

**“Hearts blameless in holiness.”**

***1 Thess 3:13***

The celebrations of Yuletide ‘out there’ are well under way. It is not so much that people are preparing for Christmas; rather, they are already celebrating Yuletide: seasonal music, office parties, school plays, television programmes, decorations in shops, and workplaces, and homes, and so on. Yuletide is already here, and is already being celebrated.

Whilst a single preacher cannot reverse a global trend, nevertheless I make no apology for encouraging the keeping of Yuletide at arm’s length and the proper observance of Advent at least in our churches and in our Catholic homes.

Have you noticed how much of popular Christmas music is anticipatory rather than celebratory? Popular Christmas music does not celebrate Christmas: it merely anticipates it. Think of perennial classics such as ‘Have yourself a merry little Christmas,’ and ‘It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas,’ the constantly recurring romantic favourites like Mariah Carey’s, ‘All I want for Christmas is you,’ and even the most famous of all, ‘White Christmas.’ All of these songs evoke fond memories and a nostalgic warmth, and there is nothing wrong with them in themselves, of course. But all of them *anticipate* Christmas rather than *celebrate* it, which means as soon as Christmas has arrived on 25<sup>th</sup> December, these songs suddenly feel stale and outdated, and they are packed up again promptly until next November.

Our observance of Advent stands in stark contrast to this secular anticipation. As Catholics we do not – or, at least, should not – *anticipate* Christmas. Instead, we should *prepare* for Christmas. Anticipation and preparation are two altogether different things.

As Catholics, we prepare for the coming of Christ, and just as we would prepare our homes for the visit of an eminent or special visitor, so we must prepare our souls for the arrival of Christ into our hearts on the feast of His Nativity. Yet in Advent we also prepare ourselves for the second coming of Christ at the end of time which – most of us suppose – is a long way off yet so we don't tend to pay it much attention. But that is a serious mistake. Indeed, our whole lives should be a preparation for the day when we will meet God face to face, and when we will be held accountable for our deeds here on earth. And none of us know when *that* day will come.

These three events, then, are what we should spend Advent preparing for: the proper celebration of Christ's Nativity two thousand years ago when He came into our world to redeem us from sin; His coming to us in the form of sanctifying grace in the sacraments; and our coming face to face with our judge at the moment of death.

Advent, then, is a season of spiritual preparation, and the penitential nature of this season explains the use of the colour purple throughout. Our attention between now and the beginning of the Christmas season on 25<sup>th</sup> December should be focused on putting in the spiritual spadework, as it were, to get our souls into good shape for the second biggest event of the Church's year. Many people are preoccupied with physical fitness. Advent, like Lent, is a time for us to become preoccupied with our spiritual fitness.

So how do we do that?

First, think of Advent as being a little like Lent and make Advent resolutions, such as giving something up for Advent or taking up some particular spiritual devotion. Take advantage of the Advent programme outlined in our weekly newsletter: various seasonal blessings and devotions, observances and Masses. Have your Advent wreath or calendar blessed; get to Mass here or elsewhere for the wonderful feast of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception; come to our pre-dawn candlelit Rorate Mass; bless your own

Christmas crib and tree, or come to our Carols by Candlelight and bring your cribs to be blessed then.

Take up some spiritual reading. There are more books available online, with Advent thoughts and prayers, than ever before; and our newsletter will carry some suggestions too.

Get to Confession. Going to Confession is something we should be doing at least once a month in any case, and not reserving just for Advent and Lent, but make sure you get to Confession this Advent whether you have been recently or not.

And above all, pray. Make use of our Advent Devotions leaflet; pray the rosary daily; read the scripture passages associated with this season. Pray to those saints most associated with Advent: St John the Baptist, St Joseph, and Our Blessed Lady. Meditate on the Joyful Mysteries of the rosary by coming to our Wednesday evening Advent Rosary & Benediction services. If you cannot get to Mass every day, try to get to Mass at least once in the middle of the week in addition to Sunday Masses.

There are Masses and Confessions available in all the Catholic churches in and around Ipswich. It doesn't matter which you go to. Just go.

In today's First Reading, St Paul prays that the people of the Church in Thessalonica may allow Christ 'to establish [their] hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father.' That is our task during Advent: to let Christ's grace so work in us that our hearts may be established in holiness. Like Lent, and especially like Passiontide at the end of Lent, Advent is superabundantly blessed with an outpouring of God's grace upon His Church and upon us, the members of that Church.

Don't waste it.