



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Advent Sunday

1st December 2024

Readings:

Jeremiah 33.14–16, 1 Thessalonians 3.9, Luke 21.25–36

The Revd Canon Sebastian Harries – Canon Precentor

Advent

Happy Advent, or should I say Happy New Year!?

Advent has to be one of my favourite times in the Church year. Our church tradition has handed down to us a plethora of wonderful readings, hymns and music, all infused with beauty, and awe, and wonder and sense of expectation. That's something we'll celebrate here at the cathedral very much throughout this season, but you might think that Christmas and Easter, should be our favourite times as they're the key events, but there is something exceptionally special about the seasons of preparation and journeying. There's that popular phrase that says happiness, is the journey, not the destination, but one of the main difficulties the church faces in this day and age, is that society tries get to the destination without the journey or time of preparation. They're skipped almost altogether, and then the message and meaning of the destination is lost altogether if there's not preparation.

Advent, as a season, seems to get swamped by the torrent of the ever earlier commercial Christmas season, which makes it really hard for us to enter it fully. In fact, marking Advent, is almost the very opposite of what is going on in the world around us; because whereas most people in our society are frantically gathering speed, and hurtling towards the end of the calendar year in December, in the church, we've quietly already begun our new year on Advent Sunday, and most people won't have noticed. In fact, many of us in the church won't have noticed that either. But there's actually a really important lesson to be learned in that: Because Advent is a time of paying attention; of watching and waiting, and more watching, and more waiting, but that often gets missed. We give a lot more time to the preparation of Lent, and Lent is generally still a time when we have some sort of fast, of giving something up; or we spend more time in prayer and study, or think about our charitable giving. But we forget that Advent too, is a time for reflection of preparation; and it's a new church year, perfect time for a re-start in our Christian faith, to think of some new-years resolutions in terms of our faith, and think about how we can allow our lives to be shaped by that of God instead of the world around us.

The writer Fr Gregory Fruehwirth, talks about his time when he was a monk in a monastery, and much of their way of life was shaped around the seasons and natural world, a way that most of us have lost in this generation. This time of year would in years gone by, have been a time where the fields were bare and the soil is being prepared. Advent is about sowing seeds: "This seed will the germinate at Christmas, sprout at epiphany, grow through Lent, blossom at Easter, and bear its Seven-fold fruit at Pentecost." But Advent is the time when this seed is sown.

So what might we do in our preparation for the sowing of this seed, what might we do for our Advent preparation?

Well the starting point is to give our out attention to God: to acknowledge that there are many distractions in the world that try and pull our attention away from God, but our Advent task, or our New Church Year's resolution is to keep returning to God, and to not let our hearts and minds be overwhelmed by the all the noises of the world that try to tell us that God isn't here anymore – because God is.

The other thing is to note that, amidst the horrors of current wars, potential wars, the fear of world war, the destruction of the environment and climate breakdown, Advent has always been a time when Christians contemplate the end of the world and the Second coming of Christ: that time when we will come face to face with God. And while we all hope and pray that we don't see the end of humanity or this earth in our lifetime, or in the generations to come, contemplating the end of times can help us to prepare our hearts and minds, to spur us to prayer and action in the here and now, so that we may live lives that reflect the wonders of God: the seed of the Christ Child that is gently growing within us; the light that is shining in the darkness and gradually getting brighter and brighter.

So my prayer for you, is that this Advent may at time when you are able to give your attention wholly to God, and time to prepare and sow the seeds.
May God bless you and your preparation for the Birth of Christ.