

December 2021

Reverend Susan writes:

Advent

As I sit here thinking about plans for Christmas and realise that I have to write my cards soon not to mention

buy some presents. I can't help but reflect on some of the presents I've received over the years – particularly when I was young. There was Wendy, my walkie-talkie doll, Cindy with her various accessories including her horse and then my 00 Gauge train set (which I still have).



I loved opening my presents but I was never a child who would wake up at 4am to rip them open instead I would open something small and wait until later for my main presents. This is something I still do much to Byron's bemusement.

It isn't that I don't want to know, or that I am ungrateful for, or indifferent towards, the gifts my family have lovingly thought about, bought and wrapped. Far from it. It's just that I find the anticipation equally exciting. I love the waiting and the build-up, savouring the thought of what is to come and finding the final revelation of love and generosity all the more wonderful and meaningful as a result.

It's no surprise, then, that I really value the season of Advent as much as I enjoy the arrival of Christmas itself.

Advent, as many of you will know, means ‘arrival’ and, in the weeks that lead up to Christmas in church, we explore that very theme: not only the arrival of the Christ-child in the manger at Bethlehem, but also the full realisation of the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ - the perfectly just, peaceful and loving community which we pray and trust will come one day on earth, as it already is in heaven.

This last 20 months or so has been a time of waiting. For some it has been a very painful time of illness and loss, for others there have been times of joy, yet for all of us it could be said there has been ‘meaning in the waiting’ (as per the title of Paula Gooder’s excellent book of Advent reflections). We have discovered new ways of being community, new ways of serving and caring for each other, new ways of worshipping and experiencing God.

As we wait this Advent, what is it we really wait for? A reduction in the severity of the pandemic; the recovery of our communal life, healing for our loved ones?

All of these things but also and perhaps most importantly I pray that we look for the comfort and joy of the sure and certain presence of God in our midst - Emmanuel - guiding us step by step through the darkness towards the perfect light of his Kingdom.

I wish you a blessed Advent, a joyful Christmas and a New Year full of grace, goodness and love.

Rev Susan

Reverend Michael writes:

Christmas

Have you ever wondered why the celebration of Christmas is so child centred? The obvious answer is that it's a time for exchanging gifts and perhaps we adults mistakenly think that it's only children who enjoy opening presents. I know that I enjoy that experience now just as much as when I was a child. Even in the church though, Christmas is very much focussed for our children.



Nearly every church in the country will have a crib service of one sort or another where the story of the nativity will be re-enacted and schools and nursery schools throughout the land will also have their nativity plays. Christmas is so dominant in our thinking that for some of these institutions it is the only Christian Story that ever gets taught in any detail year by year.

Why do we focus on the Christmas story then since in reality, the commemoration of the events of Holy Week and Easter are more significant because it is here that we learn of the significance of the gift of Jesus Christ to the world. I can imagine you all thinking to yourselves well, the Christmas story is a good cuddly story with no nasty bits and a happy ending and so its much more appropriate than the Easter story for children to act out. It's true that nativity plays are soft and cuddly but the real Christmas story isn't really like that. Think of the Holy Innocents in chapter 2 of Matthew's gospel, slaughtered by Herod in his attempts to kill

Jesus. When do we ever hear mention of that in nativity plays? Think of the exhausting journey that the heavily pregnant Mary had to undertake. The suffering that she must have endured here is never acted out in nativity plays. Despite all these other events though, the story of Christmas is a joyful event and because it is concrete in nature it's much easier for children to begin to understand than Easter. That is why we teach our children the Christmas story. Hopefully they will begin to understand it and their enquiring minds will lead them to ask some of the more difficult questions later.

For us adults though, if we go deeper than the nativity, (Why not read the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke's Gospel) the reality of God becoming man is a very challenging and exciting fact of the Christian faith. God could give us no greater gift than to share his life with ours and so when we exchange gifts this Christmas remember that the symbolism is in many ways inadequate. It may be the best that we can do in concrete terms but the most loving response to the birth of Jesus is to remember that God sent him into the world for a purpose, to teach us and to give his life that we might live. Our response must be then to follow his teaching and claim for ourselves the inheritance that he promised, eternal life for those who believe.

Have a joyful and Peaceful Christmas and may God Bless you all

Rev Michael