

OT: Joel 3.9-end

NT: Revelation 14.3-15.4

Is Advent redundant?

The Church's year begins with this period of prayer and reflection. A time for restraint and preparation for the great feast to come at Christmas. A time not dissimilar to Lent when we are encouraged to wait with patience and some fasting. I can remember when in the Roman Catholic church, Christmas Eve was designated as a fast day in the Church's year. Imagine!

The celebration comes with the birth of Jesus at Christmas followed by a period of some four weeks of Christmastide, a period of feasting and celebration. Society has flipped that on its head. We are not keen on waiting. We don't save up much anymore. We have become a buy now and pay later people. For many, today, 1st December marks the beginning of Christmas celebrations, trees up, decorations out, parties beginning, endless carols sung. The slow build up that began in September is now in overdrive in the shops.

It's full-on Christmas time.

Yet all the hype and tinsel and indulgent food will have disappeared as we reach the new year. And then January is now a time for diets and restraint. The bleakest of months made worse by a guilty feeling that indulgence is forbidden.

So is Advent redundant?

Well you might feel that you are fighting a losing battle to uphold this season of anticipation. Even here, you will see Christmas beginning by Wednesday with the first of many Carol Services, the trees up, the crib out. But there is an opportunity to carve out some space amidst the mayhem. All the readings for today have talked about the end of time. This evening's readings use the metaphor of the harvest. Any gardener or farmer will tell you that patience is required when planting seeds. They don't bear fruit or flowers immediately. They require care, the right soil, enough water and sunlight. Work is required to reap the reward.

This is the message for today for all of us. We won't just walk into heaven even though through his birth, ministry, death and resurrection in this world, Christ has opened the door for all who want to come in.

We might choose heaven but there is work required on our part before we can get there.

God has planted a seed of faith but it still needs some careful nurturing. Advent is an opportunity for such care of our faith and our relationship with God. Let us find some time for prayer, for stillness, for thought about the great gift that God bestowed in the person of his Son. God who saw humanity struggling in our frailty and sin and would not leave us to our deserved fate but intervened with love and mercy.

So then let us be mindful of the needs of others at this time of year. In all our spending, let us find some money to support those who do not enjoy our comforts, those who will otherwise be sleeping rough, those who are struggling to provide any kind of Christmas cheer for their families, those who feel lost and in despair.

Finally, perhaps we can also have some days before Christmas when we rein back on the mince pies and party food. A little fasting is a good thing and a poignant reminder that for too many people it is not an option but a reality.

Advent may not be quite what it used to be but it remains a time for us to be joyful and grateful for God's rich bounty in our lives, not just at Christmas but every day. A time that through prayer, alms giving and fasting, we can prepare to receive the amazing gift of Jesus Christ at Christmas.

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