

Sermon for Advent Sunday 2nd December 2018

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I have many blessings in my life for which I am deeply grateful, but wash and go hair is definitely not one of them. Hence my wide range of hats, which many of you have doubtless admired! Having difficult hair means that I spend more time than most people at the hairdressers. The dubious benefits of this are that I am always very up to date with news of the female members of the royal families of Europe, courtesy of *Hallo* magazine, and the exploits of minor celebrities in Chelsea, Essex, Love Island and the jungle, courtesy of the charmingly named *Heat* magazine. A not always unwelcome change from *The Church Times*.

I also have many stereotypical salon conversations with my hairdresser. They are variations on the theme of 'Are you doing anything nice this weekend? Are you going/have you been anywhere nice on holiday', and of course as the season turns "What are you doing for Christmas?" Well. This year that casual question stopped me in my tracks. What a good question. What am I doing for Christmas? What are you doing for it?

English is a wonderful language - searingly accurate one minute and nuanced and suggestive the next. Taken at one level the hairdresser's question is very easily answered: What are you doing, as in what is happening? I am cooking turkey for 25 or I am going to my cousin's in Croydon etc.

But inside the question is the trickier one - what am I doing FOR Christmas. Not so simple as taking the train south or even cooking that monster turkey. What am I doing to prepare, to connect myself with this event?

Today is Advent Sunday and a good day to ask ourselves the second part of that question. What am I doing FOR Christmas? How am I making myself ready for all it brings? How can I receive this year all it has to offer? Not everyone greets this season with joy unalloyed. Our readings are about preparing ourselves for the end times. Our focus though is preparing ourselves for the events four weeks from now.

To summarise then, the question is: How can I prepare spiritually as well as practically for Christmas this year? There are some little books available this morning by Bishop Sarah, Bishop of London called *A Good Advent*. Please do take one - they are worth reading.

I think help and insight can be also drawn from those very practical things we might find ourselves doing this month.

I'll start with preparing for visitors. What do we do when we are expecting house guests? In most homes this requires a certain amount of tidying up and clearing out. It is often useful to have a reason to turn out a wardrobe or mend a dining chair. To make some choices about what is needed and what is not. To make space for someone. To do what we can to make another person welcome.

Our hearts are preparing for a visit each Advent. The Holy Family travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, having no room at the inn must have greeted the sight of the stable with such relief, that finally Mary could rest and her baby be born. The lesson of the stable, of these visitors, should encourage us in our preparations. Should help us to see that we should not be worrying about the state of the curtains in the spare room, but the warmth of our welcome as our visitors ring the bell. As Paul writes in the letter to the young church in Thessalonica – the passage we heard today: *May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all*. Letting go of the grudges that can make our time together difficult.

Tidying our hearts to be honest about what we have made difficult for others. Let us do this for Christmas this year.

And then there is preparing for a feast. We plan carefully the menus and presents of the Christmas season. We order the best and richest things to eat and drink. The perfect gift – or so we hope for the ones we love. We spend money and time preparing for the feast. But to use a food analogy while our physical preparations are plum puddings and champagne our spiritual preparations are sometimes the equivalent of half a cream cracker and cold tea. Not enough time! But Advent is the church's way of giving us time to prepare for a feast of a different kind. Four weeks of some of the most beautiful passages in the Bible and the most beautiful prayers in our language. Four weeks to feed ourselves with the Word of God in preparation for the word of God - the Word made flesh, the glory of the incarnation. Word, glory, incarnation. If these are words that just hang in the air or stay flat on the page, then maybe this advent it is the richness of their meaning that can both prepare us for and be our true feast.

Read the first two chapters of St Luke and the first chapter of St John, and be ready to hear them afresh and in all their power. As we heard in our reading today: *Know that the kingdom of God is near...Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*". Let us know this for Christmas this year.

And preparing ourselves. A preoccupation and conversation of this time of the year is keeping well for Christmas. Flu jabs, vitamins, special diets or supplements. Running, cycling, walking. All good and important actions and activities. But some of us are not always well. Sometimes this is a physical disease or trouble sometimes something less tangible, but nonetheless painful and disturbing, making us less than we are or would like to be.

Later in the service this morning there will be an opportunity to bring ourselves forward for prayer. Prayer for healing, for the lifting of a burden, or as a sign of wanting to make this Advent a time of special closeness to God. Perhaps this is something to ask for Christmas this year.

Our homes, our thoughts, our hearts and ourselves ready for the coming of the Christ Child.

And just one thing more. An old non-conformist minister hearing of great joints of beef to be eaten in one home at Christmas gave his opinion that the only joints needed at Christmas are the ones in our knees. They must be ready to kneel at the manger.

For there is our Christmas and what it is for. What God did for us at Christmas is the proper study and food of Advent. Bending our knees to kneel at the manger - perhaps not actually but in our hearts and humility - and as we kneel to know ourselves so overwhelmingly loved, just as we are, just as you are, just as I am.

What God did for Christmas over 2000 years ago and what he is and does for us today, whatever, in the end, the state of our spare rooms, our larders, or even our hair. **Amen**