

Holy Communion, St David's, 1/12/19; Advent Sunday

A few years ago the Large Hadron Collider, the so-called 'Big Bang machine', which lies 100 metres under the French and Swiss borders near Geneva, began its operations to discover more about the nature of our world. Minute particles are sent in opposite directions around the 27 km ring until they are brought together in a controlled collision to see what emerges. They started with low energy collisions designed to test the equipment. Then they began the real thing; high energy collisions designed to see into the heart of matter and understand the fundamental nature of things. Not long after it began operations the LHC was in the news again for having

detected a very special particle indeed – the Higgs-Boson – the so-called ‘God-particle’, and you don’t get much more fundamental than that.

The Large Hadron Collider creating high energy collisions in the search for understanding the fundamental nature of things, sounds to me like a good description of what Advent Sunday brings. The low energy collisions began a little while ago with the opening of the Cathedral’s Christmas market and switching on the Christmas lights in the city; then this week there was the slight weirdness of what has come to be called ‘Black Friday’ when there is more energy in the collisions, because there are sales; and then today, Advent Sunday, when the real high energy collisions begin to take place and things really accelerate, as we enter a period when

parallel worlds come close to each other. The normal routine of life carries on circling in one direction, while at the same time a momentum builds, travelling in the opposite direction, towards our Christmas celebrations. There have been some low energy collisions even at this early stage as at least some of the present or food buying begins, and plans are made for which rooms the kids will occupy for their two week stay. But now the energy and the frequency of the collisions increases, as events and preparations are compressed into a smaller space and a shorter time, until the great explosion takes place at Christmas and we see again the fundamental nature of things. Today, Advent Sunday, four weeks or so to Christmas, signals that the machine is up and running and that the pace is accelerating.

That begins to sound as apocalyptic as many of the readings set for this time of year, such as the reading from Matthew we had as our Gospel today. Here, in part of a longer passage, Jesus is giving his disciples a warning about what has come to be called the 'end times', that period when Christ will come again in power and great glory which will be preceded by great trauma for the world and for those who follow him; actually it begins to sound like the general election too. Because of that, Jesus says, we are to stay awake and alert, to learn to read the signs, to remain faithful to Christ whatever happens, to look for his coming as the consummation of all things, and to pray for strength to stand before him when he comes to judge the world.

Now I do understand that as we look forward to the coming of Christ at Christmas

we are also looking forward to his coming again. We prepare for his first coming by preparing for the second; we make room in our hearts for him now, so that we can stand in his strength at the time of trial, at the end of all things, when time and eternity collide and the fundamental matter of all things really is exposed and made plain. I understand all that, both theologically and spiritually, but I am also a relatively simple person. I like Christmas, and I like taking a little time working up to it. And while I'm not personally that keen on the idea of God's judgement, for reasons I won't go into this morning, I also look forward to that time when Christ is all in all and justice and righteousness and truth - things we need very badly now - are the foundation of our life together; but I'd kind of like to dwell on Christmas a little before we turn our

attention to the cross and to the end of all things, for there is nothing more significant than the incarnation of God as one of us and the hallowing of all things that brings.

The traditional themes for the Sundays in Advent are the cheery ones of heaven, hell, death and judgement. They are themes that are designed to make us slow down a bit and think, and put all the seasonal madness into some form of spiritual perspective. A few years ago the Church of England had an online Advent Calendar under the general slogan – pinched from a cooking show of the time – ‘ready, steady, slow’, and this isn’t, in fact, a bad idea. You may not want to spend all that much time considering heaven, hell, death and judgement, but the real idea is to encourage us all to take a little time to think through how we live our lives now, in a time of

climate crisis, for instance, in the light of eternity and God's values to see if there are ways in which we can 'tread more lightly on the earth', use fewer resources, take more care with our waste, shop in ethical ways, care for one another and address the great misery of our world and so on. The real thrust is to get us to take the time to think before we act, and to think both spiritually and ethically about how we live.

So in a way, slowing down a bit in Advent is about spending a bit of time thinking, as we used to put it, about the real meaning of Christmas. And as we think about the real meaning of Christmas - the coming of God among us as one of us, I think we need to use the real meaning of Advent to get to it, and not rush through Advent as if it was but a great ticking clock counting down just how little time we have

left before the real event. So the point of Advent is: don't just do something, sit there.

Taking our time to savour the anticipation of the coming of Christ is an important part of what Advent is for: it's for seeing the great plan of our liberation laid out before us as we await Christ's coming. So, we look again at the patriarchs and the ways in which God's people were gathered and formed and came to understand what it means to be God's people. We hear again the great prophets of Israel forcefully reminding God's people that justice and peace and righteousness and truth and honesty are the foundations of their life together and of God's demands for us all. We see again the fearless sacrifice of John the Baptist, killed by a political machine, who could point to Jesus and see in him the

Lamb of God come to bring about our liberation. And we see the willing courage and love of Mary as she brings her child into the world and prepares him for his work in God's name. Advent gives us this historical and spiritual context for Jesus and for our life together, and, as it happens, for considering what we do in a general election, and dwelling in it, taking the time to hear it, can not only make Advent valuable and enjoyable in itself, it can make Christmas more meaningful too.

Jesus was steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, in the traditions of the prophets, and in the deep roots of a community's faith in which he was brought up and nurtured. Jesus saw himself as standing in that long line of prophets sent by God to bring the people of Israel back to faithfulness, back to the roots of their faith in loving service of

God and loving service of their neighbour, of caring for the orphan and the widow, of treating the stranger with dignity and respect. Jesus stands up in his home Synagogue and says to those who thought they knew him best, the Spirit of the Lord is on me and I have been sent in God's name to liberate the world from sin and death and falsehood and destruction, from all that enslaves it. This shines through the life and teachings of Jesus, and is that which we really need to know if we are to make sense of Jesus and what he comes to do.

This period of Advent is the time when we are called back to our roots and when we hear the call again to faithfulness. We start at the beginning with the great sweep of God's creative purpose, and we learn again with the people of Israel what it means to be God's people, we learn again

the disastrous consequences of living sinfully, we learn again, in language that has yet to be bettered, the quality of life that God wills for us and for all people. If nothing else, and if you really want to understand what Jesus was on about, don't just read that Christmas stories, read the books of the prophets; read Isaiah, Amos and Micah during Advent and understand the spiritual context of Jesus.

During Advent we can pause and think, we can re-align ourselves with the will and purposes of God, we can prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ by making a pilgrimage to the heart of things by opening ourselves anew to God's love.

In the Scandinavian traditions in which I was brought up, Advent has its own distinct spiritual and cultural flavour, and because

of the long dark Swedish nights, the traditions centre not only on special music and readings, but most particularly, they centre on light. In our house, and in many others now, Advent lights, those nice chevron-shaped, 7 candle lamps shine brightly in our windows through the long hours of dark as a witness to the light that is coming into the world at Christmas. A light by which we can see the great sweep of God's love and purposes, by which we can see the foundations of a faithful life, and by which we see the real and fundamental nature of things. And that is what Advent is for.