

The Third Sunday of Advent

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdalene,
Hewelsfield, 2021*

*Zephaniah 3:14-end
Luke 3:7-18*

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

I don't know whether any of you have chocolate advent calendars in your lives? Perhaps you have children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, or perhaps you just really enjoy chocolate and fit yourself out with a chocolate advent calendar each year for your own use!

One of the things that irritates some churchgoers is that no matter when advent begins in terms of calendar date, your chocolate advent calendar, or even your more health-conscious advent calendar with just pictures in it, always stubbornly begin on 1 December. Which may well be before after the actual season of Advent begins.

This year is a really good example. Advent began on Sunday, 28 November, but those poor children had to wait, their mouths slaving, until Wednesday of that week, four whole days later, to open the door and liberate the first chocolate from its tinfoil covering!

Advent isn't a fixed length of time. Sometimes it is only just three weeks long. Other years, like this year, it is almost 4 weeks long. Which means that this Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, is right bang in the middle of the season this year.

We have had 14 days of Advent so far. And there are 13 days still to come. We are in the middle. As Bon Jovi would say, we are 'half way there'.

And there are a lot of customs associated with the journey through Advent. One of them is the advent crown, or Advent wreath, which burns here before us today. And depending on which church you go to you will find a set of different things associated with each candle. So in my church in Salisbury the candles represent, sequentially, the prophets, the patriarchs, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary.

If you ask the vicar here, he will tell you that they represent love, joy, hope and peace.

One of the most misunderstood customs is the one of having an unusual rose coloured, or pink, candle. Three of them are purple, the one is pink. Quite often people assume that the pink candle must be for Mary, pink for a girl, that sort of thing, and therefore it should be lit last, on the final Sunday of Advent. But actually we light it today, on the third Sunday of Advent.

The reason for that goes way back into the mediaeval period, and probably even further back that. In those days Advent was kept as a fast, much like Lent. So you weren't allowed to play the organ during advent, and there were because of the physical fasting, abstaining from food on quite a lot of the days of the season, building up to Christmas. But on this day, falls pretty much right in the middle of the season, there was a glimpse of hope, and a relaxing of those rules, as a reminder that all of our journeying is a journeying towards glory. So the deep purple that symbolises penitence was replaced, just for one day, with the colour of the rising Sun. This pinky, rosey

colour. And the Bible texts chosen that service, for that Sunday, were peppered with the word 'rejoice'. So the first words of the service on third Sunday of Advent were these: "rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice."

And all of the tone and the thrust of service on that day, and it's still true actually today in our modern services, the reminder that above all other things the calling of the Christian is to rejoice. To rejoice in the coming of Christ to Christmas, but to rejoice also because Christ comes to us now, in the bread and wine are Communion, in prayer, through the Scriptures, in our brothers and sisters in the church, and all those hints and guesses of his coming in the world around us.

Rejoice! It was there in the old Testament reading wasn't it: Zephaniah says, "sing aloud O daughter Zion; shout O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart." And although we didn't read the new Testament reading today, if we had we would have heard Paul's words to the Philippians, those same words that have been associated with this day in advent since at least the mediaeval period: "rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!"

What might it be like to live as people who rejoice? Well briefly just two thoughts. First of all something about the colour of the candles and the robes on this special day in the middle of Advent. What the mediaevals were trying to do with this bit of symbolism was to evoke the dawn. I don't know whether any of you however literally kept the night watch? Maybe when you have been ill, or you have been sitting with someone is really ill through the night, and you sort of desperately hope for the dawning of the day? Or perhaps you served in the forces and were up on a night shift? And the moment that that first pinky red tinge appears in the East, and

the first light peers over the horizon, that is a moment of hope. The rose coloured candle, and the robes where they are still worn as well, are there to remind us that the dawn is coming. The sun is coming up. And of course the Bible is full of this sort of language: look towards the east to Jerusalem and see the glory that is coming from God. Like the sun in the morning sky the saviour of the world. We are supposed to be expectant that. Are we looking for the dawn everywhere? In our own lives of prayer? Maybe also in our communities, our society? Is our voice heard crying out on behalf of the light, where people are locked in darkness for one reason or another? Can the church be heard standing up to the darkness? That's the dawn. A pink candle today, to remind us in the middle of this darkest time of the year that the sun is coming up.

And connected to that, today's gospel reading. John the Baptist cries out the people to repent. But notice how incredibly practical that cry is. It isn't just, repent and say your prayers. It is repent and share your coat and your food. Repent and don't abuse the population with unjust taxes. Repent and don't use threats and false accusations. Repent, and be satisfied with what you have. It is a call to live lives that are shaped for the dawn. Shaped ready to welcome the light as it emerges. And of course that is a theme that Jesus picks up in his own ministry isn't it? Keep awake. Be ready. And that might be a sort of standing question for any PCC really: are we ready? Are we awake? What would happen if Christ returned today? Would he find us expectant and alert?

And to nourish us and help us in that Advent task of being ready to greet the light, we are sent the prophets, patriarchs, John the Baptist and Mary, we are encouraged to live lives shaped by love, joy, hope and peace. And we are reminded

that above all else call on the Christian is to rejoice. Can we live lives that really do that? Your heart, lift up your voice, rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Amen.