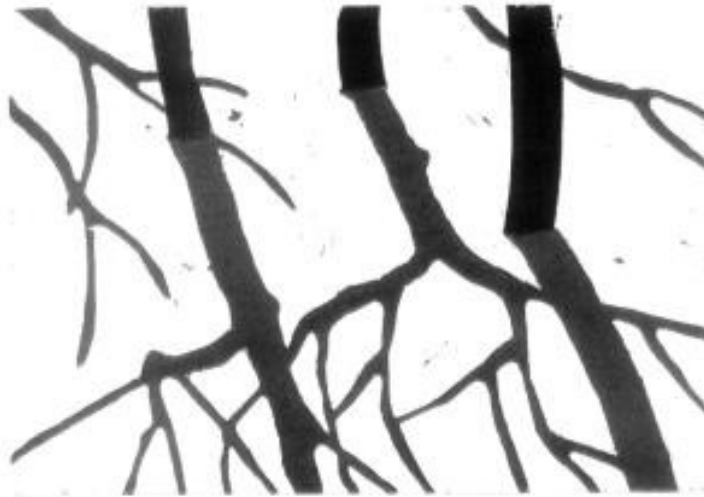


Hark! a herald voice is calling!



"Christ is nigh!" it seems to say;
"Cast away the dreams of darkness,
O ye children of the day!"

These lines from an Advent hymn by Edward Caswall remind us that the season of Advent starts on Sunday 3rd December bringing the Church's calendar round to the start of a new ecclesiastical year.

During the season of Advent, the readings and themes in our worship invite us to prepare for our judgement by reviewing our lives and amending them accordingly. The theme is dark because of our consciences. But it is not hopeless, because we know God's love and mercy filter through even on our darkest days. This season of preparation runs until Christmas Eve when suddenly, and joyfully, it transforms into the still peace and joy of Christmas. Well, the still peace and joy of Christmas as it should be experienced, rather than the mad scramble that takes place on our High Streets every year, unfortunately.

With the exception of Easter, major Christian festivals are fixed rather than following the lunar journey around the earth. This has the impact of making every Advent fall in winter and we follow its themes alongside the gradually cooling down of the earth and air. The onset of winter brings its own set of pleasures and pains. Cold weather requires us to make preparation and give ourselves protection from the problems of hypothermia but it is also one of the most beautiful times of the year. Especially in those parts of the world where snow falls, the winter landscape provides us with an exhilarating and poignant sight as the naked wood stand out against the chaste snow.

During Advent, we are all challenged to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Gospel:

Advent 1- The parable of the fig tree and the need for preparedness;

Advent 2- The appearance of John the Baptist preaching the need for repentance and preparation;

Advent 3- John's dialogues with those who come seeking his baptism and references to "another."

Advent 4- Mary visits Elizabeth and speaks words of God's justice which we call Magnificat.

One of the things that has become apparent over the past few years in the world of liturgy and worship is that innovation does not always bring improvement. We have at our finger tips a wonderful inheritance of literature and liturgy and we should appreciate it more. We should all try and make the most of the treasures which are to be found in our ordinary activities as a worshipping community, such as the Confession and Absolution, the deeper meaning of the Gospel readings and the other details of our worship which we take for granted week by week. Don't take them for granted but look at them afresh for the Christian message of forgiveness and reconciliation which is at the heart of God.

In order to make more of these treasures, a time of preparation may be needed by most people. But do you set aside time for such preparation? Do you arrive at Church without thinking about what is going to be happening? Do you arrive in haste, or late, or thinking about other things?

The way to make more of what we are doing together on Sunday morning is to think ahead and prepare. There is help for you to do this in Stop Press, our weekly newsletter. On page 2 of each issue there is a section which outlines the biblical readings of the following Sunday and summarizes the content of each passage. This also gives the references to the bible. So it would be possible to look up and read in advance any of the readings and think about these in advance, say on Saturday, or earlier on Sunday morning.

Attending a mid-week service also helps by supplementing our Sunday experience with something which is more reflective and quiet. Here is time for silence and a closer touch of the mystery of faith. Christians in every generation have found that a time, even a short time reflection and quiet, a time of prayer to God, is a renewing and refreshing experience. Try it for yourself. Extra help is available on request from Neil.

The Advent hymn quoted above continues with a positive and hopeful theme. It bears us a mysterious and challenging range of ideas. Let us enter the mystery and accept the challenges.

Neil Richardson

Startled at the solemn warning,
Let the earth-bound soul arise;
Christ, her Sun, all ill dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.

Lo, the Lamb, so long expected,
Comes with pardon down from heaven.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all, to be forgiven,

That, when next He comes with glory
And the world is wrapped in fear,
With His mercy He may shield us
And with words of love draw near.

Honour, glory, might, and blessing,
To the Father and the Son,
With the everlasting Spirit,
While eternal ages run!

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Edward Caswall
1814-1878