

**A sermon preached by the Revd. Eleanor Whalley at St Andrew's Church, Soham, on the 2nd Sunday of Advent
2018: Mal 3: 1-4; Lk 3: 1-6**

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the Living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I told Roger – Roger sitting at the back

(I'd say 'a rose between two thorns', but I don't think I dare. 'A rose between two roses') -

I told him he'd get a mention in the credits of today's sermon.

In fact, if I'd been quicker off the mark, Roger, I'd've asked you to get up here instead of me.

Roger said to me on Thursday after the 10 o'clock that he'd just learnt that Advent meant 'coming' –
which indeed it does. It's from the Latin.

Advent is the season when the Church thinks, traditionally, about the two comings of Christ:

the coming that has happened,

the coming that happened 2018 years ago, round about – Christ's birth in a Bethlehem stable;

and the coming 'yet to come' - Christ's 'second coming', 'the apocalypse', his coming at the end of the world.

Thinking of the Christ's first coming, I wanted to show you this tile...

Making these tiles was one of the activities – the activity run by Angela and Gill Campbell –

which went on here as part of yesterday's 'Get Ready for Christingle' event.

Children were invited to design and draw a world; to draw the earth (some worlds were more realistic than others)
and to write 'peace on earth' underneath it.

They then stuck a tiny star on the earth.

They did that to remember Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time, 2018 years ago.

I don't know about you, but I find I can get a bit blasée about that.

I tend think about Christ's first coming in general terms:

Some time, a long time ago, a long, long way away,

Christ was born and lived amongst us.

I almost take it for granted.

What the star does – the star on the tile - is help me remember

Christ came there – to that place; came to a particular place at a particular time.

For me, remembering the specifics

brings home the reality of Christ's coming.

It makes it more real – more alive.

When I remember Christ came there, there where the star is,

I imagine that if I'd been born in Bethlehem

or if I'd grown up in Capernaum, 2018 years ago,

I might've known a little boy called Jesus.

A boy who appeared like any other little boy.

We might've run around together,

played hide and seek amongst the fishing boats,

got up to mischief, made dens,

hunted for shells on the beach.

Thoughts like that – for me, at least – help bring the incarnation to life:

'The Word became flesh, and lived amongst us'.

He lived a human life; he lived amongst us; amongst people like you and me.

Luke in his Gospel is very clear about the specifics.

[Read Luke 3: 1&2].

What we have there is a list of names and responsibilities.

They help us date the story Luke's about to relate.

They help us nail those events in time.

Most of the names are Roman names.

This is a country under occupation; that's what Luke is stressing.

Luke makes very clear that Christ will come as one of a people who are under Roman rule.

The Son of God, even before his birth, is subject to secular power.

He will have to submit to secular authority.

Christ is, in that context, one of the oppressed; one of the poor. Luke makes that clear from the start.

Two chapters earlier (in Luke Chapter 1) – and these are the words the choir has just sung –

we hear the prophecy of Zechariah – father of Christ's cousin, John the Baptist –

the words the Church calls the Benedictus.

'By the tender mercy...' [Read Luke 1: 78 & 79]

Christ will bring 'light to those who sit in darkness'. He'll bring hope, in other words, to the poor;

to people whose poverty Christ has shared and known for himself;

people who, then as now, secular authorities – secular powers – are wont to ignore.

'This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
free to worship him without fear:
holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.'

Living lives 'holy and righteous in God's sight all the days of our life' is, surely, a hope for the next life,
something we're unlikely to manage in this:

Zechariah prophesies not just about Christ's coming as a baby,
but also about Christ's coming at the end of the world.

He's harking back to God's promise to Abraham, and the vision of the prophets that came later.

Prophets like Malachi whom Diane (one of the three roses) read from just now.

Luke looks back to the Prophets too:

"As it is written in the Prophet Isaiah:

'Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low'"

Christ's second coming – his second coming perhaps even more than his first –

His coming will spell disaster for the powers of the earth, disaster for the establishment,

disaster for those who are complacent,

disaster for those who live comfortable lives at that the expense of those who don't.

The flattening of mountains is good news if you're a refugee –

good news if you have to trek across mountains to survive.

It's bad news if you live in the safety of a valley; bad news if you live in luxury;

bad news if you're the oppressor and the mountains are the places you've driven the exiles away to.

If the land is flat, the exiles might just come back.

They might just come back and oust you from power.

And it's not just the political establishment

who should fear.

The Prophet Malachi in our first reading said this:

[Read Mal. 3: 2b and 3 'For the Lord...']

The thing I learnt this week

is that the 'sons of Levi' were the priestly class.

The sons of Levi had the particular duty of serving in the temple –

they had secular duties as well, but the point is 'the sons of Levi' were the religious establishment.

They were people, dare I say it, like us –

the ‘religious’ people; people who thought of themselves as the ‘in’ crowd.

It is and it was the religious establishment

Christ came and will come – first and foremost - to sort out.

We, above all people, will be called to account:

We will be purified – refined.

Smelted and washed until the muck comes off...

That, I would say, is worth thinking about.

It’s a sobering thought.

We need to wake up to our own impurity, and we need to pray for the determination to spruce ourselves up.

We need to pray for God’s cleansing, however uncomfortable that cleansing feels when it’s happening.

There is – let’s be heartened – a third coming.

There’s the coming of Christ in Word and in Sacrament.

Christ’s presence in this service: his forgiveness as I pronounce the Absolution after our prayers of Confession.

‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name’, says the Lord, ‘there I am amongst them’.

If you wonder why it is we turn to face the Gospel when it’s read in the context of a Communion service,

we do that because the Church teaches Christ is present,

present as the Gospel is proclaimed.

In that way, the reading of the Gospel aloud, and the listening to the Gospel as it is proclaimed -

proclaimed in the context of Communion service -

is different than when we sit and read the Bible ourselves at home.

Christ is present in a different way: present in and through the proclamation.

And Christ is present in the bread and the wine.

Christ comes to us, we believe, under the guise of the elements, and yet he’s really present –

really present when we come to Communion –

present in words of blessing, but present above all as we receive Communion -

present to help us and feed us in our need.

Our challenge is to welcome him –

open the doors of our minds and our hearts;

open our lives to his life;

open ourselves to his cleansing,

that we might be ready when he comes .

Back to the star on the tile,

I'm going to read a poem.

This is by Kathleen Raine.

Star of Bethlehem

*How far
must that star descend
from beyond the beyond beyond
to darkest end.*

*The eternal child
finds the here and now always
of the times and places
where we are.*

Amen.