

Advent Carol Service Sermon 2017

I promise you that I am trying my best not to be a grumpy, Grinch like misery about Christmas, but I have to say I am thoroughly glad that this is an *Advent* Carol Service.

It is not Christmas yet. It will not be Christmas for four more weeks. I have not bought any presents yet; our tree is not up; I have not had a mince pie yet, I do not want a mince pie yet. And I do love all these things, mince pies especially, but there is a time for them and it is *not yet*. I'm not quite sure when it is – I can't quite go the full hog and do *nothing* Christmassy until Midnight Mass, though part of me would like to. But being Christmassy *now* is too soon. Indeed, never mind now. Last Thursday night, I found myself leading the singing of Silent Night and Away in a Manger outside church. It's too soon. We're missing something important.

And what we're missing is the sense that these four weeks are about waiting, about getting ready, about honing our expectations and hopes. If we start celebrating Christmas now it's like eating before you're hungry – for most of us eating way, way too much, overstuffing ourselves before we're hungry. We'll make ourselves sick with Christmas. So there's a good case for doing what the church always meant Advent to be about:

- Fasting: holding back for a moment from the sweetness and glitter.
- Studying: reading, thinking about what exactly it is we're waiting for.
- Almsgiving: sharing what we have with those who do not.
- Repenting: taking stock of your life, making it ready for the coming of God.

And to the measure you do those things, you'll find when Christmas comes that it is not just one great over-indulgence, one great calorific and alcoholic binge. You'll find that you've made room in your life for the joy it is all about – the joy of God flooding into the world through Jesus of Nazareth.

And that means that you'll also find that in fact, Advent has always been about more than Christmas. Think of that phrase: the joy of God flooding into the world. Well, does our world look flooded with joy to you? You look at Syria, you look at broken homes and broken lives, the big scale and the small, and does it look with flooded with joy? That's the fundamental reason Jews aren't Christians, you see: they look at the world and they see quite clearly that the Messiah has not come. Justice and joy have not flooded the world; thick darkness still covers the earth. Christians must have it wrong; Jesus cannot be who we think he is, or the world would not be as it is.

And they would be right if all we hoped for, and if all we spend Advent getting ready for, is Christmas. Christmas was never enough. Christmas is like a flash of light in the dark, a bright ray from God's Kingdom shining into our world. But Jews and Christians have never hoped for *just* that. We have hoped for dawn, for daybreak. We have hoped for the sun to rise and flood all things with light: cleansing all things, judging all things, healing all things. We have hoped for darkness and death to be burned up in their entirety. We have hoped for this whole world to be shot through with God's glory, for the whole thing to shine with justice and joy.

That's what those lines in the Creed mean: *we believe He will come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead... we believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life of the world to come.* What do Christians hope for? Not just that the world might get a little bit better as the years go by. Not just that our souls may survive death and enjoy some kind of afterlife, a bit like angels or ghosts. No. Christians – and Jews – have always hoped for the whole creation. For the whole planet, for the whole history, and for each soul that has ever been, that all of it will end in glory. That all of it will be part of some great and truly happy ending: where perfect justice and perfect mercy runs through us all, where Jesus is the centre and the heart of everything. That's our promised Land, that's where we're heading, and that is far bigger than Christmas.

It's also far bigger than what words can manage. A human being, a mere vicar, trying to describe what we are destined for *now*, on this side of the Kingdom, is a little like an acorn trying to imagine an oak tree. Or if such things could imagine, a drop of paint trying to imagine being part of a Rembrandt masterpiece. It is utterly, stupendously beyond our vocabulary and our comprehension. That's why we reach for music, art, prayer, silence. Our hope is bigger and braver and better than anything we can possibly articulate.

And *that's* why Advent, really. Use these weeks to let something bigger than your mind and tongue can cope with settle in your heart. Use them to remember that we hope for so much more than Christmas. That Christmas is just the prelude, just the first note to be struck, just the first ray of light piercing into the darkness. One day the sun will rise; one day the whole world will be light. One day all things will shine with justice and joy, and the whole creation will cry 'Glory!'. That is our destiny, and it will be magnificent. Let us get ready for it together.