

The Rector writes again:

TIMES & SEASONS – ADVENT & CHRISTMAS

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...'

No, nothing to do with the new US President elect, nor with Brexit, nor even with the Church of England!! You may have recognised the opening lines of Charles Dickens marvellous novel 'A tale of two cities'.

Every great story needs a good beginning, and the 'greatest story ever told' has one too – 'A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God' (Isaiah 40:3).

Advent is the season of expectation and preparation for the coming (*latin 'adventus'*) of Christ in his incarnation. It also looks further forward to his final advent as a judge at the end of time. The churches readings and liturgies direct us not only to a stable in Bethlehem for a birth, but also to the throne room of heaven (even more spectacular than Hogwarts!).

Advent themes of the four last things – death, judgement, heaven and hell – hover behind the excitement of the impending birth of a special child. We are called to 'watch out' for both. Watch out how we conduct our lives – useful time might be spent in Advent reflections (*Tuesday nights at the Rectory*), and watching with anticipation for a saviour. What a pity the world is so heavily engaged in commercial activity at this precious time!

The season moves us from the darkness and cold of winter, to the light and warmth of Christ. The Advent carol service starts our journey, and each week we light candles on our Advent wreath (a custom inherited from the church in northern Europe in the 19thC).

Another European ceremony we enjoy came from the Moravian church – the 'Christingle' service (*Christmas Eve at St Martins*), which we celebrate with our children's nativity. So Christmas arrives, and once Santa Claus (St Nicholas?) has done his stuff, we can celebrate the real reason for the season, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God's Son.

Our celebrations are historic, Christmas was first celebrated in the 3rdC, the Christmas crib and nativity play were first performed in tableau by Francis of Assisi in the 12thC, Christmas carols date back to medieval times, and the traditional service of 'nine lessons and carols' (*Sun 18th Dec*) dates back to the 19thC.

Although dead trees and tired decorations are binned often by New Years day, the Christmas season goes on. At the end of the 12 days of Christmas we celebrate the feast of Epiphany, when Christ was revealed to the Gentiles (the Magi, Kings or Wise men) of our story. We go on to celebrate Jesus childhood and baptism, and our great 40 days of Christmas ends with the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Here Jesus is revealed as 'the light to lighten the Gentiles' and 'the glory of God's people Israel'. In medieval times candles that would provide light in the dark churches would be blessed on this day – hence its other title, Candlemas.

What a great start, to our story!

Another favourite famous story of mine begins:

'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.' (L P Hartley, 'The Go-between).

Jesus Christ, born in a humble stable, born as the Saviour of the world – God's go- between linking heaven to earth. The greatest story ever told moves on towards Easter – watch this space.

Your friend and storyteller,
Revd John

The Rector writes:

‘THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD’

The first time I saw Jesus in the flesh, so to speak, was at the Forum cinema in Coventry, when I took my Auntie Hilda to see George Steven’s film about the life of Jesus. Personally speaking, I quite enjoyed the experience, but then I knew the story! But the film was not particularly well received and flopped at the box office recouping only $\frac{3}{4}$ of its cost of \$21million (the highest costing film ever on release in 1965). There were some really good things about the film; the casting of Max von Sydow (relatively unknown at the time) as Jesus and Donald Pleasance as ‘the dark stranger’ worked for me. But the casting of many ‘Hollywood Greats’ in cameo roles really did detract from the story telling. A very bouffant Charlton Heston as John the Baptist, Telly Savalas (pre Kojak) as Pontius Pilate, David McCallum (the Man from Uncle) as Judas Iscariot, and perhaps worst of all John Wayne as the Centurion at the cross – who delivered the film’s greatest line in true western cowboy fashion, forgetting it was a wooden Roman sword and not a Colt 45 in his hand – ‘Truly this maaaaan was the Saaaaan of Gaaaaad’.

But let’s be fair – any attempt to portray the life and teaching of Jesus into 4hrs 20mins (later cut to 3hrs 17mins) was doomed to failure. The subject matter requires more depth and respect than can be fitted into such a short space. Even the later TV mini-series with Robert Powell as Jesus at 6hrs 22mins had similar problems, though it was slightly better received on release in 1977.

But for me the story of Jesus is and remains ‘the greatest story ever told’, and in our modern world its themes of love, sacrifice, forgiveness, redemption and salvation – it is very much a story that needs to be told today. And that is precisely what the church does – starting in Advent and working through to the Feast of Christ the King, the story is told every year and to every generation. The story is ageless and changeless, yet the world is a place of almost constant change. There is a challenge facing us as to how we might ensure the story is heard in our communities today. There are times when perhaps we have forgotten the art of storytelling – yet children still love stories. Or perhaps we have forgotten the excitement of the story – becoming over familiar with its repetition.

Through the ‘times and seasons’ of the year the church tells this story – I thought it might be an idea to write a series of articles to take us through these ‘times and seasons’ and encourage us to wonder at them and reflect on their relevance to us today.

Advent the beginning of a new church year is a good time to begin – the prologue to the wonder and joy of Christmas – the season that celebrates the great joy of God’s most wonderful present to the world – his Son – Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

As we welcome the Christ child this Christmas, let us make sure to welcome others to our celebrations at St Martin’s and in our wider community – as we begin the opening chapter of our annual telling of

‘the greatest story ever told’

Wishing you all a holy and blessed Christmas

Yours in Christ,

Reverend John, your Rector.