

Parish of Esher

Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Third Sunday of Advent, 16 November 2018,

10.30am Parish Communion, Christ Church, Esher

Zephaniah 3.14-end; Psalm 146.4-end; Luke 3.7-18

Revd Judith Roberts

Introduction – So what is a good Advent?

- A good Advent recognises the shadows and that the light has come into the world – Advent recognises that the light is coming into the world again and again and that the darkness will not overcome it
- A good Advent is to hold Advent in a Christmas world – it tells us we must wait – it lifts us beyond the routine and the obvious – it invites us to watch, to expect the unexpected and to live in hope today
- The origins of the Advent wreath started long before our Christian ancestors – in the middle of winter our early ancestors decided they must get the sun back – so they took a wheel from their cart and decorated it with greenery and candles – then they would wait and pray for the sun to come back – and it did
- From darkness into light represents a good Advent – darkness does not exist in itself – it is the absence of light – so one light – one single light can shatter the darkness and lights the way to itself
- A good Advent provides a time for us to find and know that hope of being rooted in and waiting on God. A good Advent prepares us for the rest of the year.
- So to our Gospel reading – a group of people come to John the Baptist for baptism – searching for meaning and understanding – a desire for holiness and goodness and he calls them a brood of vipers – not a very encouraging response!

- But it is another example of the thread running through all the Advent readings – the coming of Christ is disturbing and brings about radical change
- Last week we read about the metaphorical transformation of a desert and the removing of obstacles to the coming of the King
- Today's reading moves us to the spiritual and ethical spheres

How does the crowd respond?

- Well they don't run away – they stay to hear more – however uncomfortable they may be feeling
- The coming King requires personal allegiance rather than the belief that simple descent from Abraham would suffice – baptism without repentance is meaningless
- The crowd ask – “what shall we do?” Ethical transformation is to do with relationships and our behaviour to each other – how we share goods and food – how we have fair taxes – how to establish an equitable administration of justice – all examples of what the coming Kingdom is about
- The people in the crowd were ordinary people – but a people who were living in an occupied province with all the humiliation that comes from this – so the ethics of God's kingdom were indeed radical good news

The language of baptism

- The apocalyptic language of baptism with fire shows that Advent is far more than just changes in society
- This is the coming of God – the fire that accompanies his coming recalls the flaming sword at the gates of Eden, the bush that burned, the fiery pillar and other manifestations of God's holiness
- And, also it looks forward to Pentecost when one of the signs of the Spirit is tongues of fire
- The imagery of Advent does not allow a gentle stroll – it is demanding, fierce and inspiring

Conclusion

- Advent is a challenge – it takes us into uncomfortable territory – the temptation is to retreat from the challenge and allow oneself to be fully engrossed in many Christmas arrangements and activities
- I acknowledge that December is often an exhausting month – there are things we are expected to do, and indeed, want to do
- BUT there is the imperative to find space to pause and ponder
- I am very fortunate because my church in Barnes has an Advent carol service in a beautifully decorated church – with music and readings that were so appropriate for Advent
- That service gives me the impetus to have the discipline to create Advent space – in church – at home – even in the park whilst walking the dog
- Just pause to listen to music – let it touch your soul – let your heart go out to the poor and dispossessed – those in pain and despair
- Become aware and pray – and repent
- Respect the courage and determination of John the Baptist and find the voice to speak out against injustice, exploitation and persecution
- And then translate this into action and be generous – give to charity – invite someone to your home – share sometime with someone who is lonely – begin to relive the values of the Gospel

Note: This was a basic sermon script. Some content may have been added or indeed left out during the delivery of the sermon!