

St Andrew's, Newgate Street Wed 8 December 2021

Advent Reflection with Compline

*Give us grace, loving God, to feel the brief touch of
winter light, to sense the rhythms of the deep earth,
and to know your stillness at the heart of all things.*

Amen

One of my earliest and most vivid memories of Northumberland comes from 1972. It was the longest journey I had made on my own as a fairly new driver. I drove from my curacy post in Cockermouth to the Friary at Alnmouth, to spend a few days on retreat – mostly, if I'm honest, on retreat from a Vicar I wasn't getting on with too well! Very early on the first morning I went to the Friary Chapel which has a beautiful picture window looking straight across to the Coquet Lighthouse. It was November, the week before Advent, and the lighthouse beamed out every few seconds over the vast North Sea.

At first, I was sitting and thinking, taking in how wonderful it was to be in that space, taking in all that I could see. And then I found myself just sitting. Time stood still. I didn't have to do anything; I was just being. Just being, but, as I quickly realised as I thought about it afterwards, being in the presence of God.

Whenever I recall that morning it reminds me of why we keep this season of Advent, when the days are short and dark, when everyone around us – and, to some extent we ourselves - are rushing about preparing for Christmas. If we can't stop for a few moments, and let time stand still, we might miss the whole point of it all. We don't need to be thinking about anything; we certainly don't need to be busy doing anything at all. Just make a short space of time to sit. We might just hear the angels catching our attention: *O come, let us adore him.*

Come – one of the watchwords of Advent. Come, not necessarily on a laborious physical journey like Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem. Come ... draw near ... not to Bethlehem, but to the wonder of God as a helpless new-born child. Come, let us adore him! Let us worship him. Let our whole being be caught up in adoration.

I have only read a few pages so far, but Stephen, Archbishop of York, has an Advent Book this year, 'Music of Eternity: Meditations with Evelyn Underhill.' It is written by Robyn Wrigley-Carr who has made a special study of Underhill, who was a great Anglican writer a century ago. Even if you don't know her devotional books, you may have read one of her great whodunit

novels featuring Lord Peter Wimsey. Anyway, one of Evelyn Underhill's great themes is that Christians are made for adoration.

So here we are, on a cold Wednesday in 2021 – for what? First and foremost for worship, or adoration. In a beautiful hallowed space where we can just sit. You may not be listening to my words any more, but sensing everything around you just as I sat fifty years ago, looking out on the North Sea in the dark, just aware of the lighthouse marking out the rhythm of life, but allowing me to be held in the presence of God, caught up in a moment of eternity.

We are not here to **do** anything – well, except those who are going to sing and pray in a few minutes – we are here together to **be**, to adore the God who is so much greater than any of us can grasp. And we are here together **as we are**, with all the things that weigh heavily on our hearts this Advent, because they are part of us. All those concerns and people are caught up in our praise and our prayer. We're not turning our backs on the world, or escaping from it; far from it.

And there's one more vital element to all this: music.

Many of us will know the saying made famous by Pope

John Paul II: *The person who sings prays twice*. At its best, music lifts our thoughts and senses to a new level.

Music sometimes makes words redundant; sometimes music takes mundane, everyday words and makes them profoundly poetic. When we are caught up in the ancient office of Compline, we hear beautiful words sung to music that in one sense takes us back to the Middle Ages; but in another sense the music of plainchant is not ancient, it's timeless. We don't need to stop and work out whether we like it or not – any more than we need to

ask whether we 'like' breathing. If we will let it, it is there to draw us – body and soul – out of ourselves and into worship, into eternity, just for a few moments.

Enjoy your preparations for Christmas, but try to make sure they are punctuated by quiet moments, moments when you can do nothing, but just be, moments when you can glimpse the glory of God, the mystery of the Christ-child, and moments when you know and feel yourself be held in the presence and the love and power of God.

Now, before Compline, we keep a few moments to do just that. Whether you are leading our worship, or content to sit and let others pray and sing for us, let's just enjoy being caught up in the music of eternity. In the words of John Donne, *I shall be made Your music – as I come*. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Amen