

# On the move

A REFLECTION ON ADVENT PROCESSIONS BY **JEREMY DAVIES**

The season of Advent – the four weeks of preparation for Christmas – is a profoundly evocative time which draws on the closing in of the days as winter deepens. It invites us to consider the darkness that pervades our world and often our personal lives, and yet finds a glimmer of that divine hope that scatters the darkness from before our path. Although Advent has been almost entirely subsumed in the popular mind by the rush to Christmas, the Church's stubborn observance of the Advent season is a call to explore the depths of our human experience and to discover something even deeper which gives point and purpose to, and ultimately makes sense of, our being human – namely a sense of God's love. That is rather a grand way of describing the Church's keeping of Advent but the point about the Church's year, driven by the gospel narrative, is that we believe in a God who has entered our human condition, with all its darkness, and by that entering in transformed it – indeed continues to transform it – into something so grace-filled that it leads to perfection.

Part of the mystery of Advent is tied up with what Advent actually signifies. The word means 'coming' and the coming of Christ, celebrated at Christmas, is anticipated in this season especially by the stories of John the Baptist and the annunciation to the Virgin Mary. But 'coming' has further resonance in the Christian understanding in that it also refers to the second coming of Christ as judge, and the last things (death, judgement, heaven and hell) – what in theological language is called eschatology. This is something to which nowadays we give scant attention, despite our unflinching affirmation in the Creed that 'Christ will come again to judge both the living and the dead.' Should Advent, therefore, be kept as a time of rejoicing or a time of penitential waiting and preparation? The question is reflected in our Advent liturgies – we revert for example to the liturgical colour of penitential purple (Sarum blue in Salisbury) and we omit the Gloria from the Mass, but Alleluias abound in our hymns. This is an age-old ambivalence, for the penitential observance of a much longer Advent season beginning on 11 November (the Feast of St Martin) or even earlier was the practice of the church in France, Spain and Germany in the fifth century. But in Rome

(rather later in the sixth century) the Advent season started later, comprised only four or five Sundays and was a festive season of preparation for the Feast of the Lord's Nativity, without penitential character.

When in the eighth century the Frankish Church accepted the Roman liturgy the non-penitential Advent of Rome clashed with the much longer penitential season of the Gallic observance. After a few centuries of vacillation there emerged a final structure of Advent observance that combined features of both traditions, which, with pruning of the season to four weeks, is the tradition we have inherited almost unchanged since the thirteenth century.

This tension between joyful celebration and penitence can provide depth rather than confusion. Certainly the ceremonies of the Church (using symbol, ritual, movement, colour, music and silence) often provide focus and clarity and a level of understanding that words do not. The growing popularity of Advent processions is a case in point, for processions today, as in medieval times, start where people are, and help to engage congregations in the drama that is being enacted, establishing common ground. Even when the whole congregation cannot move in procession because of numbers or restricted space, the whole assembly is invited by the movement of the few to an imaginative participation in the action. And few things kindle the imagination more than lighting a single candle in an unlit church. Before any words are spoken we have an understanding of St John's graphic image: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it'. Immediately our imaginations turn to the darkness of our world. Maybe we remember the creation account when the Bible tells us there was only emptiness and everything was null and void, and in the darkness 'God said "Let there be light" and there was light'.

