

Advent Sunday

Welcome to the season of Advent. Every year the same question arises. Why don't we sing Christmas carols in Advent?

Christmas seems to start earlier and earlier each year. This year we had Christmas trees for sale immediately after Halloween, Cards and decorations even before then. In a world where we hear Christmas music in November, on the radio, on TV (there's even a channel dedicated to Christmas films which starts about mid-October) we hear it in the shops, everywhere we go, as the song says "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." So why can't the church follow suit? I can hear Graham now saying, not those Advent dirges, can't we sing something Jolly to make us feel happy? Well it's to do with the liturgical calendar. The argument is that Christmas music should be held off until the season of Advent concludes on Christmas Eve. However I am sure many worshippers want the opportunity to sing carols throughout December. Part of the problem is how the Church Calendar is constructed. The Christmas season is short – only 12 days long, the maximum Sundays being 2. But this year we only have 1 Sunday, that is Christmas day., because the following Sunday January 1st is the day we celebrate the naming and circumcision of Jesus, the following week 8th January we celebrate the baptism of Christ.. No more Christmas music,
So is it wrong to sing about Christ's birth before Christmas.
Not necessarily, but in doing so we miss the meaning of Advent

A few weeks ago I was preparing for a holiday. I was getting excited, sorting out clothes to take, visioning the travel by coach and ferry, imagining and hoping the hotel was going to be good, the food excellent and wishing for good weather.

The preparation time was good but it wasn't the actual holiday. I had to wait patiently for that time, that day to arrive, and then I could really enjoy it.

Advent is a season of preparation, of watching and waiting and of longing a time to look forward to. We do have a wealth of Advent songs which express the advent hope well. They can be joyful if we sing them joyfully. So this December I invite you to watch and wait and to fully embrace Advent and the music of this season; by doing so the Christmas season will be made even more special with singing, dancing, feasting and merry making to give a fitting welcome at the appropriate time.

So the readings today help us to reflect on the outcome of the end of times, when our Lord will come again. We have a warning to be on guard against complacency, to be vigilant, to stay awake and be ready lest the end comes and catches us by surprise. We look back on our past mistakes and we look forward with hope.

Advent is a time to prepare ourselves now for the end of the world as we know it and to reach out to the new world that is to come. Advent is exciting, the beginning of a new year.

Our readings prayers and hymns have a sense of urgency and conviction; Wake up! Big things are going to happen.

In our first reading we see God's chosen people hearing Isaiah's words of hope and longing; hope and longing for the establishment of the City of Jerusalem which would be the focus and inspiration of all nations.

We too are looking for the establishment of Jerusalem, but for us it will be the New Jerusalem, not a place but a state of being, with all people joyfully accepting the just and merciful rule of God.

We too long for peace to be established throughout the world - to live in a world where disputes between nations are resolved by mediation and disarmament, not by terrorism and war.

How poignant that vision this year/.

Ukraine and Russia, conflicts in the Middle East, troubles in South Africa. People are afraid of the future with climate change, poverty crisis, and health issues.

Out of all the tragedy and darkness goodness comes and we can witness and can see a little more clearly God's love and compassion and something of how God wants us to live.

Each day we can think about our lives and our relationships, ask ourselves if this is how we would like things to be on the last day of life. There may be words unsaid that need to be spoken; words spoken that are now regretted; old feelings of hurt or anger that needs healing and forgiveness. Things we always wanted and meant to do to enrich our lives but haven't got round to doing.

Advent could be a time for stocktaking and deciding where our priorities lie and what we need to do to grow into the people God meant us to be.

Paul writes to the Romans and encourages them and us to make a conscious effort to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; - an image which suggests a daily renewing of our commitment to the journey into light. And we need to make that journey because all the works of darkness come from seeds that are found in all our hearts – jealousies, hatred, prejudice and greed.

But Christ has triumphed over sin and death once and for all and that triumph can never be reversed, but it is still to be fully realised on earth. That's what we are still waiting for/ the final fulfilment of God's kingdom and the return of our Lord.

Both Jesus and Paul call us to be awake and ready for that final day, the return of the Son of Man as King of Kings, Lord of Lords and Judge of all people.

Advent is a time of two sorts of waiting and getting ready.

Firstly we are waiting and getting ready for Christmas. That is definitely going to happen on a set date. Its traditions, stories and carols are familiar to us. Their familiarity is perhaps comforting in a world that this year seems much less safe and predictable. We know how to prepare for Christmas festivities and we can also prepare ourselves for whatever sad or painful memories and emotions it may evoke.

Secondly we are waiting and getting ready for the return of Christ. Like his birth, this is a definite event –its part of our Christian belief. But we are warned that although it will come unexpectedly we still need to be ready for it.

So Advent is also a tale about two happenings.

It's about God coming as the light of the world, bringing forgiveness, peace and healing to all people.

And it's about the return of Christ – God coming unto the world in power and might to bring a

final judgement on all people.

It's in the light, forgiveness, peace and healing that Jesus brings into our world at Christmas that we can be transformed and made ready to meet him face to face whenever that may be.

So, come let us go to the house of God that he may teach us his ways. People of God come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.
Amen.

Gill Gough