

An Advent Reflection

I like to think that those who know me, are impressed by the way I always have my finger on the pulse, always aware of exactly what is happening and that they are especially impressed by my super memory. I am going to reveal, now, a secret - I am just a little bit absent minded. In my bachelor days about two weeks before I went on holiday I would open a suit case and every time I thought of something which I needed to take with me I would put it into the case. Its true, that a day or two before I went away there would be a little bit of a muddle, but at least I would have most of the things I needed. I did straighten them up a bit before I took off - that was after all the only way I was going to get the lid shut! However I didn't pack the guide books and maps until I was about to go so I could plan just what I was going to do.

Well it might seem an odd way to plan for a holiday or a trip away - but I didn't forget much and I had a good idea about what I was going to do when I got there. There are times when just letting it happen works really well. But there is a great deal in life which needs careful planning, wether it is baking a cake or going on holiday.

All right - perhaps you're thinking yes its December - there's a lot to think about - that puce tee shirt I bought Aunt Aggie - which has "42 the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything", which I bought in a fit of enthusiasm at a craft fair in the summer - the one dyed with vegetable dyes which will run if it rains - I wonder a bit now, if it is really her thing. And Stir Up Sunday is gone - the Sunday at which the prayer about stirring the hearts of the Lord's faithful people is used - but it often thought of as the time when the whole family stir the Christmas pud. Oh there is so much to be done - that tinsel from last year is getting a bit tacky. But of course while all of this in its way is important is not the thing which matters most. For many Christmas risks becoming a sort of world of make believe in which you indulge the idea that people can really live at peace with each other before returning to the real world. Sadly often harsh reality breaks in not long after Boxing Day.

At the heart of Christmas is a truly mind boggling idea - that God is in our midst - sharing our life with us, our hopes and dreams, our joy and pain. What is more the "our" is not exclusive - just for the few special chosen - but for everyone, the whole human family. It is the idea which John struggles to express in the opening verses of his Gospel. The implications of this touch every aspect of our lives. There are no demarcations marking off the things that belong to God. We can't just reserve the holy bits for God and keep God out of the rest. Our laughter and our tears, our striving and our moments of despair are part of our-relationship with God. But there is more to it than that. - for God is involved in the laughter and tears, the striving and moments of despair of all the others, the rest of the human family. The idea we can build our happiness on the backs of the despair of others, which is in effect the basis of so much of modern living, is in the light of Christmas shown to be utterly grotesque.

There is the Christmas story itself. Mary and Joseph coerced by a occupying power to make a journey when Mary was heavily pregnant, finding no where to stay in

Bethlehem, giving birth in a stable and having to use a manger as a cradle. There is the plotting of Herod. And Mary, Joseph and Jesus being in effect refugees. We make the story pretty and cover it with tinsel but elements of the story mark so many people's lives in the present. Yes indeed, Christmas is very much about joy and about peace and the excitement of new life. It is however also about our need to change - to travel further on the pilgrimage of life - to make new discoveries about God's grace. All this so that the joy we discover at the heart of Christmas is not at the cost of blanking off from our selves the reality of the world of which we are a part.

Advent is traditionally seen as a time of judgement. I remember all too well, preachers in Northern Ireland who would dangle their congregations over the fires of hell - seeking, it seems, to bring about repentance through fear. But I do not believe that that is the way in which God works. I believe that judgment comes through encountering the love of Jesus which enables us to see the areas of our life which need to be changed. Advent is about a journey, not into a world of make believe - rather a journey which is full of hope. It is a journey which, faces squarely the reality of a world where the rich manipulate the poor, the plenty is squandered so that the destitute are starving, in which people know the price of everything and the true value of nothing, where because of greed and self interest we face the consequences of global warming. But it is also about the parts of our life which have good but which need to be developed. All this means facing the challenges which we have steadfastly avoided but which we must nevertheless confront and embrace.. You can't, it seems to me, to truly confront the abundant love of Jesus and not see in its light our part in a world which all too often dodges the issue, is narrow in its perspectives; you can't truly confront the abundant love of Jesus and not see the potential we have for good; the good we sometimes pull off but frequently lack the courage to do, Put simply Advent is a time to stop turning our backs on God's love and deafening ourselves to his call; it is a time to embark again on the journey of faith. The reappraisal of our lives in the light of Jesus' love is an integral part of the Christian pilgrimage.

Without this journey Christmas far from being a celebration of real hope, of the prospect of breaking down barriers, runs the considerable risk. at best, of being little more than a sentimental indulgence. In the Christmas story there are three journeys, the journey to Bethlehem, the journey of the wise men and the flight into Egypt. We too must make our journey if we are truly to worship the infant Jesus.

We all joke about the child who plays with the box rather than the flash present inside. But this is in effect what we are all in danger of doing with Christmas; spending so much time and effort on the trappings and missing the real treasure all together. Advent helps us to get the all important sense of proportion. Yes it does matter whether aunt Aggie will really like her puce tee shirt. Maybe a really nice box of chocs would be more her thing. But what matters above all else is the journey we must make seeking to be God's people.