

**First Sunday of Advent,
Sunday, 29th November 2020**



Dear Friends,

'And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!' (Mark 13: 37)

Today is the first Sunday the new Church Year! So Happy New Year to you all! As we celebrate the beginning of a new church year and look forward to Christmas, even though we are in Lockdown and cannot meet in person, we gather from the sanctuary of our own homes to worship the Christ, who comes to us through word and prayer.

It is also the First Sunday of Advent, in which we recall the saving hope we have in Christ. The first candle of the Advent wreath represents the Patriarchs: Abraham, his son, Isaac, and on through Isaac's son, Jacob, who bore the 12 sons who became the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel. In addition to being key figures in the Old Testament, the Patriarchs are key to the new Covenant that God has with His people, as their lineage eventually produces Jesus, our Messiah. God told Abraham that, through him, all the nations of the world would be blessed because he had trusted and put his hope in God. The Old Testament spoke of the coming of Christ; of how a Saviour would be born, a king in the line of King David. He would rule the world wisely and bless all the nations. We too believe in God's promise to send Jesus again to this world to establish His kingdom upon the earth.

Hope is like a light shining in a dark place. As we look at the light of this first lit Candle of Hope on our 'virtual' wreath, we give thank for the faith of the Patriarchs and celebrate the hope we too have in Jesus Christ. So as we remember the history of our faith, let us quietly join together in a 'virtual' prayer:

Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent – The Candle of Hope

God of Abraham and Sarah, and all the Patriarchs of old, you are our Father too.

Your love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of David.

Help us in preparing to celebrate His birth,
to make our hearts ready for your Holy Spirit to make His home among us.

We ask this through Jesus Christ,
the Light who is coming into the world. Amen.

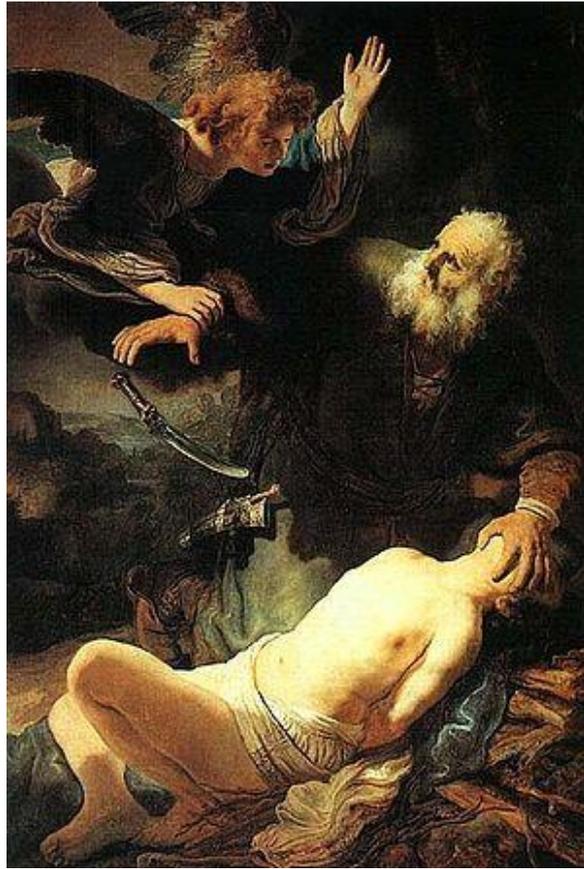


'Three Patriarchs in Paradise' - 18th c. Russian Icon, Pinterest

Here we go again – 4 weeks to Christmas Day! Yet whilst supermarkets are brim-full of Christmas trinkets and tinsel, many of our other shops and services are closed because of Lockdown regulations. As frustrating and as worrying as this situation undoubtedly is, with many thousands of jobs, businesses and self-employed livelihoods in jeopardy, perhaps the silver lining might be that we can use this enforced time of isolation to devote our energies to the important task of preparing ourselves to watch and wait and hope for the birth of Christ?

