

1/12/19

O God, light of the minds that know you, life of the souls that love you, and strength of the thoughts that seek you - bless the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts. Breathe your life into us that we may live in the manner you have appointed unto us and better love and serve you and one another.

Amen

Today is Advent Sunday, the start of a new church year.

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation, as the Church prepares to celebrate the coming (*adventus*) of Christ in his incarnation, and also looks ahead to his final advent as judge at the end of time. The readings and liturgies not only direct us towards Christ's birth, they also challenge the modern reluctance to confront the theme of divine judgement:

Every eye shall now behold him

robed in dreadful majesty. (*Charles Wesley*)

The Four Last Things – Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – have been traditional themes for Advent meditation. The

characteristic note of Advent is therefore expectation, rather than penitence, although the character of the season is easily coloured by an analogy with Lent. The anticipation of Christmas under commercial pressure has also made it harder to sustain the appropriate sense of alert watchfulness, but the fundamental Advent prayer remains 'Maranatha' – 'Our Lord, come' (1 Corinthians 16.22). Church decorations are simple and spare, and purple is the traditional liturgical colour, although here we have blue. In the northern hemisphere, the Advent season falls at the darkest time of the year, and the natural symbols of darkness and light are powerfully at work throughout Advent and Christmas. The lighting of candles on an Advent wreath as we do here was imported into Britain from northern Europe in the nineteenth century, and is now a common practice. The Moravian custom of the Christingle has similarly enjoyed great success in Britain since the latter part of the twentieth century, with the encouragement of the Children's Society; we have our Christingle service on Christmas Eve. The Third Sunday of Advent was observed in medieval times as a splash of colour in the restrained atmosphere of Advent (*Gaudete* or 'Rose Sunday').

Our Advent Wreath has three purple candles, reflecting the liturgical colour for Advent, with a pink candle for the Third Sunday, when rose-pink vestments are traditionally worn in some churches. Alternatively, there may four red or blue candles in a ring around a white or gold candle. The first candle is lit on today on Advent Sunday; additional ones will be lit, one on each Sunday, and the white one on Christmas Day.

There are different traditions as to when in the service the candle is lit, but here we light it after the procession before we start the service.

There are also several traditions about the meaning or theme of each candle. The scheme that accords best with the Common Worship Lectionary which we use here is:

Advent 1	The Patriarchs
Advent 2	The Prophets
Advent 3	John the Baptist
Advent 4	The Virgin Mary
Christmas Day	The Christ

Each of the four Sundays then reminds us of those who prepared for the coming of Christ. 'The Patriarchs' can naturally focus on Abraham, our father in faith, and David, the ancestor in whose city Jesus was born. 'The Prophets' gives an opportunity to reflect on the way the birth of the Messiah was 'foretold'. John, who proclaimed the Saviour, and Mary, who bore him in her womb, complete the picture

As I mentioned in opening today is New Years Day for the church. This is traditionally a time for new years resolutions which are as appropriate at the start of the church year as they are at the start of a calendar year.

This is therefore a good time to look at our spiritual lives and see where they can be made healthier. For some of us this may involve building a more active prayer life, for others it may be more involvement in bible study, it could be more regular worship. For some of us it may involve becoming more actively involved in the running of our church and its services. I would suggest that it is a good time for all of us to examine our lives prayerfully to see what is right for us; if there are ways we can use our time, talents or money better for this church.

However, this year I would particularly ask each and every one of you to think carefully about your giving to the church.

For many years the Church of England has in many ways been seen as a free service provided for the local community which accepted donations to defray a small part of its cost. As a congregation we are asked to cover the cost of running the church building and to make a contribution to the diocese. This contribution covers the central administration costs of the church and the costs of stipendiary, or paid, clergy such as our vicar. The contribution we are asked to make, of about £35,000 per year is vastly less than the cost of these services, which in 2020 will be about £75,000. The balance has historically come from the central church using investment income and more affluent dioceses supporting less affluent ones such as ours.

There has never been any semblance of a membership fee to belong to a Church of England church. This has always seemed amazing to members of other denominations or other faiths. Talking to good friends of mine who are Jewish they cannot believe that we can operate as a church without having a membership fee levied.

