

Sunday 3 December 2017

Today we start advent and our Gospel this morning gives us a stark and stern warning to keep awake. Advent is the season of watching and waiting. However, the commentary that I tend to use when I preach, starts with this:

“Most congregations do not need to be told to “Keep awake” during advent. They are already operating in a state of sleep deprivation.”

I have spent this last week repeating the words, Christmas comes earlier every year! With a slight undercurrent of exasperation and longing for longer and warmer days. A part of this has something to do with being ordained... but of course, however much Christmas is a joyous and celebratory season it can be a struggle.

As we supposedly prepare for Christmas during the season of advent, family budgets get squeezed and family tensions get stretched as we all prepare for that perfect Christmas, there is little time for sleep. I for one spent last night sleeping at St Mary's for the Opendoors sleep out and I can assure you, I had little sleep then either. The last thing we need to hear during advent is keep awake.

However I think, here at St John's we are offered a gift during advent. Often in a season of Advent we try and strip back in order to reflect about the nature of the coming Christ much like in the season of Lent, they are both seasons that are rooted in self-reflection. St John's however, instead of stripping ourselves back in order to think about the nature of Advent, of watching and waiting, we are given so much to stimulate our imaginations. This morning we find ourselves in a positive winter wonderland, surrounded by trees, and colour that sparks our imaginations.

Advent should never be about ashes and sackcloth, but it should be about focusing down on what we are talking about when we are preparing, not for Christmas, but for the coming Christ.

As families and communities are put under so much strain during this season, we do not need to be reminded to stay awake. But maybe we might need to remind ourselves what we are looking for.

For three years now here at St John's we are given a fantastic reminder of what we are looking for in the coming of Christ. As St John's opens its doors to the community that this church actually belongs to, this building comes into its own, as it envelopes the community around it. If you take a wonder around the church during coffee you will see so many charities and organisations who have come through the doors of St John's to be a part of what we could call a Christmas community.

As ever when you gather a community together, we can see glimpses of theology being crafted, of people's imaginations sparking off one another to ignite a fire of love, of ideas about what Christmas, what the coming of Christ means.

I had a wonder round the trees on Thursday once most of them were decorated, and it is worth reminding ourselves that Devizes, is actually quite a strong third sector town. Charity seems to be very much at the heart of Devizes. And when we see the trees gathered around us, its amazing to remind ourselves how many people volunteer their time to help those around them, and many of them are you and me.

However what has really got my imagination going this advent, is going round and reading some of the themes that the various decorators have chosen. As I wondered round, looking

fairly vague, as seems to be my habit at the moment, looking for inspiration for this morning both Nita and Suzie told me to look at the themes of the trees, and they were so right.

As I have said, it is unhelpful to remind each other to 'keep awake' during advent, however, some of the themes can really reignite us as we prepare for Christmas. Perhaps this advent looking to reignite our understanding and longing might be a more helpful image than prodding each other to stay awake.

At risk of being accused of favouritism, there are two themes that I would particularly like to offer this morning, as we spark off each other's imaginations, and they are from one charity and one school, Opendoors and Heddington Primary.

I shall start with Heddington Primary. Their tree is just over there (Point) and is entitled, 'If I were a shepherd' and it is covered in presents. Each present has on it a label with what each child would give if they could, and there is not an x-box or iPod in sight! What the children of Heddington Primary would like to offer is 'Kindness for the world', 'Food and water for all', 'Shelter for Everyone', 'Friendship, peace and Kindness', 'Joy' and 'Love'. As we look to the Christ child this advent, I think these are gifts well worth dwelling on.

I am slightly biased, however, I am also very fond of Opendoors' theme for their tree. In a somewhat striking reminder of the realities of Christ's life preaching to our own, their tree is called 'Nowhere to lay his head'.

Alongside all the beautifully decorated Christmas trees we have one rather bare Christmas tree just here. This is our St John's tree waiting resolutely for Christmas. And I find it rather nice, as we look for inspiration this advent from our community, that this tree, offers us a reminder that what we look to is not seen, it isn't obvious, and it yet to come. And so, this advent, let us park the thought of nudging one another awake as is often the language of advent, but try and spark each other's imaginations this season, as we find our way in this life, toward the coming Christ.