

ADVENT 2024

I am not a great morning person, you may know! I still need one of these (show alarm), particularly as a matter of personal insurance! I do not want to sleep-in when there is an 8am said Eucharist on Sunday. I do not want to sleep in if I have an important meeting or an urgent task.

And that brings me neatly to another Church Year and Season, for you and me.

Advent readings change to 'Year C', the vestments and altar hangings show 'penitential purple', the church is free from beautiful flowers until Christmas dawns, and the emphasis is on that Second Coming of Christ for which we are all expected to be waiting on and, preparing for.

In case there should be any doubt, I said mischievously on Thursday, at our packed mid-week Eucharist, Jesus would return to sleepy Suffolk first! It is a bold claim, I know....but just think if that were true; not London or Birmingham or Manchester – but instead, 'Suffolk Coastal' and very near you and me. Would we be ready to meet and greet the Lord who is coming to us and expecting us to welcome him? Would that be a union of mutual love or, in many ways, mutual dread?

We cannot escape these biblical warnings of apocalypse or, what our novelists prefer to term 'dystopian' – when all will be black, despairing and unforgiving. St Luke doesn't hide the agony of death or judgement in the last days as he declares:

“People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

I joked on Thursday that we have our Christmas Market coming up first, before the world collapses and implodes!

We struggle with all this vivid and prophetic biblical imagery, I suggest, with timescales, with the urgency and despair of our souls laid bare; and yet we just have to look at what’s happening right now in those countries very much in our prayers. There we see a ‘window’ on persistent and cruel bombing and destruction of innocent families and children; or another ‘window’ on the damaging floods and effects of climate change which no political ideology can pretend is unreal.

So, ‘Stay Awake’ is the Advent call to us. Be ready. But Luke’s message is quite different from any kind of ‘dystopian’ future. Instead we are being asked not only to expect the Messiah, and to welcome Him wherever we live and work, but to ‘stand before the Son of man’ and to recognise Him as our Saviour, the God of all mercy and forgiveness – the same Creator who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light, the One who shaped us to become children of Light, and Hope, and Joy. Our Christian calling at Advent is to know whom we are expecting to meet and welcome into our hearts

again, however vulnerable, frail, or unworthy we may feel. The love of Christ never fails us. So think of Luke's words as something radically quite liberating and transformative because Christ wants to come and redeem us, set us free, and most of all, embrace us with outstretched arms. Advent is about looking forward to that day of meeting Love incarnate without any embarrassment and certainly, no fear.

This coming week, today's Psalm 25, verses 1-9 would be worth learning as we used to as children, 'by rote'....let the words inhabit every part of us, guide and inspire us: 'Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.'

In that historic Parliamentary debate on Friday, I didn't hear a whisper about this Creator God who made us, shaped us and sings to us in the psalms. In tonight's beautiful Advent Liturgy of Light we do well to bathe there and reflect on the care and compassion of the God we trust in, believe, and follow; let us pray that we will be ready to welcome the Christ child again at Christmas; and let us be prepared for His coming to us when we least expect, and before the alarm clocks are set to wake us. Let us be surprised by joy this Advent, and be changed by it forever!