

An Advent letter from the Chaplain-General of the Grand Priory



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen."

For many people in our modern society today, the Season of Advent is simply Christmas come early. It features fairy lights in the High Street, Santa's grotto in the stores, office parties, pre-Christmas dinners, extravagant spending and general excess. It is most certainly not inhibited by the words of Jesus:

"Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness."

On the contrary, it would appear to be the season par excellence of debauchery and drunkenness. This can mean, for many people, that by the time they actually get to Christmas itself they are fed up with the whole thing and just want it to be over and done with, and to get back to normal, every-day living – and perhaps consider a bit of a detox.

Though of course not this year! The world pandemic caused by Covid 19 has put a stop to most of this! The national press has been full of stories that Christmas has been cancelled, or that Christmas can be saved! The Prime Minister even cautioned us that it “ ‘tis the time to be jolly; jolly careful!” The Christmas he wanted to save? Perhaps the “season par excellence of debauchery and drunkenness”. Well, certainly spending money!

But as Christians, Christmas can never be cancelled, or saved! We will celebrate the birth of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ whatever the restrictions and with how ever many - even if none - of our family!

It may come as a shock, therefore, to hear the readings from the scriptures that the Church sees fit to proclaim during this season, especially at its beginning. They seem to have no connection with the mirth and jollity prevalent at this time in the world around us. There are horrific warnings of signs in the sun and moon and stars, of people dying of fear as they await what menaces the world. Whatever possesses the Church to begin Advent with such a chilling message?

This is how the Christian faith works. We believe in a saviour who is risen, ascended, glorified; but first he had to be crucified. There can be no resurrection without the crucifixion, no Easter without Lent; and, likewise, there can be no Christmas without Advent. Jesus does not enlist disciples under false pretences; he teaches us that we cannot journey with him to the joys of heaven unless we first take up our cross and follow him to Calvary. And he warns us, on this first day of the Church’s year, that days of agony and menace lie ahead. We cannot skip them and proceed directly to the sweetness of the nativity story, with its jolly shepherds, glittering angels and exotic kings.

As we begin our Advent season, the readings are an encouragement to us, even if they may seem quite stark. We are called to remember that God respects the choices we make and so, if we choose to distance ourselves from God, it becomes harder to hear God’s voice. If we choose a path that obviously deviates from the one that God has set out for us, it can be difficult to see the signs pointing back to the right route. Advent is a wake-up call to bring us from potential slumber to a new alertness of the immediacy of God’s presence. God is never distant from us. It is just that sometimes we do not allow God’s closeness to be apparent to us. Advent can bring us back on track. Advent gives us the opportunity to be further shaped on the potter’s wheel. God, the potter, will never discard us into the waste bucket, even though we do at times find ourselves out of shape, or with fractures opening up. Life and our choices do that to us. In the production of pottery, the potter will sometimes use what is called slip. Slip is a liquid mixture of clay suspended in water. It is often used to decorate pots, or to help to join parts of a pot, or to cover up cracks. At the beginning of this special season, perhaps we can imagine God’s grace being poured over us like potter’s slip. The Lord wants to pour his love out upon us, gently filling in the imperfections and smoothing out the inconsistencies. God wants to join us where there is brokenness. Having an image such as that of the divine potter forming us in the palm of his hand may help us. What is certain, though, as we consider our readiness for Christ’s second coming and prepare to celebrate his incarnation, is that God will never abandon us. Fired in a kiln of pure love, we are a delight in God’s eyes.

I have attached with this email (I am grateful to Gareth for forwarding this) a little booklet of daily prayers and words of encouragement for the coming season. I hope you may find it of some use. During this time of restriction perhaps we could see it as a prompting from God to spend some of that time in preparation - an extra helping of the “slip” that we might be more conformed to his desire for us.

Adjusting a line from “Strictly Come Dancing”, keep praying!

With my very best wishes and every blessing,

Fr Andrew Stevens SChLJ