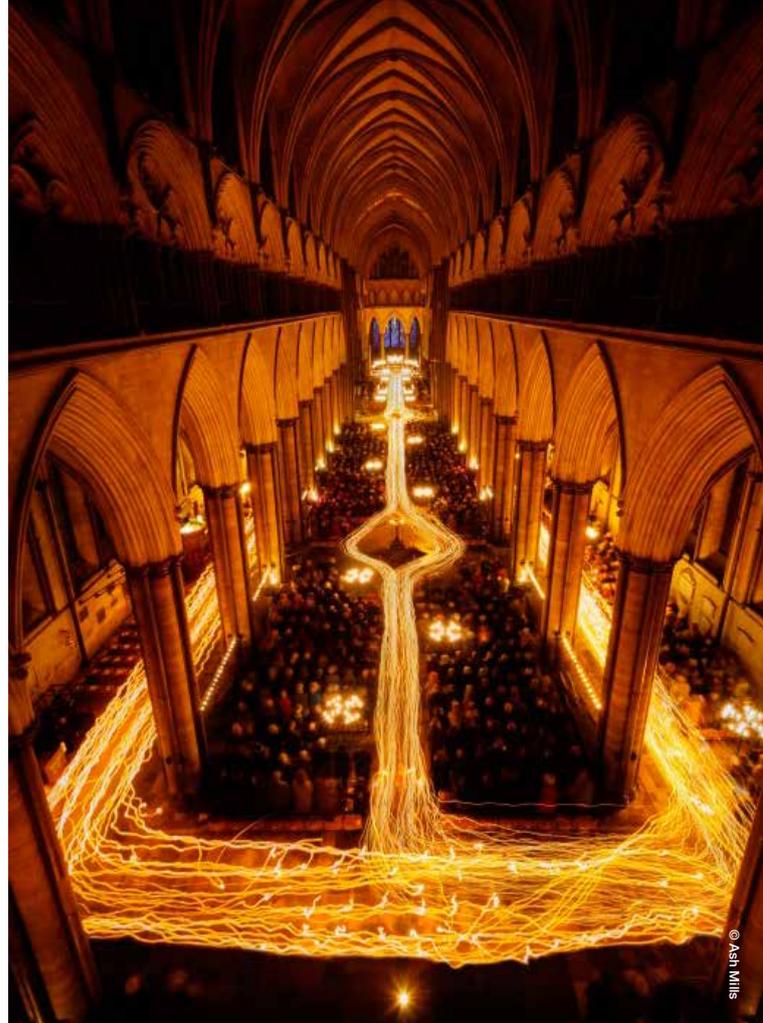
The Advent candle is lit either at the west end of the church at the beginning of a procession that will move from west to east, or maybe, better, in the centre of the church where all the congregation can see the candle as it is lit. The Advent Responsory ('I look from afar') sung by choir or congregation in a responsorial form is both a traditional and entirely appropriate response to the lighting of the candle. It is usual for the Christian

assembly to be convened by some greeting: ‘The Lord be with you’ and its response is the most familiar. The Anglican provision in *The Promise of his Glory* and the Common Worship volume *Times and Seasons* offers some excellent bidding prayers. My own sense is that words at this point are unnecessary. The congregation is drawn together by the flickering flame – Christ our Light. Our response is a song, and the words come later. It may be that brief prayers can be included after the readings in the procession, though the prayer in the Salisbury procession is confined to a final recitation of the Collect for Advent Sunday. I like to think that the whole liturgy, even without particular prayers of intercession, is an offering of prayer. The RSCM’s publication *The Advent Sequence* includes an effective opening responsory and a Blessing of the Light by Trevor Jarvis.

From this dramatic opening the ceremony continues. From the single flame other lights are lit. These candles may be on free-standing candelabra or night lights on ledges and sills, gradually lit in the course of the liturgy, or candles with drip shields held by the congregation, lit at different stages of the procession. If it’s possible not to use electric light at all I would make that plea, for nothing kills the drama and atmosphere created by candlelight more effectively than electric light!

If the spreading candlelight is the primary symbol of this procession the other important feature is the procession itself. Processions have been a feature of Christian liturgy for centuries, as have pilgrimages to which processions are related, and many shrines such as Salisbury Cathedral have been built with processions expressly in mind. The procession, passing the font (the point of baptism), coming to the rood screen (the remembrance of God’s redemption of us), on to the sanctuary to receive communion (our participation here and now in the promise of heaven), and our progress to the Lady Chapel (if there is one) where perhaps one day our coffin will be lodged, is a symbol of our earthly pilgrimage. It reminds us that we have here no abiding city, but we seek one to come.

