

Sunday 29th November 2020 – 1st Sunday in Advent

Galatians 4:1-11

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Today we begin the advent season, the season of preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas. The word advent is from the Latin word 'adventus' meaning 'coming'. Advent is a season of expectation, anticipation and a season of waiting in hope.

Advent in one of its aspects is the period of preparation for the Feast of the Nativity....the birth of Jesus the Christ in Bethlehem. Advent is the time of 'getting ready'.

The big question then surely *is who is getting ready and for what?*

What about the world? What about the world's preparation for Christmas?

There will be many sermons, angry sermons preached this December and all the Decembers to come **on how the world** prepares for Christmas.

This 'glitzy' merchandise approach however with all its tinsel and colour and glitter has a long and legitimate ancestry. It is the continuation of the ancient festival of the winter solstice when people rejoiced that the sun had ceased to slide down the Southern sky and had made the turn which would bring it back again to the Northern hemisphere.

And so it was a time of rejoicing, a time of good fellowship because it renewed the people's hope in the workings of nature and the natural world. It was a time of feasting and festivities and the giving and receiving of presents.

The commercial over-lords of the Western world have adopted this Saturnalia with great enthusiasm!

This pagan festival was 'baptised' by the Church around 325 AD when the emperor decreed that Christianity was to be the official religion of the Roman Empire.

We don't know exactly when Jesus was born, **but it is traditionally** agreed that it was at the time of the winter solstice.

So the ancient rites were '**naturalised**' into the Christian faith with many of the old trappings and customs accepted as valid. *And so you see the merchant's carnival is not wholly a secular fiesta.*

The world's advent hustle and bustle is not entirely pagan. The effects of commercialisation and wealth and materialism and greed (*added to the illusion of self-sufficiency in our Western world*) have taken their toll, **however...** and this semi-sacred season of preparation has become very far removed from its baptism until we have reached a stage when Advent **is really observed by only a minority** as the anticipation of the 'Christ Mass'!

That is how the world prepares to celebrate the event which changed the course of world history in which time itself was 'split' in two!!

Now let's ask ourselves this, *if we dare to ask this question, 'How did God 'get ready' for Christmas?*

The moment we ask this question we realise how difficult it is to answer it as the Bible constantly warns us.

The prophet Isaiah has written his words of caution in the Old Testament.....*'for my thoughts are not your thoughts' and 'my ways are not your ways'. 'This is the word of the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts'.*

And Paul the apostle adds his word of warning to the Romans – *'O depth of wealth, wisdom and knowledge in God. How un-searchable his judgements, how untraceable his ways! **Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counsellor?***

And so we cannot probe this mystery by the techniques of scientific research or historic analysis. ***We have to 'turn' to people, men and women, of the Spirit for an answer.***

St Paul (*in his letters to the Galatians*), says this about the first Christmas..... ***'but when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law'***. That phrase *'the fullness of time'* has fascinated the interpreters.

It has been suggested that God chose this particular period for revealing his nature and purpose because at the time of the birth of Jesus Rome had given the world one government, Greece had supplied a common language and Judaism had offered a worthy mono-theistic faith.

But God did two surprising things at the nativity.

First, God chose a most unlikely method of revelation - *the child of two very ordinary people in a third-rate part of the Mediterranean world.*

And second God gave a surprising message, *Peace on earth....and to all people goodwill* at a time when there was great tension!

God prepared for Christmas by deciding to give people hope. He would give them hope which comes from renewed confidence ***that he cares for them and he loves them!***

We can put this in abstract terms and say that ***'the eternal broke into time once again in that stable in Bethlehem!'*** Perhaps it is more easily grasped if we say that the first Christmas marks the beginning of God's **new** attempt to give people hope, ***a hope that was wrapped up in a person – Jesus the Christ!***

And then finally how should we as Christians 'get ready' for Christmas?

We have to remember that we live in the world with all that that means. Therefore we share in the culture in the semi-Christian observance of the solar 'turn' of the year and we recognise it with joy and enthusiasm.

Santa Clause, decorated trees, stockings hung on the end of beds and the exchange of gifts all have a valid place each December. **But on the other hand we are also in the Church.**

Therefore we seek to understand what God was trying to do about 2000 or so years ago so that we may prepare ourselves properly to bend our knee (*in the mind's eye*) in the stable in Bethlehem and **let Christ come into our hearts.**

Advent is indeed a time for reflection, and as Christians a time to express regret and to seek forgiveness – call it repentance and faith if you prefer – and so it's important to take some time to think about the good news of “peace and goodwill to all” that was heralded from on high.

If you find these times difficult, remember the message of Advent is ‘wait for God in patient hope’. For it is towards the proclamation that we are headed in these next few weeks, and towards the renewal of a meaningful encounter with the living Lord that will bring our faith alive and make our living purposeful.

So we shall prepare ourselves to worship this Christmas,..... ***we shall send Christmas cards that really are cards for Christmas.*** We shall give gifts to those who can make no return except to say thank you. Support the food bank. So we as Christians enter through Advent into Christmas as people in the world and in the Church.

For the Christian there is a cultural and a religious observance of the season with the secular and the sacred intertwined in the same occasion.

At this Advent season we prepare for both the Christmas and the Christ...Mass recognising the place of each in our heritage and yet knowing **deep down in our hearts that we prepare to meet the Son of God.**

As we make our journey together over the coming weeks on our Pilgrimage to Bethlehem, ***will you come this Christmas and kneel at the feet of the Christ child who is God come to be with us?***

Will you come and receive the love of God and share it with the world? Will you come and meet the Christ child?

Amen.