

**The Rectory
Rectory Close
Radyr CF15 8EW
vicki.burrows@me.com
Tel 029 20842417 or 07515 965781**

Dear Friends,

*Almighty God, as your kingdom dawns,
turn us from the darkness of sin to the light of holiness,
that we may be ready to meet you
in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.*

This collect prayer for the First Sunday in Advent carefully articulates the meaning of the Advent season. Yet for the past couple of weeks I've been busy buying Christmas presents on line as if that is the meaning of the season! I have not been into Cardiff shopping for months but this year I've stepped onto another treadmill. "Send me your wish lists please," I texted our sons. Girls, "what would you like for Christmas?" I asked. Hours have been spent on websites trying to find the longed for gifts. And, in the excitement to 'buy, buy, buy', having found a much wanted gift on a Black Friday deal, it went astray because in the delight of finding the elusive thing I hadn't noticed the default shipping address was to Surrey where once upon a time I was Vicar! Oh well, next year I will wander around the shops, if there are any still trading, and carefully choose, purchase and carry home as we all did long ago.



Am I alone in feeling conflicted? Is your Christian faith and your Advent hope expressed only in church or reflected in your shopping habits? I'm also confused why, when the church in the UK has been in near terminal decline for decades, so many wish to "save Christmas". Honestly, I'm really not The Grinch but for many people Christmas is primarily an excuse to party and enjoy time with their families. Christians believe that once upon a time God revealed himself to us in the face of an infant born far from home and that the nativity story is inextricably linked with the reckless love, the sacrifice and the pain that baby boy suffered years later on a cross. I can't quite work out whether I should sacrifice my longing to be with family for the sake of others or whether I should spend, spend, spend to help the economy because that will also save others. What am I to do?

And whilst all these thoughts are jostling for head space we enter the season of Advent. I remind myself that I am on the verge of missing something precious if I simply count the shopping days until Christmas. Advent is a solemn time in the church year when, filled with expectation, we prepare to celebrate, not just the advent or coming of Christ in his incarnation, but also in his final advent when at the end of time he will come as judge. From now until Christmas our readings and services direct our thoughts inwards; we are called to prepare our hearts. Whilst twenty-first century Christians love singing Charles Wesley's wonderful Advent hymn "Lo he comes with clouds descending" we religiously avoid the theme of divine judgment and tunefully skip over his coming "robed in dreadful majesty" to judge us. However, "The Four Last Things" – Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell – are the traditional Advent themes. Yet tinsel and trees, carols, calendars and commercial pressures continue to divert even the faithful few from a sense that watchfulness is our mantra.

This year, as Advent begins and Christmas beckons, let's take time for a bit of self-examination, to think of those who are suffering and all who have lost loved ones, and let's give thanks for all who continue to love and serve us in a myriad of seen and unseen ways

With love

**Vicki
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