

Pastoral Letter - East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

December 2022

Dear Friends,

It was with a wry smile the other day that I noticed two large Advent Calendars on the Welsh Dresser in the kitchen - our two children Chloe and Tyler are well beyond the infant years now, but they still exhibit the lively expectation of having an Advent Calendar. Day by day they will open the windows and enjoy the chocolate delights inside! It is just one of many customs and traditions that we associate with this time of the year, which help us to mark the journey through the season of Advent, to the joyful celebration of Christmas.

Advent Calendar is also the title of one of my favourite poems by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, an accomplished poet as well as an erudite theologian. The poem is deliberately couched in the language and imagery of winter - a powerful reminder that in the northern hemisphere this season of preparation coincides with the reality of shorter days and the prevalence of darkness. It is often the case that this is accompanied by prevailing winter weather - frost, snow, storm, and rain. Through the passage of four memorable stanzas, Rowan takes us from '*last leaf's fall*' of late Autumn to the '*star-snowed fields of sky*' in December, whilst at the same time reminding us of the promise of Advent '*He will come*'. If you are not familiar with this work, then I commend it to you - search it out and let it be part of your reading and reflection this Advent.

The beauty of this poem and the reason why I return to it so often at this time of the year, is that it reminds me of a lasting truth at the heart of the Gospel - the incarnation is about the presence of God in Christ in the here and now, not some distant historic event with little bearing upon my life. It is the startling truth that God's presence, in all its love, mercy, peace and grace, is revealed in the present reality of our human experience now! It is for this reason that the recurring verse '*He will come*' is so important because it acts as a faithful repetition of the Advent promise that *Christ will come* - in darkness, cold, fear, struggle and violence, *Christ will come!*

The question of the incarnation and the mystery of the presence of God in Christ became the *cantus firmus* for the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (German theologian and martyr) as he wrestled with the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany and the seeming impotence of a Church that had accommodated itself to the status quo and lost the courage to act and speak prophetically. In contrast, a costly discipleship, shaped by the spirit and person of Christ, might align you with a vastly different group of people and might lead to a quite unique way of being in the world! For Bonhoeffer, there is a constant need for the disciple and the church, to ask the question '**Who is Jesus Christ today?**'

I hope and pray that each one of us will wrestle with that same question as we journey through Advent and celebrate Christmas. At a time when there is conflict in Europe, a cost-of-living crisis, fuel poverty and an ever-greater disparity between the rich and the poor, what will it mean for us to pray 'Come Lord Jesus.'? In a society that is less Christian (according to the latest census) and where the historic Christian denominations are haemorrhaging resources and people, what will it mean to sing 'Come Lord Jesus'? When all is said and done, we might well be surprised, when we discover the presence of Christ in our midst and his calling upon our lives!

With very best wishes,

Julian

