

Introduction

If you chose just three or four words to summarise the season of Advent, what would they be? Hope? Light? Watchfulness? Anticipation?

Imagine someone coming to your church for the first time during Advent this year. What would impact them if they came to a service? Would it be the Advent Wreath? Or maybe a Christingle service?

Common Worship *Times and Seasons* teaches us that the Advent Wreath was imported into Britain from Northern Europe in the 19th Century. The Christingle was imported into Britain from Moravia in the late 20th Century. Each are, I believe, creative ways of describing the season of Advent through light, story and symbols.

This Advent reflection uses the illustration of both as a place from which we may listen; question; reflect and enter into the season in preparation at its end for our Nativity story.

The First Candle

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

John 1.9-10

The Gospel of John introduces Jesus as the light coming into the world. Our Advent Wreaths and Christingles each use the symbol of light to point towards Jesus. The Christingle is particularly effective and yet not the easiest teaching aid to assemble. If you have put together a Christingle you will know what I mean. It is a messy business inserting the candle and you may have felt the discomfort of one of the points of a cocktail stick pushed into the orange. 'Healthy' Christingle's sport raisins rather than sweets yet both can prove difficult to attach to the sticks.

However, what I am more interested in is the interpretation as to what those four cocktail sticks represent. Is it the harvest of the four corners of the earth? Or the harvest of the four seasons? I have heard both versions expressed with equal conviction.

If the seasons, then Advent of course sits in the season of winter. The shortest day touches Advent and the barrenness of deep winter stretches forth its promise. At the start of this time we light the first candle on the Advent Wreath. The solitary candle reminds me of those other candles found in the cold air of winter: the living snowdrop. They foretell the earliest promise of spring when no other sign of spring is near.

Snowdrops in snow. Light in darkness. A sign of hope in the midst of winter. This gives me a reason to rejoice and be thankful. At the beginning of Advent, whatever we face, however unknown or empty it may be, we take comfort from that single candle flame of hope facing the darkness. The hope of Jesus: *Jesus was in the world, and the world came into being through him.* His light is in us, is with us and is constantly giving us the hope we need. Let us give thanks with gratitude for his light and hope.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5.16-18

People of God: awake!
The day is coming soon
when you shall see God face to face.
Remember the ways and the works of God.
God calls you out of darkness
to walk in the light of his coming.
You are God's children.

Second Candle

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Rev 3.20

As we light the second candle on our Advent Wreath, the brightness of the light is doubled in strength. The light chases away the darkness. If we allow our candles to symbolise the year's seasons, then lighting the second candle moves us from cold winter to early spring. After the shortest day of midwinter the daylight begins to lengthen. The single candle of deep winter becomes the double candles of early spring. Although we remain in Advent, the promise of light to come begins to stir within us. I am reminded of Jesus stirring within my heart through the words of his invitation above. *Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking.* He asks: *will you hear my voice? And if you do, will you open the door?*

The invitation of Jesus knocking at the door of our hearts and offering to come in and eat with us describes an invitation of incredible intimacy and friendship. Can there be a greater invitation extended to us? Jesus doesn't enter without our inviting him in. Will you open the door? When we do so, we begin a relationship and the invitation becomes two-way. We invite Jesus to enter. Jesus invites us to eat with him.

The spiritual act of 'sitting down' and 'eating' with him reflects an honesty of an open heart. We can place our thoughts and anxieties before him. We can ask Jesus to respond to our petitions. If he asks us to open the door, then we can have confidence to ask him to respond to our requests. Let us place them before him. Offer him your hopes and desires, your requests and petitions, for yourself and for others. Jesus loves the relationship we share with him when we offer him our genuine prayers of hope and request.

'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Matthew 7.7-8

People of God: be glad!
Your God delights in you,
giving you joy for sadness
and turning the dark to light.
Be strong in hope therefore;
for your God comes to save.
You are God's children.

