

Advent Sunday 2015: Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16;

Luke 21: 26 – 36

It's Advent Sunday which, means that Christmas must be coming and we'd better prepare for it. Only, if you're painting and decorating, or so I've heard it said, all the work is in the preparation. I say that I've heard it said because I've never actually taken the risk of finding out. There are also rumours it might involve getting your hands dirty, so I've steered well clear. But I can imagine that slapping on a coat of emulsion is probably pretty easy – and might actually be quite fun – but that sanding and filling and re-sanding is really rather tedious hard work. So all the work is in the preparation.

Now I'm sure that of us here are hoping to enjoy Christmas. But, just life decorating, all the hard work will be in the preparation. As Christians, the extent that we can celebrate a blessed Christmas is dependent upon the extent to which we observe a holy Advent.

Advent is a penitential season; it's a time of spiritual discipline and self-examination. That's why the church is arrayed in purple, as it is in Lent. The character of Advent is like the character of Lent, only perhaps not quite as severe.

It's not as severe, of course, because it's impossible to navigate through the next four weeks without knocking into Christmas celebrations. Not only are the shops full of Christmas jingles and tinsel, but on Friday night we're putting up the Christmas Tree in the Priory. We have our first Christmas service tomorrow morning – New Pasture Lane School are having their Christingle service tomorrow! You simply can't avoid the anticipation of Christmas – you've got to get real.

But that's the whole point. Christmas is about God getting real. It's about God becoming more than simply some sort of abstract, theoretical proposition that somewhere, out there, there's some sort of

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spiritual force. Rather, God comes to earth, he shares his life with us, he rolls his sleeves up – he does get his hands dirty! – and he compromises his integrity by the company he keeps. He tells us that rules are there to serve us rather than the other way round.

So, actually, we would be totally missing the point of Christmas if we got all holier than thou and said we couldn't possibly countenance the anticipation of Christmas because Advent is meant to be a penitential season. The irony would be colossal.

And yet it is true that the rules are there to help us. We can only celebrate Christmas to the extent that we observe a holy Advent. And that's why it's all the more important that, in the midst of all the anticipation of Christmas, we do make space and time to keep a penitential season, to attend to self-examination and spiritual discipline.

Because Christmas may be a time of great enjoyment; it may be a time when we quite unashamedly indulge ourselves in sentimentality – and are all the better for doing so; but also there is another aspect of Christmas, an aspect that has a bit more of an edge to it. Because making room for the Christ-child in your life involves a bit more than having your heart strings pulled when you see a baby being laid in a manger full of straw.

Our Bible reading from St. Luke this morning – the Gospel reading – put it the other way round. It talks about us having to stand before the Son of Man; being judged on the extent to which we can withstand the destructive forces that are around us. Now, in the year 2015, this reading can't have the literal impact it would have had on the first generations of people who heard it. They were in the grip of a genuine belief that the destructive forces that were in the world around them were heralding the end of the world. We know they were wrong; and however horrific the state of the

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world today may be, we don't seriously think that the end of the world is nigh.

But that's no reason to be smug. It's not a question of us saying that the last laugh is on poor deluded first century Christians. It is a good discipline for us to allow a passage, like the Gospel reading this morning, to bring its full rhetorical weight to bear upon our consciences. Because if we don't conscientiously seek to conform to God's ways; if we don't allow our faith to make any difference; then all our talk of letting the Christ-child enter in will be shallow sentimentality.

Amen.