

Four candles by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 1st December 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (at the Advent Celebration service)

Readings:

Romans 8:18-25 The hope of all creation

Isaiah 11:1-9 The Messiah's future reign of peace

Luke 1:39-45 Elizabeth and her baby rejoice at the arrival of the mother of the Saviour.

1 John 4:7-21 The meaning of love

Introduction: four candles

The title of tonight's sermon is Four Candles. And before you think I'm going to refer to the famous sketch by the Two Ronnies, let me make it clear that I'm talking about the candles of the Advent Ring, the first of which we lit earlier in this service.

Today, Advent Sunday, we begin the countdown to Christmas. Some of you will no doubt have started your countdown by eating chocolate from your Advent calendar. But here in church we light one candle on our Advent Ring each Sunday until finally on Christmas Eve we light the Christ candle in the middle of the ring.

The four candles of Advent help us to consider what the coming of Christ is all about. One scheme is to make the candles represent people or groups of people whom God used to prepare the way for the birth of Jesus: Abraham and

the patriarchs for the first candle, the prophets for the second, John the Baptist and Mary for the third and fourth.

Tonight, however, I'm going to use another popular scheme that considers four graces which the coming of Christ offers us: hope, peace, joy and love.

Hope

First, hope. It's a commodity which we all have much need of as we see the state of the world and see terrible conflicts in the Middle East, in Ukraine and Sudan, which continue to wreak destruction and indescribable suffering. Then there's the whole climate crisis, and the inadequate responses of governments of the world to really get to grips with it.

But when the chips are down, we can either let ourselves be plunged into despair or we can cling on to hope that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, even if we can't see it right now.

At the time of Jesus, the people of Israel had been waiting for centuries for the time when the promised Messiah would come to bring them freedom from oppression by foreign nations. Many pinned their hopes on Jesus – but then he was arrested and crucified. St Paul describes the crucifixion of Jesus as a scandal to Jews and foolishness, or nonsense, to Greeks, but to those who believed in Jesus it was “the power of God and the wisdom of God”¹. God in his wisdom had a bigger plan than just the salvation of the Jews. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection God was dealing with a much bigger issue than the oppression of one nation by another: the

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:24

whole issue of sin and its destructive power. Jesus conquered death and sin, and offers eternal life, in a new creation where suffering will be a thing of the past.

Our first reading comes from the wonderful chapter 8 of St Paul's letter to the Romans, which speaks of the purposes of God for the whole of creation. With modern awareness of climate change and biodiversity loss, we're increasingly noticing the "groaning" of creation that Paul writes about. But there is hope that one day the whole creation will be liberated as God brings his purposes for the world to a completion. As we allow the Spirit of God to dwell in our hearts, we find ourselves also "groaning" in anticipation. Paul uses the image of a woman in labour. The experience may be grim, but it is temporary, and will result in the joy of new birth. And so God will bring a new world to birth, a world in which the glory that will be revealed will make the sufferings of this present time pale into insignificance. What keeps us going through it all is hope - which means looking forward to the future with confidence.

Of course, as Paul says, it requires belief in a future which is yet unseen, but that belief is grounded in our experience of being called by God, and being saved by the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus for us. Our baptism into Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit are the pledges of what God has promised us in the future.

Peace

The second candle stands for peace. Our second reading was one of Isaiah's most beautiful prophecies, which speaks first of all about the promised King who will reign with

wisdom, righteousness, justice and faithfulness. In his kingdom there will be no room for violence, hostility or fear. It is a place where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and a child will lead the calf and the lion together. When I think of the mindless cruelty in today's world, and the callousness which allows the innocent to suffer through indifference and greed, the phrase "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" brings tears to my eyes.

This is a picture of the Hebrew concept of Shalom – which means peace, harmony and well-being thrown into one. What is the key to this? Isaiah tells us that it is when "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea". What he means is not that people will *know about* the Lord, but that people will *know him personally*. It's that relationship with God that transforms us and enables us to become the people he intended us to be – people who are at peace with God, at peace with ourselves, with each other and with the creation. We can experience it now as we come to know Christ for ourselves. The famous portrait of Christ by Holman Hunt, "The Light of the World" shows Jesus is knocking at the door of the human heart. The painting is an invitation to us to decide: will we respond to Jesus and let him in?

Joy

The passage I chose for joy was that meeting between the virgin Mary and her older cousin Elizabeth. It comes just after the archangel Gabriel has appeared to Mary to announce that God has called her to be the mother of his

Son.² Gabriel has told Mary that Elizabeth, who was infertile and is past child-bearing years, is expecting her own baby, and so Mary goes to visit her. She knows that Elizabeth will understand and believe her story.

What happens as Mary arrives at the house and calls Elizabeth's name is a spontaneous outburst of joy, which begins with Elizabeth's unborn baby "leaping for joy" in her womb, as she describes it. And Elizabeth realises that it is because the mother of her Lord has come to visit her.

But how did Elizabeth know what had happened inside Mary? Perhaps Mary had sent her a message in advance. Or was this a sudden prophetic insight? Whatever the case, Elizabeth is filled with joy as she recognises the enormous blessing God has brought to both of them and to the world. And a few verses later Mary bursts into a prophetic message, which we know as the Magnificat, and which was sung a few minutes ago. Mary recognises that the way God has dealt with her is typical of the way he honours those whom the world considers unimportant³.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, when we realise how God is bringing his good purposes for the world into effect, and how he has even chosen us to be part of this, we too will be filled with joy. The joy of Christ's birth is not just for Christmas – it is for every day.

² Luke 1:26-38

³ Luke 1:46-55

Love

And finally we come to love. There are many kinds of love, and many ways of showing it. But the fullest meaning of love, according to the apostle John, is expressed in the love that God showed for us:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins⁴.

John explains that God is the source of love. This is the kind of love that seeks the wellbeing of another, even when this is to our own disadvantage. When we learn to love others like this, God's love shines through us.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Christmas is supposed to be a time of goodwill, but it can also be a time when patience is tested and relationships can become strained. How important it is for us to remember what Christmas is all about – in the famous words from John's gospel:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son⁵.

God's love for us, shown in Jesus, is the true Christmas present. Everything else is just the wrapping paper.

If we choose each day to meditate on God's love for us, and choose to follow the path of love, then we will have no need

⁴ 1 John 4:10 NRSV

⁵ John 3:16

to fear when Christ comes as our Judge. As John writes a few verses later in his first letter:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear⁶.

Advent is a season of looking forward without fear, secure in the knowledge and the experience of God's unfailing love for us.

Conclusion

Hope, peace, joy and love – four of the themes of Advent. As we wait in hope for the fulfilment of God's promises to bring justice, healing and peace to our troubled world, we remind ourselves of what God has already promised and accomplished in the gift of his Son Jesus, and his death and resurrection to bring us life. And so his peace, joy and love can be ours, every day. And not just ours to keep, but ours to share and give away.

Let us use this Advent to reflect on God's promises and his good purposes for the world, to repent of the ways in which we have disregarded his will for our lives, and to seek the guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit, so that we may live out the values of hope, peace, joy and love day by day. In this way we will prepare ourselves to receive Jesus, and we and those around us will experience the true blessings of Christmas. Amen.

⁶ 1 John 4:17-18 NRSV