



## WHAY- HAY what a ride!

Good morning. Happy New Year. And a special welcome to Planet Earth to Caspian, who is to be baptised this morning.

Today is the start of Advent and so the start of a new, Christian, (liturgical year). It is tricky for the preacher to find fresh ways of speaking about the different elements of the liturgical carousel.

It's rather like meeting with the same relatives at the same annual occasions and realising that the exchanges are set-piece. If you, too, have been around the liturgical running track for more than one lap you will know that the name *Advent* comes from the Latin *adventus* and means 'the coming'. It is the season immediately ahead of Christmas, and it begins today.

The tradition asks us to get ready for celebrating the coming of God in the human person Jesus. So the preacher bangs on about getting ready inwardly for the birth of the Word (capital 'W'), and the arrival of an enfleshed God amidst an enfleshed creation and it is, I find, difficult to do this in a way which isn't, to use a technical term, *fluffy*. It is too easy to be twee about Advent, and it is most certainly possible to be so about Christmas. They are seen as predictable, scripted episodes with so many cultural and social barnacles that we might very well give up on their core meaning.

*But let's not do that.* After all, we reckon ourselves to be an adventurous Christian community. And we have no local vested interests to keep on side, no horses to avoid frightening, no dynastic presence on the PCC always saying how Great Uncle Cyril (Churchwarden from the Siege of Mafeking to D Day), would not have liked it. We enjoy considerable freedom here. It would be a sin

to ignore that. So let's all wipe clean our hard discs of early programming about Advent and Christmas, and go exploring, leaving those relatives behind.

I've found what I think might be a suitable text. It does not come from today's readings; indeed, I am not sure where it comes from but when Googled showed 123,000 hits. The text, then, for this Advent Sunday AD2018 is "*Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, chocolate in one hand, wine in the other, screaming 'WHAY-HAY what a ride!'*"

One of the sentences we quite often say in the Eucharist is '*all things come from you, O Lord, and of your own do we give you*'. It is an acknowledgement that all things have their origin beyond us. We have nothing we have not received, nothing we have not been given.

And a related phrase – one of the Prayer Book Funeral Sentences - is '*we brought nothing into the world and we take nothing out*'. It certainly appears so: we bring nothing into this life and we take nothing out. That rather focuses attention on what we might make of it – *and be helped to make of it* – between those two points of entrance and exit, birth and death.

All this falls within the reach of Advent; it is also the focus of the Christian Gospels; it is also the focus of everyone and every school of thought able to see beyond the immediate, able to listen to the questions raised by existence, able to sense that it is not that 'I' have life, but that in some way life has me.

I hope you like the text for today and that it might be useful. You will see of course, that it cannot be taken as literally true, just as Scripture cannot be taken as *literally* true. Moderate intake of chocolate and wine can serve the business of living well, bringing pleasure and sharing and celebration; yet handled unwisely it brings too many calories, and even poverty, violence and addiction.

What I like about the text is its sense of fullness – of life being lived with a degree of extravagance and risk and celebration. The soul that worries too much that it must arrive at death squeaky clean, well balanced, and perfectly acceptable to God has got it wrong, often at great expense to itself and almost certainly to those around it.

Better grubby and whole than squeaky-clean and partial. Paul – St Paul - uses a marvellous phrase in his Letter to the Ephesians about our being ‘accepted in the Beloved’ – that interior awareness that we have a place in the very heart of God. I suspect it’s a rare awareness, skilled exponents as we mostly are in the endless business of justification, merit and judgment. But what a grace, what a place, what a basis for living a life of extravagance in the practice of love and generosity oh heart. What a great way to skid towards the Beloved when our time comes.

Yet what is the context for exploring Advent, celebrating Christmas, and skidding towards the beloved? Its certainly rough enough to blow away the spray-on snow and any half-felt yo-ho-ho’s. To be alive and alert is an exercise in realism.

Suffering is all around us. We see others suffer. We ourselves suffer. To some extent we inflict suffering, consciously or unconsciously. We have structured our world with systems and mechanisms of oppression and exploitation. And there is terrorism at home and war abroad and poverty everywhere and an eco-system we are harming and an endless litany of unhappy, unfulfilled lives. There is misuse of

chocolate and wine and nearly everything else.

Context is always important. And these major human realities – to be added to those which are unique and personal to each one of us here – form the context in which we practice our faith.

The simple awareness of all these horrors can make the practice of faith either seem ridiculous or felt to be impossible. And yet. And yet. And yet, we might recognise how ridiculous it appears and practice it still; and we might at moments find ourselves thinking faith is impossible and yet mysteriously experience an uplift and energy which although it does not bring certainty brings resolve and hope. Christian faith finds its texture and its strength when lived with a form of extravagance yet in full awareness of its own apparent absurdity and with a full attentiveness to the horrors and well as the joys of human experience.

This is where the great ‘N’ word comes in useful – *nevertheless*. A word which should have a better place in our talk about God than it gets. The whole meaning of our old and new testaments might be condensed into ‘nevertheless’. We stand alone in a finite physical word; nevertheless we sense we are creatures of eternity. We are born, we grow old, we die; nevertheless we sense that, though accurate, it is an insufficient statement of the human possibility. In our short lives we face many challenges and many obstacles; nevertheless there is the odd truth that when faced and experienced in a certain way, we become changed men and women, often left expanded rather than diminished, more capable of love than less. We suffer; nevertheless we are sometimes, somehow transfigured by the experience.

We are, of course, talking of faith here as a radical commitment to things - to a God - which we cannot know about for certain. Such faith is a deliberate jump across an abyss, a deliberate leap from despair to faith. No half measures, no holding back, no having

it on sale or return. It is the human heart, in the face of absurdity or suffering, affirming a glorious *nevertheless!*

Advent beckons, and the Church urges you to take it seriously. It speaks as usual of inwardness, thoughtfulness, and reflection; it paints a picture of a period of interior waiting and preparation and it suggests the Four Last Things of Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement as themes to consider. That may work for some, but I wonder if it has not become a little lacklustre, stale even. But what the anonymous writer of our text suggests, is that this is not an either/or thing: it is not a matter of monastic introspection *or* wild partying but something which tries to combine realism about the world with a joyous robust hope in God's promise. Participation and detachment are not opposites but necessary elements, integrated into each life and put in the service of one another and of God. To whom, skidding as we go, be honour and praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.

*Hugh Valentine*