

Advent points to entire faith

BY BISHOP CHRISTOPHER

ONE of the slightly odd things about planning public worship is preparing for future parts of the Christian year while leading the current services. As we come into Advent, many clergy may be thinking ahead to Lent and Easter, and it can all get a little bewildering. At other times, that slight mixing up of different seasons and occasions can be profound and creative.

In November, we marked a very poignant Remembrance Sunday while also looking ahead to Christmas. This year especially, I imagine many will find the connection between the coming of peace after war, and the birth of Christ as light into darkness, to be profound and thought-provoking. Stories from the First World War like that of the Christmas truces and football matches in no-man's land will echo powerfully to the proclamation that in Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself.

Advent is the season that many will associate only with calendars and Christmas shopping, but which often speaks most powerfully about what it means to follow Jesus in the here and now. Advent tells the big story of God; through it many churches will tell the stories of the patriarchs, prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, and we tell the story of the darkness into which God promised to come as Saviour in Jesus.

As we anticipate celebrating the coming of Christ at his birth, we also anticipate the presence of Christ to come, where the work of redemption is completed and the tears of the world are wiped away. We celebrate the coming of light into darkness, yet with the knowledge that we are people of hope. We still see darkness, yet we have confidence that God will be faithful to his promise in Jesus.

In that sense Advent is all year round, for to live as Christians now is neither to pretend that there is not pain and darkness around us, nor to fall into despair as though God had not come in Christ. We are instead people of hope, and perhaps Advent is one of the best ways for us to offer the gospel to those around us, because everyone can share in that longing for light in the darkness.

If we start talking about Advent and the incarnation of Jesus, the coming of Christ and the now and not-yet of the kingdom of God, it gets a bit abstract. That's perhaps why stories are so vital to sharing the gospel and capture our imaginations so vividly. We don't need to be able to explain the mechanics of our faith to people, as much as we need to tell the smaller stories that point to the big story. So through Advent and beyond, think about what is your story of light in darkness. What story will you tell to show that hope to others? How has the story of Jesus shaped your story?



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DECEMBER 2018

UPFRONT

- 3 Faith in Focus
- 4-9 Latest news
- 10-11 Christmas 2019

IN DEPTH

- 12-15 School governors make all the difference
- 16-19 Clergy and lay people have vocations from God

PEOPLE

- 20-21 My Faith: Nigerian man now understands grace
- 23 Big Issue: Going vegan can help environment
- 24 Why I love my church: Pam Dana

AND FINALLY

- 26 Top 10: Our guide to Christmas services

Editor: Neil Pugmire (023-9289 9673 or neil.pugmire@portsmouth.anglican.org)

Advertising: Glenda Charitos (01752-225 623 or glenda@cornerstonevision.com)

Front page photo: Pete Langdown