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 Highertown 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

the world, who comes to us not in splendour and glory but in the humility and weakness of a babe born of woman.

But each year that Advent journey seems to be attended by new difficulties and hardships particularly as we look across the world and increasingly feel our security threatened. Yet as we wonder what Advent can bring to us afresh, what the story can bring to our journey we discover that this story is better when you know how it ends. That doesn't happen in many books or films but one of the most moving moments in the trilogy of Tolkein's epic story of the Lord of the Rings comes in the third film. All seems lost. Minas Tirith is under siege; the walls have been breached; the orcs are running amok killing all in their path. Pippin the hobbit and Gandalf the wizard find themselves on a terrace of the city with a few moments to talk:

Pippin: I didn't think it would end this way.

Gandalf: End? No, the journey does not end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain curtain of the world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass. And then you see it?

Pippin: What, Gandalf? See what?

Gandalf: White shores ... and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.

Pippin: Well, that isn't so bad. Gandalf: No. No it isn't.

With hope renewed and vision rekindled, they plunge once again into the fray of battle – and very soon the tide turns.

We know the ending of our story too. It's ending gives us hope in a better world to come, hope to fuel our journey again through Advent. But we can't walk around all the time with our heads raised to the sky in anticipation, can we? And what are we supposed to do if we think the world is falling down around us? The great reformer Martin Luther was asked this very sort of question. Someone challenged, "What would you do if you heard that Jesus would return tomorrow?" Martin Luther said that he would plant a tree. For in all likelihood, the rumour would be untrue. After all, Jesus said elsewhere that no one knows the hour or day when he would return. No one but the Father. So why not plant a tree and plan for the future? Then if Luther was wrong and his Lord did return, he would find Luther taking care of the earth.

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 Handle'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 manager 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

Canon Lynda Barley