

# The Advent Story ...

*... helps us to make sense of our lives, and good choices*

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*A talk given in the Joint Service on Advent Sunday, 27th November 2022 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44*

Well, Advent is here and the countdown to Christmas has begun. And one of the things which often seems to happen over the next few weeks is that at some point on television, they will show the film 'The Railway Children': a much-loved film; there's a stage show too; it was on at the Railway Museum in York a few years ago. It's the story of a family where the father is wrongfully accused and put in prison. And the rest of the family, the three children and their mum, have to leave their big London house and go and live in a remote house out in the country. And they have to live without the father being around. And the children have all sorts of adventures and they learn things about themselves. Sometimes, when they have choices to make, they find themselves asking, "What would father want us to do?" And at the end of the film comes the moment we've all been waiting for, when the father is released from prison and everything is put right. And he unexpectedly turns up at the station, close to the house where the family is staying, just as the oldest daughter is there on the platform. And she looks along the platform and out of the clouds of steam from the steam engine, this figure appears of her father. She runs to him and says, "Daddy, my daddy." And all the grownups watching burst into tears! It's the moment in the story we've all been waiting for: we hoped it would come; and the return of the father makes sense for the rest of the story; all the other adventures, we hope, have been leading up to the family being reunited.

And that's true of every story, isn't it? We love stories, whether they're fairy tales or films or plays or soap operas or ballads - we're surrounded by stories. And even when you get home at the end of the day and your family says, "What sort of day have you had?" You tell a story about what's happened to you that day. And a good story has a beginning and a middle and an end, if it's going to be a satisfying story. And it's as if we are made to live in stories - they're all around us - and the way we look at the world around us, we tell a story about it. But what's a bit difficult is that when you're telling the story of your own life, you don't know what the ending is going to be. And when we're telling the story of our world, we don't know how it's going to end. And so the story of The Railway Children, if you stopped it in the middle, before the father had returned, it wouldn't have been a very satisfying story. It wouldn't have made a lot of sense. And your story and mine sometimes feel like they don't make a lot of sense because we don't yet know the ending.

Now, another thing that a lot of people do over the next few weeks is they open the windows on an Advent Calendar *[Jonathan addresses the congregation - "Does anybody here have an Advent Calendar? Yes. Few of you do? Yes, jolly good.]"* When I was little, an Advent Calendar was a very simple thing: you opened the window and all you got was a picture. Nowadays you get lots of other things: you get chocolates and toys and liqueurs and I don't know what - but in my day, we got excited just by opening the window and seeing a picture. And you'd run down first thing in the morning, excited to see what the next picture was going to be. And the pictures would all be something to do with the Christmas story - you might get a camel or a star or a wise man or an angel, but they'd be in no particular order. And you never knew exactly what would lie behind each day's window as you opened it. But the one thing you did know was that the very last window would always have a picture of baby Jesus, in the manger, in a stable. And whatever other pictures there were in your Advent Calendar, you always knew that the last one would be a picture of Jesus being born in the stable at Bethlehem. And when you got to that last one, it made sense of all the other pictures. Whatever order they came in, you'd then see how it was all building up to the birth of Jesus and the coming of the Son of God.

And it's a bit like that at Advent.

Advent is like a little trailer looking ahead to the end of the story. Or it's like getting a little glimpse of that last window, where we see not just Jesus being born as a baby at Bethlehem that first Christmas long ago, but we also see Jesus, the Lord of the Universe, returning in order to heal the world, to put everything right, to renew God's creation. Because one of the things that first Christmas showed us is that God is faithful to the world he has made. The Christmas story isn't just a lovely story about God being born as a baby, it's a story about God's faithfulness. When we say 'God is Love', one of the most important things about God's love is that he's faithful to the world he's made and to you and me. And he doesn't give up on us, no matter what we've done, no matter what wrong turns happen, no matter how big a mess the world is in, God is faithful to it. And the Advent message is that God has come not only once before at Christmas, but he's still with us by his Spirit, and He will come again as the Lord of Glory to put everything right.

And so we have that glimpse of the end of the story that helps us to make sense of our lives and of the world as we go, day by day, trying to muddle along and understand what we're doing. And having that glimpse at the end of the story means that we are promised that love is a better thing than selfishness; and that mercy is a better thing than getting our own back; and that peace is a better thing than division.

And so whenever we are making choices, if we're choosing love or peace or mercy or compassion or justice or any of those things that Jesus has shown us, then it's as if we're asking, "What would the Father want us to do?" It helps us to make the right choices so that when, at the end of time He comes again, emerging from the clouds of glory, He will recognise us and we will recognise Him. And we'll have done what we can to get ready to meet Him.

So Advent is Good News. It gives us a glimpse at the end of the story so that we can start to make sense of our lives day by day, here and now.

# Reading Texts

## Isaiah 2:1-5

<sup>1</sup> The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. <sup>3</sup> Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. <sup>5</sup> O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

## Matthew 24:36-44

<sup>36</sup> "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup> and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup> Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup> Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup> But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.