The time has now come however when things need to change. I very much hope that as a church we will never have a membership fee. There should never be a situation where anyone cannot be a member of our church because they cannot afford to do so, or where one can only worship in a church if one is a member.

However, the Church of England is today living beyond its means. To date the church has run as it does because of the generosity of its past members. These funds are now running out and many of the dioceses which used to be more affluent are starting to struggle. The net effect is that there are no longer the funds to support our diocese from central funds and the subsidy is being reduced each year. For several years now our diocese has operated at a deficit of £1,000,000 per annum which has only been made possible by selling redundant clergy housing. This is clearly not a tenable long-term strategy.

There is an initiative in the diocese to move from subsidy to sustainability and this was the main subject of debate at the diocesan synod eight days ago and will be at the next meeting in March. It will also be considered by our deanery at a clergy

chapter later this month and a deanery congress in the new year. The effect of this is that in future parishes will need to work to cover their costs. This means that if we as a parish wish to have a full-time vicar in the future we will need to cover much more of the costs which will involve a significant increase in our contribution to the diocese. There is no immediate threat to the parish as nothing will happen as long as Jude is our vicar, and he has no plans to depart.

However unless we start to change now we will have problems in the future. Bishop Stephen was quite clear at the Diocesan Synod that the object of the initiative was not to cut stipendiary clergy numbers, although they are declining somewhat, and that he was confident that the churches in the diocese would rise to and meet the challenges which being church in the 21st century presents.

Even with our current level of contribution we at St Anne's have for several years now only just broken even financially. Even this has only been achieved by using some of the income from our church centre to fund the cost of running the church. This has reduced the amount we are putting into reserves to

meet future fabric maintenance costs which will itself cause problems in the future. We also now make no charitable contributions from our church income. Only 20 years ago we tithed 10% of our church income to donations to charitable causes.

If we are to cover these increased costs then we either need to cut our local costs or increase our income. Our local costs to run this church are budgeted to be less than £20,000 in 2020 and in reality there is little that could be cut, unless we take drastic steps like not heating or lighting the church. If therefore we are to increase our income, we need to increase our giving either directly or by growing our congregation or increasing our fund raising.

I do not believe a church should be primarily a fund-raising organisation; our primary role is to promote Christ's kingdom in this parish, not to raise funds. That said as I mentioned earlier we do now rely heavily on the income from the centre to subsidise our church and of course events such as the bazaar also make a significant contribution.

However in reality if we are to succeed we need to look at the contribution each of us makes and ideally to continue to grow our congregation.

In recent years we have lost a number of the longer serving members of our congregation either because they have moved away, like Jenny, or have died, like David. However, there have also been a number of new members joining the congregation and I hope this will continue. This is why developing ideas from our open PCC on worship and outreach are ways to move our community forward which will hopefully lead to growth.

However, we have to face the fact that if we are to secure our future it will need each of us to see if we can increase our contribution. Tithing has a biblical basis and there are many churches, including Church of England churches, who do ask their congregation to tithe, which means to give 10% of their gross income to the church. I do not think this should be an expectation, but I have always found that looking at my giving in cash and kind in this way helps me to assess whether I should be trying to give more. If you are not a member of our free will offering scheme in one of its forms I would ask you to

consider joining. Firstly, it helps one to look at what one is actually giving. Additionally, if one is a tax-payer and signs up for Gift Aid the church is able to claim 25% of the donation from HMRC thus increasing our income at no cost to you. If you want more information on FWO our FWO Officer Lindsey Archer would be pleased to give it.

I realise that I have spent much of this sermon looking at financial giving. I also realise that the giving we all make to our church is in time, talents and money and that all are important. I would also reinforce what I said earlier that there is not an imminent crisis, a cliff edge we are about to fall over. If we start to take the problem seriously now and make gradual steps to move forward I am certain we can avoid ever being in such a situation and will confirm Bishop Stephens confidence that the Subsidy to Sustainability Initiative will enable us to build a church which has a sustainable future without too much radical change.

So on this Advent Sunday at the start of the new church year I would suggest that it is a time for all of us to take stock of our

contribution to this church in time, talents and money to see what we can do to move this church forward in the 2020s.

Amen