The readings that accompany the journey through the darkness can be drawn from a variety of sources, and though the biblical material is so rich and plentiful it can often be illuminated by prose or poetry from other genres. Also the themes of the readings may cover a wide spectrum reflecting the Advent ambivalence I have already alluded to. Providing not only structure but coherence in the choice of texts is important. Both *The Promise of his Glory* and *Times and Seasons* offer a good selection of possible biblical readings on a variety of



Salisbury Advent procession

themes. At Salisbury Cathedral I introduced pairs of readings at the various stations which punctuated the procession – one from the Old and a corresponding or answering reading from the New Testament, giving a sense of the continuity of the tradition of faith and also of Jesus as the light of the world fulfilling the prophecies of old. More recently we based the pairs of readings around the Advent Antiphons which were sung to plainchant at different points in the liturgy. All the antiphons have a Christological focus apart from the unique Sarum antiphon *O Virgo Virginum*, and are drawn from biblical images, such as Key of David or Root of Jesse. The images suggest rich biblical sources for choosing appropriate readings and again *The Promise of his Glory* provides a helpful resource. Without such tying in the Antiphons, beautiful and evocative as they are, sometimes feel like a spare part trying to find a niche in the proceedings.

Plainchant with its simple monotone provides a plangent beauty in the liturgy and offers a reflective foil to the polyphony of which there is so much for choirs to sing. Where a church can draw on choral resources that can meet the demands of Byrd, Palestrina or Vittoria, or contemporary composers such as Tavener, Dove, Richard



Shephard or Peter Hallek, then there is a wealth of Advent-appropriate music. If a polyphonic setting of *Rorate Coeli* is not used, there is much to be said for including the Advent Prose with its repeated congregational response. Again, the RSCM's publication *The Advent Sequence* provides a range of music for choirs but also for congregations, often led by a cantor. Plainchant finds its place in this selection, along with small-scale anthems and contemporary and traditional hymnody, some of it newly and skilfully arranged. Crafted around the Advent Antiphons the RSCM booklet suggests ways of staging the liturgy which can be adapted to any church, and places important emphasis on pace and silence.

Crucial in the planning of the Advent procession is the use of hymnody. If as at Salisbury the drama of lighting the congregation is gradual and staged as the procession moves on, congregational hymn singing performance comes late in the proceedings. That in itself reinforces the sense of waiting, and accentuates the climax as the building fills with light and with resounding music as the mystery of God's purposes is again revealed. But even if hymns come earlier in the liturgy their choice needs to reinforce the direction of travel, complement the narrative, and facilitate the transitions within the liturgy. Music, whether played by instruments or sung by a solo voice, a choir or a congregation in full voice, affects the mood and atmosphere and our reception of the narrative.

Never more is this true than in the season of Advent. Long before I came to Salisbury and had some responsibility for the cathedral's liturgy and therefore for crafting the Advent processions I had introduced Advent processions in university chaplaincies where the resources to hand were inevitably of a different order than those available in cathedrals. The principles I have enunciated above could be applied and adapted in many different contexts, using whatever resources, skills and imaginative input – musical, liturgical, architectural, dramatic – might be available. Liturgical principles apply – in this case privileging ceremony and processional rite over mere words, seeing that light illuminating the darkness was worth a hundred sermons and understanding that music of all kinds, as well as silence, added depth and texture to spiritual experience. But alongside the undergirding liturgical principles come imagination, planning and rehearsal, without which liturgy remains flat on the page instead of being the exuberant expression of a Christian community on the move.

#### FURTHER READING

*The Promise of his Glory* (Church House Publishing, 1994)  
*Times and Seasons* (available online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/times-and-seasons.aspx>)  
*The Advent Sequence: Veni Emmanuel* (RSCM Press, 2009; available from RSCM Music Direct)