

Sermon preached by Fr Christopher Wood
on the First Sunday of Advent 2017
at St Julian's Church and Shrine, Norwich

Advent means “arrival”. The arrival of the King. And the King shapes around himself, by his presence and power and through his Holy Sacraments and his people, a Kingdom of justice. A kingdom of inclusion, of compassion, integrity and generosity. That is what we hopefully believe. So although we are beginning a new church year as Advent begins, there is a certain continuity with last week's Feast of Christ the King.

But this Sunday also we launch into the reading of St Mark's Gospel. We have ahead a year of readings when we become familiar with St Mark's rather urgent account of the ministry of Christ. “Stay awake” we have just heard. That distinct feeling of St Mark's message is with us right away from Advent Sunday. Urgency and yet expectant waiting.

So, there's a thread running through everything about today, on this Advent Sunday, and indeed it is a thread which continues to run through the whole of this season, if we let it speak to us, and if we can manage to hold in tension the competing demands of being an Advent people in the midst of a distinctly Christmas world.

You may have noticed the picture of the chapel at Little Gidding on this week's Messenger sheet, and the quote from the last of T.S.Eliot's 4 Quartet's. We are familiar with the idea of books and poems noted as “Christmas reading.” I would say that there is also plenty of essential Advent reading. Indeed, earlier than Little Gidding, in East Coker, Eliot writes:

“The faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.”

I am sure that Eliot's work had been thoroughly digested by another poet, the somewhat haunted priest R S Thomas, because, in what he says in a Summer context, he offers to us perhaps as the meaning of Advent in the last line of his poem "Kneeling," which begins:

*Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; . . .
. . . Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.*

Great poets, like the season of Advent, are pointing us, compelling us, forward to the understanding of something important. We are, I think, to seek to develop an affinity with Infinity.

The most famous words associated with this cell I hardly need to repeat now. But Julian's expectant waiting and confidence that "all shall be well", is not the blind optimism of someone whose perspective stretched only as far as Christmas. It is the thoughtful Wisdom of a woman who understood that if your perspective is infinity, then you have understood the nature of your journey, your waiting, your suffering and all your life experience, and indeed you have understood the meaning of incarnation.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to-day of an almost distilling wind that will take so much away. Things we may now feel are so pressingly troubling or important. St Paul speaks of the spiritual graces, the nourishment that will strengthen us to the end until all is revealed. All of this concerns that same long view which is at the heart of any and every life of faith.

So when the twinkling lights of the next 4 weeks cease to sparkle let us pray that we are still found waiting with quiet and joyful certainty, for the Christ of crib and cross to reach out from his swaddling bands and enfold us.....in his love.

Amen