

Those of you with good memories will know that the diary I like to use begins tomorrow. For ages I have carried my 2015 and 2016 diaries around together, and from tomorrow I only need one. I don't think the diary I use is designed specifically for clergy, but it's rather good to know that I can begin it at the beginning of the church's year, as Advent unfolds. This week the Christian year starts again. New diary, and new year.

This time in the church's year is full of hope. We are getting ready for a party, preparing for something wonderful to come. A new diary is like that for me: page after blank page of possibilities, with no messes, no crossings out, no clashes, no cancellations. I start putting in the fixed and wonderful events: birthdays, anniversaries, and the great celebrations which are both personal and corporate, like Christmas and Easter. If we're lucky we can sort out the things we really want to plan for, like concerts or sporting events or holidays. And if we're really good we can look back on what happened this year to make sure that next year is done better.

That's the other thing which happens at this time of year for me. The Christmas Letter looms large. We do one of those round robins which everyone pretends to hate. I've got all of mine since 1989, and I read them all again to get me in the frame of mind to do the current one. Over the years you can see trends emerge. Looking back, reviewing the evidence, reflecting on what's happened, helps us look forward properly and live in the present responsibly. Jesus told his followers to be aware of the signs of the times. What's been happening? What do they mean? How will you react? Julia is amazing at going outside, looking up, feeling the atmosphere and declaring that it's going to snow. Review the past, gather the evidence, keep alert, and you can read the weather - and you can read the events of the day.

Advent is the season of the signs of the times, of looking back to look forward, of making the future present. Since the fourth century there has been some sort of marking out of the calendar, the theological diary, to enable Christians to prepare for the celebration of Christ's coming to us: that is what *Advent* means. The church year is a way of doing theology and discipleship and prayer with dates. Christians have found it useful to declare that, at certain times, we will remember certain things. It's like tying a knot in your spiritual handkerchief: use this time carefully, so that in a complex world, when the date to celebrate the incarnation of Christ comes, you'll be ready. Advent is about taking a long view, both backwards and forwards, to rejoice in the coming of the Christ promised long ago through Jeremiah, the Christ already present with us, and the Christ who will come at the end of the world as we know it.

The way that fourth century Christians reflected, looked back and prepared was to fast, pray, study and be penitent. But new things were soon added to the celebration. In Rome the period leading up to the shortest day was marked by light ceremonies, a marking of the end and the hope of a new beginning. So Christian prayers at this time looked forward as well. This was the season of joyful hope: in the darkness the light was both promised and present. Advent is the first growth of the leaves we know will signal an abundant harvest, just like the fig trees in Luke 21.

As Christmas grew in importance as a festival, these themes of penitent preparation for Christ's first coming and faithful readiness for the second coming, reading the signs of the times, all came together. If all we did over these next weeks was to eat the chocolate and burn the candle, get to Christmas unscathed and then put the decorations away we would only have scratched the surface of what this season can offer. This is the season of the knowledge that Christ's coming as child means that God is indeed with us now, in the detail and the eventfulness of a complex and worrying world. The signs of today's times are as worrying as the wars and rumours of wars of which Christ spoke in Luke 21. They all put us on our guard: Christ could come any time and we must look to our behaviours and our lifestyle. What price 'Black Friday' when we are overwhelmed by consumerism? How will that help us to 'strengthen our hearts in holiness' as Paul encourages the Thessalonians?

Remember that Advent is future present: the Christ who will come and make new heavens and a new earth is living among us now. The Christ who will release us from all that holds us back, who will speak for us before God at the final reckoning walks in gentleness and challenge alongside us and looks to forgive our wrongdoings and our failures now. Christ who will beckon us to himself beyond death already lives the resurrection life in us. All of which could be very individual and personal, and it should be nothing of the sort. For the future heavens and earth present now are all about justice and righteousness, about the ending of violence and the active presence of peace, about the healing of wounds, about the setting aside of ancient enmities.

"In those days the righteous branch will spring up to judge with righteousness and decide with equity, and Jerusalem will live in safety" says my namesake prophet Jeremiah. That puts it in stark relief, as today Israel and Palestine battle it out in an unequal contests for the land we call Holy, and individual Palestians attempt to stab Israeli soldiers, almost always being killed as a result. There was one yesterday. To make that future present is our task as Christians, to reveal the kingdom which will one day be fulfilled but which is already among us. To light our candles and eat or chocolate is to say that Christ came, that Christ will come, and that Christ is here. Advent is about our future longing for all to be well, for this world to be made new, about our future hope. But it is also about that hope made manifest in us, about the way we deal with each other being worthy of the new heaven and earth, not this messy one.

My new diary will soon fill up with mess. But I still have a vision of what it might be like, and of how things could be, and I want to review the old one to make things go better in 2016. May we live in penitent preparation and joyful hope, so that we walk in the light of the Lord, reveal the future kingdom now, and be ready for Christ when he comes...