Third Candle

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

John 1.6-9

As we light the third candle on our Advent Wreath, we do so on the Sunday our lectionary readings focus on the person of John the Baptist. The increasing brightness of our candles remind us of the greater light which John shed to those around him. And yet John himself said he was not the light which is to come into the world, but he simply points to that light.

If one candle on the wreath was a symbol of hope in the darkness of winter, and two a symbol of the coming of spring, then three possibly reveal a greater fullness of spring.

There is a peculiar thing about spring. The grass begins to grow and to turn green. There is a flourishing of spring flowers, the sound of birdsong, the buzzing of the bumble bee. Gardens come to life with the promise of plenty, yet there remains little to eat. The growth is illusory. Salad crops and summer fruit do not come until later for all the unfurling of leaves. The promise of new life remains yet a promise of the summer harvest - but the true harvest is yet to come. In a similar way, John was a witness to the light, he testified to the light, yet he was not the true light. The true light was yet to come.

On this Sunday we celebrate the one who points towards the true light. It is also Rose Sunday or Refreshment Sunday which eases our Advent fast. We look to the fruitfulness to come, and in doing so we are moved to prepare ourselves to receive the greater blessing. Preparation is a theme of Advent. Preparation to receive the light of Jesus is preceded by John's call to prepare, to repent, that we may be ready.

To my lips at this time comes the word, 'sorry.' John calls to us to repent; to prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ. 'Sorry' is not always the easiest of words to express yet I believe it is an overwhelmingly powerful word of preparation for the growth of fruitfulness in our lives. John called the people to say sorry, to repent. In our hope, our thankfulness, our petitions we leave room to also repent of all that needs to be removed from our hearts that the true light coming into the world may shine out of our hearts.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Mark 1.5-6

People of God: return!
You are called to be God's own.
From the mountains announce the good news.
God comes in justice and peace,
to all who follow his ways.
You are God's children.

Fourth Candle

For nothing will be impossible with God. Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1.37-38

On this, the final Sunday before Christmas Day, the fourth candle is lit on the Advent Wreath. Following the seasons of our year, we move into the expectancy of full summer. Mary has trusted the angel with the news she will become a mother. We are reminded nothing is impossible with God. We anticipate the Christmas gift of God's Son come to earth. The stage is set for the culmination of our Advent watch.

Yet for all the promises, hopes and desires, I am aware that for many Christmas hope feels like an empty promise. Those who have never received the joy of promise of a longed-for child, those who lose a child or who face the holy holiday alone without family or friends around them can feel lonelier than ever when the rest of the world is rejoicing. Those of you whose hearts carry pain, unfulfilled longing, or unhealed memories: - how do you find peace when Christmas points towards joy? The only way I know to be able to celebrate when my heart is breaking is to find the freedom to be able to say, *I forgive you.*

Whether this is forgiveness for ourselves or forgiveness towards God or forgiveness to others, we remember that forgiveness is a gift given to us from God. Empty promises hurt long after they are delivered. Waiting for healing is a long process. Yet forgiveness is a gift we can receive. Even if we find it painful to ask for it, we can open the door as Jesus knocks upon the door of our hearts. We can let him sit and eat with us. We can pour out our frustrations and offer our forgiveness as best we can. As we do so Jesus begins the harvest within us which is the harvest of Christmas: the true light and its precious crop - which is Christ in you.

The Apostle James compares the healing within us with the patience of a farmer waiting for his crops to grow. The alert watchfulness of the anticipation of Advent is summed up for me in these verses:

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the Lord is near.

James 5.7-8

People of God: prepare!
God, above all, maker of all,
is one with us in Christ.
God, the mighty God,
bends down in love to earth.
God with us, God beside us,
comes soon to the world he has made.
We are God's children,
we seek the coming Christ.

May you know a blessed Advent and enjoy a fruitful Christmas.

Every blessing,
Mother Alison.