

ADVENT 2 (St Nicholas)

The Director of Music's daughter, in my last Parish, was a Bishop for the day! She was the head child chorister at Salisbury Cathedral. And in our Advent Book, 'Sleepers Wake', the former (real) Bishop of Salisbury, Nick Holtham, spoke of this. His favourite annual service was cathedral evensong on the Sunday nearest to Nicholas Day. That's today! He writes:

"In keeping with medieval tradition, my place as bishop was taken by a child, one of the choristers. Each year I placed a mitre on the child's head and a ring on his or her finger. The child sat on the bishop's throne – which in Salisbury is big – while I disrobed and sat on a chair. The choir sang the Magnificat (as they will here in St Mary's at 5.30 pm tonight):

'He hath showed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud, in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away'.

The child bishop preached the sermon. The ten I heard in my time were all brilliant. It was a humbling experience – not in a demeaning kind of way but in one that was profoundly humanizing. I was reminded of who I am as a person and, like any parent, I was delighted to be taught by a child."

Now I realise I have taken the liberty of seeming to ignore today's set readings and the story of John the Baptist's crying out in the wilderness. But we are, in thinking of St Nicholas, able to do something equally telling which we have done here in the last couple of years. You have kindly brought along your children's gifts for those whose needs are much greater than our own. That in itself is a

wonderful Advent blessing in humility also, to match our prayers, for so many charities crying out for help and solidarity. Despite the latest census about how Christian or not our country is, our care for the sick, our setting up a warm room, our outreach and help for our Ukrainian guests, or taking some Christmas puddings to our local Salvation Army (I seem to have a lot of them this year, thank you!)... these are sure signs of a faithful and generous Advent journey.

The former Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, has just written this beautifully illustrated poem 'Advent Street' in which we are invited to look into imagined, real-life windows. Here's a taster:

"Old age in its armchair. Babies lifted from cribs, presents. Teenagers lit by laptops – young saints their guardians below, passing and laying the plates onto the tables."

An Advent Church is very much a grown-up Church, rooted in its local community and serving that community (whether believers or not) to the very best of our ability. Watching out for and caring for others is a shared and joyful task. And preparing for the Christ-child to come among us again, that timeless bundle of vulnerability and sacrificial love, is a shared and joyful task. Perhaps we should see St Nicholas and John the Baptist as two sides of the same Advent coin?

Thoughtful preparation and as well, understanding how to respond to those around us who may need us; being generous with our time and our gifts...

An Advent Church is also an expectant one, wanting us to step out of our comfort zones, however we understand them to be, and reaching out to the God of our ancestors and the prophecies of an Isaiah, to become much bolder and stronger in sharing our faith with others. I really do want us to explore together how Communion can be shared with our children; how we can create an alternative to 'The Alpha Course' which can still be attractive and helpful for someone peering into our windows here, and wondering why we do what we do, why

we sing and pray, and to whom? This is a time and a season to reflect and pray, to listen to, and be guided by God; also to seek out the company of those we have barely spoken to or, at least, not in any depth...

Talking about the weather or the football or 'Strictly' may be an opener, or 'starter for 10', but it can never be the whole deal: let's try to unravel one another's wisdom or experience or, move from plain acceptance to lasting friendship. These are the gifts which truly bind our communities and make them blossom and grow. And our Advent God is actually encouraging us to make this link of service and love between and for both church and community.

If you err more on the side of a cuddly St Nicholas or a waspish St John the Baptist, so be it. What matters most, for all of us this Advent, is encountering the divine in the everyday and, in the everyday, to bump into the occasional angel or saint, and with them, 'put on the armour of Light'.

AMEN.