

We hosted our first carol service here at the cathedral on Friday evening and then less than 24 hours later I was at a conference at Hightertown yesterday that was entitled Sanctuary in Cornwall. People of different backgrounds gathered to pool their experiences of providing sanctuary in Cornwall and to look towards what shape offering sanctuary in Cornwall might take in the future. Stories from across Britain and further afield left us feeling very emotional about the plight of so many innocent people across the world, millions displaced through war and dictatorship and a growing number displaced through extreme weather events, flooding and hurricanes occurring more frequently through climate change. The Caribbean, Syria, Venezuela, Indonesia, the Rohingya, Palestine, the plight of many women and children across the world and even the food bank queues here across England. All this we were reminded has gone from European media coverage that has become obsessed by another impending event, the B word!

The conditions of the poor, the disenfranchised, the exiles and the refugees is a sharp challenge to our western way of life today and yet these too are the backdrop of the biblical Christmas story. As we embark on our Advent journey towards Christmas it strikes me how every year this story remains so relevant to our human condition. Somehow the Christmas message continues to make us reflect on the less fortunate, the needy, the destitute and the homeless in a sharper way than the rest of the year. It's message cuts through the political and international crises that seem to come relentlessly from different quarters every year challenging our comfortable way of living and the way we live out our faith. But where is it all leading if every new year it all seems to start again?

Over 2,000 years ago the men we call the Magi set out on their journey from the east. To say that theirs was a strange journey is an understatement. They did not know where they were going or why. The terrain they traversed was alien to them and they did not know what they would find at their journey's end. But they did have the star to guide them, the star which had not only caught their eye but had also fired their hope and expectation. The Magi made that journey but once. We make it many times in the course of a life-time. We call the journey Advent (and last week we prepared for it as we remembered the traditions of Stir Up Sunday). Unlike these Magi we know our journey's goal; the Bethlehem manger. And we know what we will find anew each time we make that journey. We find the Son of God, the saviour of



It was Jesus who in our gospel reading this morning told the parable, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

We are told to look for the signs so that we are not taken by surprise but those signs and happenings that Jesus describes sound frightening and other worldly. I’ve been following JK Rowling’s two part Harry Potter related prequel and it starts with *Fantastic Beasts and Where to find Them*. It is of course full of wizardry and fantasy characters flipping between different worlds and encounters with magical creatures who are bent on destruction of the muggle human world. These signs certainly lift us into another realm but it’s far from a heavenly one. Our eyes need to look up from this world not in dread but in hope, hope of something better, a world of restoration and reconciliation not annihilation and destruction.

The signs we are told will be there for anyone to see. But there have been so many signs. Thirty years after Jesus’ death, the Romans crushed the Jews in a horrible war that destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Many Christians at that time still worshipped at the Temple. How could that not be the beginning of the end? Or what about the fall of the Roman Empire, or the rise and fall of the Nazi Empire, or Stalin’s reign of terror in Russia, Pol Pot in Cambodia or the many other conquests for power that have ended in the deaths of tens of thousands? Were these not the signs of the end? How could we possibly know what truly signals the end of times? The fig tree encourages us not to freeze in panic and fright but to continue with our planting and reaping, with our living and preparing ourselves to be ready for this particular journey, to put our house in order. That might include getting our finances straight but our epistle reading reminds us that it also involves getting our relationships right, reaching out to those we live among in God’s love.

So getting ready for our Advent journey must be with love in our hearts although Jesus foresees another problem that we wrestle with particularly today. We can become weighed down by the expectations of this life, by the worries and pressures of everyday living. That star which once shone so brightly and clearly has become dimmed by a twenty-first century smog: the secularised commercialisation, Black Friday perhaps, the boredom and apathy that have crept into the lives of so many; and the uncertainty and doubt that there really is a God who cares for us enough to become one of us in Mary’s child.

Despite the dimming of that star, however, there are still landmarks by which we can pursue our yearly journey. These landmarks are fixed, unchanged and abiding; yet ever new, refreshing and renewing. They are the landmarks we find in art, music and poetry, in Scripture and tradition, in reflection and prayer. Yesterday evening the St Mary's Singers set the mood with Music by Candlelight and in the next couple of weeks we have the opportunity to hear Handel's Messiah with the Three Spires Singers and the Cathedral Choir Christmas Concert. It is landmarks such as these often shared with others that guide us again and again to Bethlehem's manger and to the miracle of God's love who was born there.

On our journey there we must look for landmarks that rise above the immediate things of this life, that raise our sights heavenwards to share the love of God and to remind us of Jesus' words to us today: "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away." It is not that we shouldn't enjoy the hustle and bustle of anticipating Christmas but that our preparations should serve as a portal to deeper living, the giving of ourselves to others and striving to live in the overlap between our time and God's time. I came across a poem by Gunilla Norris in my preparations which is entitled Polishing the Silver but it encourages us to polish a different sort of silver.

*As I polish my life let me remember the fleeting time that I am here.*

*Let me let go of all silver.*

*Let me enter this moment and polish it bright.*

*Let me not lose my life in any slavery –*

*from looking good to preserving the past,*

*to whatever idolatry that keeps me from just this –*

*the grateful giving and receiving of the next thing at hand.*

On our Advent journeys may we polish our lives to shine more brightly, become cheerful givers to get ready body, heart and soul to be a signal in our time of Christ's coming into the heartache of this world.

*Jeremiah 33:14-16    1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13    Luke 21: 25-36*

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