

St Thomas's 8th December. Advent 2

Many years ago before Angela and I were married - we were engaged – I bought Angela what I thought was a rather lovely brooch. It was silver and the design was a Celtic one. You know a sort of intricate knot. That was the good news; the bad news is that a few months later the brooch was stolen from her coat which had been left in a cloakroom.

However despite the lost brooch -or perhaps because of it - I've always had a interest in the Celts and have enjoyed visiting Northumbria. The home of the great Cuthbert , I've been to Iona , Lindisfarne and even climbed Mt Brendon in Ireland, not forgetting holidays in Cornwall, Brittany and the Basque region – all lands of the Celts.

Our retreat House in our diocese of Guildford is named after St Columba, another one of the Celtic Saints. It was at St Columbas last week that a book caught my eye "Celtic Advent " by David Cole.

It's fascinating. Apparently the ancient Celtic Church kept 40 days of Advent rather than our shortened version which began last Sunday. They began Advent on the 20th November and divided the season into three sections.

The first third of the 40 days they reflected and imagined how Christ the incarnate son of God came into the world as a human.

The Second third of the 40 days they reflected on how Christ might come into our lives not just as a one off event or conversion but how his coming might continually happen throughout every part of our everyday lives. The joys and sorrows, the hopes and the fears.

And the last third of the 40 days they reflected on the coming of Christ when he comes at the end of all things. Traditionally

expressed in the four last things – Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell.

So Advent for the Celtic Church was a pretty demanding time; there was a lot to meditate and reflect on.

How is it that God the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things actually enters into our world as a helpless baby?

How can we mortals be embraced and as it be were caught up in the very life of God. ?

How can we make sense of our life and our ultimate death?

All these very deep and profound questions are expressed artistically in wonderfully illustrated manuscripts produced by the Celtic monasteries. The most famous being The Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels.

The most beautiful and complicated and brilliantly coloured pages show incredible swirling patterns of creatures, humans, angelic beings, plants, animals which together give an insight into the mystery of life and death of nature and all creation in which all things are held together in God's loving embrace. I think the correct name for the pattern is a mandala.

David Cole recommends getting hold of illustrations from one or either of these books and using them as a focus for meditating during this season of Lent. They are amazing and easily downloaded from the website.

The Celtic Church took Advent seriously and I know that I for one often don't.

We can be so busy preparing for Christmas that we miss the opportunity to reflect, to wonder, to wait. Perhaps we could take

some time to reflect on the nature of our world, our society, ourselves on the coming of Christ as a human child coming into our day to day lives and coming at the end of time.

And here's another thought

The Christian year begins not with the great feasts of Christmas, Easter or Pentecost but with waiting. A season of waiting. Not just waiting for Christmas, but waiting and longing for peace and justice in our confused and very confusing world . A waiting for wholeness and healing in our broken and hurting lives . A longing that the church might be a living sign of God's love for the world and care of the creation.

Advent is in many ways a stark season. Here is very short Advent poem called Advent Landscape. It describes that sense of emptiness.

**Leaf fall. The open framework of trees
Open ploughed fields. Wide skies**

Advent is also a season of longing. Like the Autumn landscape a time to be in touch with our longing but also our inner emptiness and need.

A longing for God to be with us in making sense of our restlessness, our tiredness, our inability to make change . These longings can become the open door to God but only if we truly look at ourselves as children of God part of the human family, look at the world as God's world not our world, look at the church as God's church not our church.

It's very unusual to have an election in Advent and goodness knows how the Celts would vote if they were here today. But I believe they

would see the vital importance of cherishing and caring for creation and every part of it - they would be pleased that our parish is striving to be an eco church. They would be deeply concerned about climate change, about the warming of the oceans, about the extinction of so many species in the world. I believe that they would want Christians to value every human life as precious and of equal value in God's eyes. They would see all of life as a gift from a gracious and generous God who holds all creation in mysterious but wonderful unity. And that is why those Celtic manuscript illustrations are so good at getting us to think about the mystery and unity of all life and all creation of the human and the divine.

And so as we go to the polls on Thursday I believe we should go with a sense of longing - a longing to bring healing to our world and those who are suffering. How best we can show our concern about climate change, how best we can show that we care for those who are struggling and feel forgotten.

When Friday (the morning after) comes I don't imagine that the Promised land will have arrived. But don't give up because that longing for a more just, merciful, loving and forgiving world will come in a most amazing earth shattering way when we will celebrate in just a little more than 2 weeks time - the birth of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

But then it is over to us. - In the words of today's post communion collect.

"Give us grace, give us patience, give us courage, give us commitment to imitate him in the humility and purity of his first coming "