

## Advent Sermon 2 December 2018

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Our church has gone purple. When I speak to children about the colours we use in church, I tell them that purple means prepare. We have purple in Lent as we prepare for Easter, and now we have purple in Advent as we prepare ... for what? Children of course answer 'Christmas', and they are not wrong. We do prepare for the birth of the Christ Child. But is that all we prepare for in Advent?

Our readings tell us something different. Through Advent, the readings focus not on the birth of a baby in Bethlehem but on the end of time, on the coming of the Lord in glory. The readings describe a time of terror and judgement, not things we like to focus on or think about. After all, it's Christmas: let's not talk about the end of the world.

So we light candles on our Advent wreath to count down to Christmas. A delightful custom, far better than the old tradition of Advent sermons on death, judgement, hell and heaven. But even the Advent wreath has another message.

Think about the hymn we sing as we light the candles:

'Christmas is coming' the Church is glad to sing ...

That chorus is misleading. Yes, Christmas is coming, but that's not what the verses of the hymn, or the candles, are about. According to the hymn:

- the first candle is 'for God's promise to put the wrong things right'.
- the second is 'for the prophets, who said that Christ would come with ... angry words for some'.
- the third, for the Baptist, who, you will remember, had some very stern and angry words for just about everybody.
- and finally, the fourth candle is for the Virgin who sang of God's justice.

'put the wrong things right'; angry words; God's justice. Our Advent wreath is as much about Christ's return as it is about his birth as a baby. The candles on our wreath tell us to prepare for Christ's coming in glory as Judge of the earth.

Christ's judgement is not something to be terrified of. After all, the Judge is the Lord whom we love and serve. More to the point, this is the Lord who loves us and gave himself for us. Our judge is our lover – and a lover is a very biased judge indeed.

Nonetheless, we will be called to account, and we do need to prepare for that. How do we do this? By getting on with the job! Think of the parables Jesus told about servants left in charge of their master's goods or vineyard or money. The ones commended did not do anything extraordinary; they just did their jobs. The servants who are condemned are those who either did nothing or else tried to steal from their master. The point of these parables is simple: get on with the task at hand until your Lord returns.

And what is our task? At the beginning of Advent, we commemorate four saints who illustrate our task as Christians, who show us how to prepare for God's coming. Their feast days occur this coming week.

Tomorrow is the feast of Francis Xavier, a Spaniard, one of the original seven Jesuits of the sixteenth century. Preaching the gospel overseas is an integral part of the Jesuit vocation. So, Francis sailed for Goa, on the west coast of India, in 1541. He travelled all over the East Indies, establishing the Church in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, in Malacca, Malaya and Japan. He died in 1552 on his way to China.

Next is Nicholas Ferrar, an Anglican deacon of the seventeenth century, remembered on the 4<sup>th</sup> of December. Ferrar established a community in the village of Little Gidding, dedicated to charitable works and to prayer.

On 6<sup>th</sup> December we commemorate Nicholas, fourth century bishop of Myra in modern Turkey. Most of what we know of Nicholas is legends – of his love and care of children, how he fed the hungry, healed the sick and cared for the oppressed. One story tells how Nicholas saved three girls from a life of prostitution by providing them with dowries. From this story came the tradition of giving presents to children on his feast day. This is still done in many parts of Europe; in the English speaking world, the tradition has been transferred to Christmas Day itself. Nicholas, dressed in the red robes of a bishop, was deemed a saint for his charitable works: Saint Niclaus, Santa Claus.

Finally, another bishop: Ambrose of Milan. In 374, the church in Milan gathered to elect a new bishop. An argument broke out and Ambrose appealed for peace, only to find himself the popular candidate even though he was not yet baptised. He pleaded his unsuitability, in vain. He was baptised, ordained and consecrated in a matter of days. Ambrose soon became a teacher of great renown.

So, in summary, this week we celebrate an evangelist who took the gospel to Asia, a man who built a community of prayer, a man who gave with abundant generosity and a man who taught peace. These are our tasks as Christians, the tasks of Advent, the way we prepare for the coming of Christ.

I encourage you, this Advent, to prepare for Christ's coming in glory to 'put the wrong things right'. That's what judgement is about. Knowing that we will be called to account, let us get on with our tasks: proclaim the gospel, pray, give generously, work for justice and peace.

To assist us, I have printed out a sheet with the words of the hymn and a little about each of the Advent saints we commemorate this week. You can pick up your copy at the door as you leave. I suggest that, each week of Advent, google one of the saints, learn more about him, take him as an example of preparing for Christ's coming. May Francis Xavier inspire us to proclaim the gospel; may Nicholas Ferrar bid us to prayer; may we see St Nicholas not as the jolly man with reindeer and sleigh but as the bishop whose generosity and care for the needy motivates us to give; and may Ambrose remind us all that, as servants of the Prince of Peace, we too are called to be peacemakers.

I bid you to a holy Advent.