

Advent I Year B 2017

**O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence**

I have to say, that after watching the 10 o'clock news on Thursday and then the start of *Question Time*, that these words seemed to fit the bill for the state I find myself in before reaching for the 'off' button! I hasten to assure you that this is not said to trivialise them, because these powerful words from the Prophet Isaiah mark the start of our Advent journey. Out of the three-yearly cycle of readings, it is the start to *this* year – the Year we spend with Mark the Gospel writer- that I find the most powerful clarion call to consider the Advent journey we begin today.

Advent originated in the early days of the Church as a preparation for Epiphany – the Feast of the Manifestation of Jesus, and remembering this perhaps gives us a sense of what the season truly represents. It has a flavour all its own, because it is primarily a season of **longing** for God – Advent is a deep call to cultivate that longing for God within our hearts as part of our journey of faith. This sense of longing takes us beyond our journey to Christmas (although we make that part of our Advent) – it is more than this.

Neither is it some call of desire for the Second coming of Christ, although I have said more than once that we should always live in expectation because this is part of our identity as brothers and sisters in Christ. No, the Risen Lord is as much present in the world today as when he walked the shores of Galilee or the streets of Jerusalem. How can he have gone when we gather around his table Sunday by Sunday to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation? He has not gone, and his glory fills the Church - that world-wide fragile and marred vessel of grace. Christ is present because his life has been given to you and me through baptism. Christ is present when he binds wife and husband together in holy matrimony – indeed in any couple committed to each other in love. More than this, he is present in **all** who seek to transform the lives of those less fortunate than themselves, and therefore bringing about their own transformation.

No, he is not gone, but Advent is the time when we **LONG** for the world to be transformed – to be manifestly shot through with the Love and Glory of God as revealed in the self-giving of Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh. The true character of Advent is our longing to bring this about.

And the world? It's hard to imagine more dysfunction on so many fronts. Looking within our own country - slavery within our society and growing as a problem; the rise of the knowledge of scale of abuse of so many kinds; rampant problems with the rise of modern technology, from the appalling lack of self-worth so many young people experience, to the opposite - a preening culture where the exterior worth is more than the interior or where *my* opinion has precedence even in the face of reason or right. Advent is the season where we are called to dream and then seek to bring about a better world.

I, for instance, want prisons to be, yes, places of punishment, but I also want them to provide real rehabilitation and education, and not dens of brutality, violence and

radicalisation. I want to be part of a country where refugees can't be locked up without time-limit – and we are the **only** nation in Europe (not just the EU) where this happens - to be part of a culture where no matter what your colour, creed or ability, you can prosper and grow – where education is inspirational and releases the talents all people hold in different ways.

And this is *why* the call of Advent – of a longing for God - is so important and why I so want more to join in this journey. Advent should be a desire on our part for God to establish through our hands the **fulness** of his Kingdom. It is a call to look away from the materialism of the world so that this no longer remains a worry or a fear. I'm not saying that the things of this world are unimportant, but that we look beyond them. In doing so, we then start to enter the fulness of life our Faith calls us to: the establishment of peace and justice - the drawing of every human soul into the life Christ desires for us. A radical call to experience the fulness of God's love for each of us, which Jesus exemplified in every moment of his ministry.

So Advent is a precious part of our Christian journey - a yearly encounter - when Jesus says to each of us, *'What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'* The worst enemy in keeping Advent is indifference or apathy. You may remember that the Revelation of to John starts of addressing the seven churches of Asia. The great East Window of York Minster, the largest expanse of medieval stained-glass in the world, created between 1405-8 at the cost of £56(!), depicts John with upraised hands, whilst a fiery angel prepares to visit one of the seven churches, represented by seven bishops standing in canopies of a church-like structure. Of all the seven churches, that of Laodicea is found most wanting, and this is not because of any misdemeanour or wrong practice on the part of its worshippers. It is found wanting because it is lukewarm in its faith. John says, *'I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.'*

If we don't use this desire and longing for God to bring about the fulness of his Love within our world- the Advent hope- we join the people of Laodicea. If we say, 'O well – tomorrow will do,' then we are not allowing the call of the Church generated by Advent to work effectively within our lives. It's all too easy to back-pedal or coast along, to be ineffectual in our journey.

The longing for God, the desire to bring about transformation both within the world and ourselves is born of the knowledge of God's love made known through Jesus Christ and fortified through the life-giving Holy Spirit which quickens every soul. God always desires us to know and grow in understanding this love. So, do use Advent as a time to increase your knowledge of this love. Our diocese begins a Year of Prayer today, so a way you might do this is to pray as a family or with friends; perhaps devote some time each day to read just a few verses of scripture and then sit silently with God meditating on them, allowing his divine love to work within.

Advent is a time to hear as Jesus says to all, 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in.' Amen.

Collect

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

Isaiah 64: 1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
² as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴ From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.
⁵ You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.
⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all
fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷ There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered^[a] us into the hand of our iniquity.
⁸ Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

I Corinthians 1: 3-9

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
⁴ I give thanks to my^[b] God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ
Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as
the testimony of^[c] Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual
gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that
you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the
fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13: 24-end

²⁴ 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and
the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.²⁶ Then they will see "the
Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather
his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.²⁸ 'From the fig tree learn
its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.
²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he^[a] is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I
tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will
pass away, but my words will not pass away.³² 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the
angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert;^[b] for you do not know when the
time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge,
each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you
do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at
dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep
awake.'