to be finally remedied.

For the Church it is the beginning of the new year, which is not standing still but going round on a circuit: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week and Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost. The traditional Western churches sum all this up on Trinity Sunday. Hopefully, we are not simply going round and round the same topics and never getting anywhere because if we choose, we can be part of God's larger project and purposes, for the whole creation to be renewed. which is always going forward. His plan begins with the Advent hope, thinking back to the call of Abraham and his family as the start of God's rescue operation for a world in ruins and a human race in chaos. We follow the story of that hope that refused to die no matter what terrible things happened; a hope that the first Christians believed had become human in the baby Jesus who had come to be the saviour of the whole world.

With that first Advent, it was clear that God's rescue operation for humans and the world had been decisively begun but not yet completed. Jesus really did launch God's kingdom "on earth as in heaven" in his life, death, and resurrection. But it was clear, because of the sort of thing this kingdom was, that it would then need to make its way

through the self-giving service of Jesus' followers, until the time when Jesus would return to finish the work, to put all things right, to banish evil and death forever, and bring heaven and earth completely together.

This is more meaningful if we understand Advent broken down into three English words. 'arrival', 'presence' and 'coming. We have already seen these in Jesus. In him we saw compassion, and forgiveness on the cross and there we see God's love which does not change, that will be fully seen when He gathers all things at the end.

Love like that is profoundly challenging and inevitably it shows up our weakness, failures, and unworthiness so the themes that are linked to the four weeks of Advent still apply: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. Death because that awaits us all, judgment because of our failures, which we have to repent of and to receive God's forgiveness is heaven, to step away from it is hell. Advent, therefore, provides the light to guide us on the right path in our darkness, and the right way to go.

To do that we need eyes to see. In the fourth century, the great Christian teacher, Gregory of Nyssa, suggested that there were two ways of looking at things; we can look in a diabolical way, or we can look in an angelic way.

To look in a diabolical way, is to look entirely with our own interests at heart. That is how the devil seeks to control us and keep us separate from God. He tries to make us see everything entirely from our own standpoint, to gratify our desires and egos rather than seek God, to the end that we have no concept of something or someone other than themselves and end up bereft and alone.

Angels on the other hand live in the presence of God, and so they see everything charged with God's presence and

creativity. They see who each of us is, made in God's image, and who we might become, in God's likeness. As Gabriel goes to Mary, a young girl, who lives in an out of the way village no one has ever heard of, with no education, no recognition, no purpose, but Gabriel sees God's future for all of mankind resting on her. That's how angels always see, everything pregnant with possibility.

You and I are always between the diabolical and the angelic way of seeing things. All too often we look at the world in relation to ourselves; we exploit it to the point of danger, and then we go on thinking that we have somehow cleverly defended ourselves against all misfortune then throw our hands in the air when it does not work.

But we also have the capacity to look with the eyes of angels: to see everything and everyone made in God's image and with the potential to grow in Him; to see a future for humanity, even when so much appears to threaten us. The difference between the two ways of seeing, lies in our readiness to be ready to let go of all the ideas and things we surround ourselves with, or to risk stepping into God's future, with joy, faith, and hope, as Mary did, uncertain as it might seem.

What we learn from Jesus today is that we must be ready, be awake, because God's great ending, the arrival of His kingdom, is being shaped in the present moment, in you and me, continually drawing all of us into His kingdom of love. So, during this Advent, let us seek to sharpen our angelic eye and join those who have seen the great things God does and step forward to help bring in His kingdom.

Thanks be to God. Amen.