Advent is the time, right at the beginning of our Christian year, when we remember that Jesus said that he would return again to earth. He did not tell us when that day might be, so it's important for us to have our lives clean and in order. As Mark reminds us in our Gospel reading today: *'Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.'* Perhaps this was Jesus' intention all along? He knows our human natures so well, that in not divulging the day, the time or the hour, we must stay alert to the prospect of His coming – living each precious moment of our lives the way Jesus asks us to as we watch and wait and hope for His coming.

One of the ways we can prepare for Jesus is by following the examples of other faithful people – maybe those around us in our own lives and in this faith community, or indeed we can look back to the Patriarchs who we are celebrating in the lighting our first Advent candle this week – to the faithful obedience of Abraham, the father of many nations, who was prepared to offer the life of his son, Isaac, at God's command.



'The Sacrifice of Isaac' by Rembrandt

A little closer to home, perhaps, is the special example and witness of St Andrew, whose Feast Day is held on 30th November. Andrew was a humble fisherman, born in Bethesda on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and was the younger brother of Peter. Remember how Mark 1: 16 gives us the account of the time when Jesus became aware that Andrew was walking behind him along the shore of the Lake. Jesus asked him *'What are you looking for?'* Immediately, Andrew realised that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and from that moment on, Andrew, the first-called of the Apostles, spent his life as a fisher of men, calling people to Jesus.

Andrew is with Jesus at the miracle of the loaves and fishes; with Peter, James and John on the Mount of Olives for the *'Olivet Discourse'* as Jesus explains to them His future plans for Israel; and at the Last Supper. Apocryphal writings recount the missionary work of Andrew in Byzantium and in the area around the Black Sea. Andrew devoted his life to doing what Jesus asked of him - converting many people to Christianity. This eventually led to him being put to death on an 'X-shaped' cross to which he was tied, not nailed. He lived two days in this state of suffering, still preaching to the people who gathered around their beloved Apostle. It is said that, as he prayed on the cross, he was bathed in a great light which only faded as he died.

Legend has it that the relics of Andrew were brought to Scotland from Constantinople to the place now called St Andrews. The 'X' shape of this obedient saint's cross is reflected in the Scottish national flag, known as the Saltire. St Andrew has been recognized as the patron saint of Scotland since at least the ninth century.



'St. Andrew - exterior mosaic to the cathedral at Amalfi' - Shawn McCullars

As we come into the period of Advent, we are confronted by an uncomfortable question: *'If Jesus were to meet us today, how would we as individuals shape up?'* Would we respond in faithful love like the Abraham or Andrew? Or would we remain caught up in our own behaviours and desires such that we might fail to see Jesus even if he were right under our nose?

During Advent, Christians go back to that time of waiting before the birth of Jesus, when people were longing to be freed from slavery and to be at one with God again. As *we* wait for the coming of the One who would change everything, this is Jesus' call to us: *'What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!'* We are called to be still: to slow down and to find time in the busy-ness and chaos of modern living for reflection on the difference Jesus has made in our lives: to anticipate what will happen if we allow Jesus to be even more fully present in and through us.

We are called to confront the truth - about ourselves, which is not always very edifying, if we are prepared to answer the question as to how Jesus might find us today; and the truth about God, which brings us hope eternal in the form of the Christ-child: vulnerable, lowly, radical, holy. In our 21st Century world, where God's truth is largely ignored, we are called more than ever to be prepared – to be morally alert; obedient to the commands of the living word in Jesus Christ. Even more determinedly than we prepare for Christmas festivities, we must always encourage each other to keep alert, to prepare and watch for Him. It is our greatest act of love, from one soul to another, that we share the light of Christ and kindle faith in another's heart, drawing them in from the darkness of despair and isolation to the deep fulfilment of life in Jesus' love.



