

This is Advent Sunday, the beginning of a new Christian year, so I wish you all “A Very Happy New Year”. The Church cannot make up its mind how to treat Advent, for it is a time of penitential preparation for Christmas, and yet it is also a joyful time of looking forward to the Second Coming. We do not know whether to be sad; or glad. Some do not know whether to have flowers in church and sing carols before Christmas Day or not.

This confusion is nothing new. Up to the 12th century, Advent was definitely a festival season with the celebrant at Holy Communion wearing white vestments. But in the 13th century the festive white was changed to the penitential violet or purple. The thanksgiving for the birth of Jesus Christ gave way to the reminder that we should take a look at our lives, and turn over a new leaf ready for the day of judgement. This attitude continued well into the last century. Some of us can remember the time when the church in general refused to allow the display of flowers, or the singing of carols, or the celebration of weddings, during Advent. Nowadays the pressure is on the church to drop all such solemnity, especially when non-Christian shops start selling for Christmas in September! Even some Cathedrals already display their Nativity Crib.

So Christians are confused and tend to take sides. Yet this is not necessary. We do not really need to put everything in only one direction. It is natural to feel happy, because we look forward to the anniversary of Jesus' birth. Happy and grateful for the good news that Jesus brought, and for the freedom that Christianity has given to mankind. Yet at the same time, the very good news of a loving and caring Father in heaven, this joyous news, also naturally makes us aware of our own shortcomings. It should therefore encourage us to make a determined effort to try to improve our faith and our attempts to live up to the ideals that Jesus puts before us.

An excellent way of doing this is to follow the example of St Andrew, whose feast day was last Thursday. Many people associate St Andrew with Scotland for he is that country's Patron Saint. Indeed I attended a celebratory St Andrew's Day dinner last Thursday in Edinburgh. But in the world-wide church he is better known as the patron saint of Foreign Missions. This too, like Advent, is a bit ambivalent; for his real claim to fame was as a *home* missionary. According to St John's Gospel (1.42), Andrew was the apostle who brought his brother Peter to Jesus. If you think that was easy, just try bringing a member of your family to a new knowledge of Jesus. It is extremely difficult to really convince our own family, or friends. Perhaps that is because we appear to them as such unlikely apostles. Or perhaps this is because our religion does not appear to be particularly joyful. Of course it is important to remember foreign missions: to evangelise the pagan natives of Africa or Asia. But the person next door, or in the same house as us, is more likely to be in need of the same message of salvation. Few of you have the chance or wish to do missionary work overseas as I have, but we all have the chance to do missionary work amongst the pagan natives of Sussex, or wherever we live; and we ought to do this if we are to fulfil our Christian obligations.

This then could be the task for each of us this Advent-tide. To come to church more often in a penitential frame of mind, ready to receive the strengthening power of God in the Bread and Wine, to help us to go out into the world again in a spirit of cheerfulness, to spread abroad the joyful and happy news of the Christmas story to those who have not heard it clearly. But to do this we must believe it ourselves. Some, perhaps many, accept the Christmas story with little effort. Yet full acceptance of the birth of Jesus as the Son of God, is the greatest single step in faith that a Christian is called on to make.

A German theologian, Baron Von Hugel, said: "the faith required of a Christian is like the leap of the salmon - a leap upstream against the current". It needs a superhuman effort. For if one can truly believe in the Incarnation, the birth of God's Son, you can believe in anything. None of the other miracle stories present any difficulty if you can accept that one.

For in the Incarnation, the greatest miracle of all, we are called on to affirm that God who created the whole universe with its millions of years of development, then decided at a particular moment in time, to visit in the flesh one tiny corner of this universe. In one tiny corner of our world; in an unknown village, to an unknown woman, as a mere ordinary mortal. No-one else but God could dare to make himself so small. Some people find this impossible to believe: to believe that with such an eternity of space and time to choose from, God should choose to come to Israel over 2,000 years ago in human form. Yet we are not thereby called upon to assert that He has done nothing else since. With the vast development in our corporate knowledge over the past half-century and more, it is inconceivable to think that there is no other life form on some other planet. But we do not yet know for sure. So we must be reverently agnostic about that, and not concern ourselves with doubts about what God may or may not have done on other planets or in other ages. Rather let us concern ourselves with what he has done here on earth in our time.

If we can accept that he has done what we celebrate at Christmas-time; that he came down among us to reveal himself to us in love, then we have no difficulty in believing that everything else we know about him is logical. That he is concerned with and about, you and me. That he does have enough love for each and every one of us, regardless of our past. And that he wants us to respond to him yet he will not force himself upon us. To be loved by someone who *hopes* for its return but makes no demands for it, is one of the greatest joys we can know. It is one not to be lightly ignored. So, as missionaries walking in the steps of St Andrew, there is no greater message we can share with others, than this message that in God's eyes, we are very important to him. We would be very greedy and selfish people if we kept that good news to ourselves.