

## The Second Sunday of Advent

*St Thomas, Salisbury, 2021*

*Malachi 3:1-4*

*Philippians 1:3-11*

*Luke 3:1-6*

Lord Jesus, light of the world, born in David's city of Bethlehem, born like him to be a king, born in our hearts this Advent-tide; be King of our lives today. Amen.

Friends and family are well aware of the annual battle of wills which exists in our house. And it concerns when the Christmas tree should go up. Emma is a jovial, gregarious and optimistic person, and would really like the Christmas tree to go up pretty smartly upon the heels of Advent Sunday. I am not renowned my joviality, gregariousness *or* optimism. I would like to put the Christmas tree up on Christmas Eve, and am quite clear Christmas trees do not belong in the season of Advent...

... And so I set off on today's sermon surrounded by challenging context.

But actually the more I thought about it over the past week, the more this particular Sunday in Advent, which we experience annually in St Thomas's Church in this rather strange way, surrounded by harbingers of the festive season whilst, in the colour of our vestments, the absence of flowers, and our choice of hymns, still being stubbornly less than halfway through Advent, might not be a rather fine parable in its own right.

I have vivid memories of a school nativity play that I was in in primary school. So I guess I was about seven or eight. And it was a sort of creative amalgam of the story of St Boniface and

the Victorian introduction of the Christmas tree into English tradition. Boniface of Crediton was an Anglo-Saxon missionary, and good deal of his ministry took place in what is now Germany. The famous story is that he comes across a group of pagans worshipping an oak tree, and filled with evangelical zeal he chops the tree down. Now in the version of the story that we did in school, he then points to a little fir tree that is revealed behind the fallen oak, and preaches a sermon about how this fir tree is a wonderful prophecy of the true God: evergreen like God's love, and pointing upwards towards heaven. It went down well in Tutshill Church of England primary school.

Christmas trees are pointy. They point up towards God. This time last year on one of the daily audio thoughts I talked about the 'Pointy Stick of Prophecy'. That prophets, and prophecy, are an integral part of the way in which God reveals himself to us. That alongside affirmation and assurance of love, we all need a jolly good poking now and again. So the prophets are there to jab at us with pointy stick of prophecy, to wake us up, and to point us back to God. We need to be pointed back towards God.

And both of the great 'purple' seasons of the church year, the penitential seasons, and you can tell them not only by the colour but by the lack of a Gloria amongst other things, both of these seasons are there to point us back towards God. But Advent has a different tone to Lent doesn't it? That is because the advent penitence is penitence tinged with expectation. Or perhaps the advent expectation is an expectation tinged with penitence? Either way, we are waiting.

And the prophets that we hear read, Malachi today, Jeremiah last week, Zephaniah next week, are all in their own way poking us, waking us up, nudging us back around to face the right way, preparing us for the coming of the Lord. In today's prophecy,

“who can endure the day of his coming? He is like refiner’s fire.”

We sit, don’t we, in between the first coming and the second coming of the Lord. The first coming is that which we celebrate each year at Christmas. A coming in flesh. A coming in history. Coming in relative obscurity. That is not what we are waiting for. No, we are waiting for that. Up there. About which the Rector preached last week. The ‘second coming’, as it is often known. Which will be unavoidable. Which will be glorious.

And that is what is presented in today’s gospel isn’t it? I’m going to leave John the Baptist for whoever’s preaching next week. Because we get him twice. So forget the middle of the gospel for today. The beginning is a bunch of historical information. Jesus was born in this particular place and these particular people were ruling. The end is the vision of unavoidable revolution. Valleys lifted. Mountains laid low. The crooked made straight. First coming, and last coming. All in the space of six verses.

How do we live in the middle? What are we supposed to do? Well I turn, as you might expect, to the Cistercians. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that actually it isn’t particularly helpful to think about first coming and the *second* coming of Christ. He says there are at least three. There is the first one, in flesh, in Bethlehem. And there is most certainly the *last* one, painted up there on the wall. But Christ comes to us in between as well. Comes to us half-hidden, like in Bethlehem, and half-visible, like on the last day. Comes to us, into our hearts, comes to us like a road leading from Bethlehem to the Kingdom. He says this: “the middle coming is like a road that leads from the first to the last. At the first Christ was our redemption; at the last, he will become manifest as our life, but

in this middle way he is our rest and our consolation.” And although he doesn’t say it, it’s obvious from what he’s writing that Christ also comes to us now not only to sooth and console us, but also to provoke us. Like the pointy stick of prophecy. Like the sharp end of a Christmas tree. To nudge us back onto the path. To inspire us to cry out against injustice. To face down persecution. To be brave and courageous for the voiceless.

And one of Bernard’s contemporaries, Gueric of Igny, another Cistercian Abbot, noted that of course one of the places where these middle comings of Christ are most focused are at the altar. In a few minutes time the Rector will hold up the host, and then lower it back down again to the altar. And that is Christ coming to you. And it’s halfway between Bethlehem and the Kingdom. Bethlehem remember was almost unnoticed and utterly ordinary. The Kingdom will be unavoidable and extraordinary. And here we have both. It’s just bread. Surely it’s just bread? Utterly ordinary. And yet. And yet, it is Christ, coming to you, driving the path of his Kingdom directly to your heart, pointing the way to the End, to the culmination, pointing the way home, like a Christmas tree pointing to heaven.

Brothers and sisters, relish Advent. If your tree is already up, rejoice in its evergreen foliage, reminding you of the everlasting love of God. If, like me, you are holding your nerve, allow that empty space into which Christmas will burst in a few brief days, allow that space to be pregnant with expectation. And look, and listen, for the coming of Christ right here and right now. In each other. In the stranger on the street. In the hints and guesses of the incarnation that might catch our eyes in the most unexpected times and places. And most especially in the holy Sacrament of the altar, utterly ordinary and utterly divine.

Keep waiting. Keep watching. Christ is near. In the name...