'The Last Judgement' by Michelangelo

For the One who comes as the Christ-child and who returns as judge of all brings to the faithful a great challenge rooted in His desire for us all to be united with God's love: *'What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!'* Isaiah describes the power of His return: *'It will be like fire on earth that causes wood to burn and water to boil.'* (Isaiah 64: 2) Our only earthly hope is to respond to the challenge by having faith in Jesus Christ, just like Abraham and the Patriarchs and the witness of St Andrew: an obedient faith which can cleanse us and bring us into God's merciful presence. Confronting truth might well be deeply painful, yet it also has the potential to bring great joy.

This especially sacred time of Advent during Lockdown frees us from the commercial pull of 'yuletide' and gives each of us space to hold a mirror to our personal lives: to our own behaviours and responses to God's call on our lives to stay awake in Him. How have we lived out this year past? With Christian openness and enthusiasm? With faithful courage and generosity? Or have our self-righteous deeds overwhelmed us?

During this strange time of isolation and of too much time, will we abandon ourselves in all humility to God in Christ Jesus? Will we take the risk to venture closer into relationship with our Saviour and our Redeemer? Or will we stay set in our old ways that keep us from the One who comes to find us in all love?

Yours, keeping awake for the coming of Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice

High Days and Holy Days



Reindeer courtesy of Facebook!

Earlier this week, the Government issued the next phase of Coronavirus regulations. As you may have deduced, Hampshire has been put into Tier 2, which restricts us from many of the freedoms we enjoyed prior to the Autumn Lockdown when we were in Tier 1. However, as Christians, our response to these continuing privations must be that we endure them out of love for the other, and continue to support our families and neighbours who are shielding as much as we can.

This comes with my gratitude to each of you for your actions of love in this regard. Making `phone calls or helping with shopping deliveries to those at home alone or in vulnerable circumstances might not feel like much but, believe me to the people on the receiving end, your generosity of spirit is a blessing. Thank you all for helping to keep our communities flourishing.

Mercifully, the Coronavirus Lockdown measures which will come into effect on Wednesday, 2nd December allow for the resumption of worship services, with the caveat of maintaining mandatory pre-booking of services, social distancing, mask-wearing and the deep-cleaning of buildings between services.



A sheep from Littleton's Christmas ADVENTure as the Posada moves online!

Whilst there will be no services permissible this coming Sunday, we have a treat from the stable of Carol Coleman and the Café Church team. Be sure to click onto the Benefice website or on Facebook to view the video of: *'Why Are We Waiting?'*

Schedule of Services

(All services begin at **10am** unless indicated otherwise)

Date	Service	Chilbolton	Crawley	Littleton	Sparsholt	Wherwell
6 Dec	<i>2nd Advent</i>	Closed	Morning Prayer	Closed	Holy Communion	Morning Prayer
9 Dec – Wed		X	x	9.30am - Mid-week Holy Communion	X	x
13 Dec	<i>3rd Advent</i>	Holy Communion	Closed	Morning Prayer	6pm – Christmas Music & Readings by candlelight	Closed
20 Dec	<i>4th Advent</i>	Advent Readings & Prayers	4pm – Readings & Music by candlelight	Morning Prayer	4pm – Crib Service	4pm - Evening Prayer
24 Dec	<i>Christmas Eve</i>	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed
25 Dec	<i>Christmas Day</i>	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Communion	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Service
27 Dec	<i>St Stephen's</i>	Closed	Closed	Closed	Patronal Holy Communion	Closed

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have issued a call for a **Month of Prayer** in response to the Lockdown, and across the diocese we will be answering their call to pray for our nation and to serve our communities. You can find resources and information about the diocesan response to the call for prayer on our Benefice website.

Please also see our website for updates and more prayer and service resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

Collect Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent

Almighty God,
 give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
 and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life,
 in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;
 that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
 to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal;
 through him who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.



Mark 11: 24-37 - The Coming of the Son of Man

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!

