

## God's Advent

### Wakefield Cathedral

#### Sunday 2 December 2007 Advent Sunday

People tell me that once you are found wandering in the 'Easy Listening' section of a record, CD or music shop, then you have finally lost it. The aggression of heavy rock, the innovation of modern jazz and the intellectual depth of a Bach quartet are out of the window. That section, however, is just where you will find one of my favourite (and now retired) popular singers, Peter Skellern. Maybe he's so past it you have never heard of him!

Skellern is, however, himself an innovative musician – good use of brass bands, writes his own stuff. He also has humour. So, he was appearing in the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool making ironic jokes about Lancashire – a dangerous game. Whimsically, in front of the mayor, he mused: 'And, do you know, I've never been invited to switch on the illuminations here.'

In a loud stage whisper his worship replied: 'No, and thou won't neither!' The mayor got more laughs than Skellern, the hapless singer.

Of course, there is rather more to this than might at first be seen. Switching on the Blackpool illuminations is a powerful statement.

In that place it is equivalent to the performance of The Messiah by the Huddersfield Choral, in the weeks before Christmas at Huddersfield Town Hall. That switching on announces a 'change of gear', a radically new season. And it coincides often with this weekend. This is almost a 'divine switching off' of the illuminations.

We move into a season of darkness uniquely trailed for us in that amazing passage we have just heard from St Paul's letter to the Romans:

'For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light!'

These are words classically cloaked in the garments of prayer by Cranmer in what is, for me, the most powerful collect in the Book of Common Prayer, the Collect for Advent Sunday. We heard it just a few moments ago. Or did we? We heard something very like it. We heard the Common Worship version. It began like this:

'Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light ...'

It is just the same as it was. But in fact it isn't. Listen now to the original version, from the Book of Common Prayer:

'Almighty God, give us grace *that we may cast away* the works of darkness and *put upon* us the armour of light.'

The changes are oh so subtle. But as well as destroying some of the rhythm and cadences of the language, they make a profound shift in the theology. In the contemporary version, it is we who do it all. *We* cast away the works of darkness.

*We* put on the armour of light. There is just a cursory glance over our shoulder at God's grace. Give us grace so that we can get on with it. But *we* are in the driving seat. It is all up to *us*.

The Prayer Book takes us infinitely deeper. *Alone*, as the curtains open to reveal the darkness of advent, *alone* we can do nothing.

So we pray that God may 'give us grace *that we may* cast away the works of darkness.' And it is God who will 'put upon us the armour of light'. God will switch on the illuminations in Jesus. All this may seem just like a play on words. But it takes us to the very heart of Advent, and to the heart of our faith.

Advent is a dramatic moment. *Ironically*, in drawing back the curtain it opens us up to *darkness*. But it is a brooding, expectant darkness. God is there, brooding over the waters. God is there waiting to act. The *mystery* of the Incarnation never goes away. The *Christ-child* captures uniquely God's humility in coming among us. But in that very humility we are opened up to a new world.

God casts away the works of darkness from us. God puts upon us the armour of light. *God takes the initiative*. Advent and all that follows remind us of God's eternal initiative with humanity. Even the Mayor of Blackpool will be silenced. For the illumination of the universe which is soon to appear is the greatest miracle of all – God.

And without God there is nothing. Let's stick to the original version of that marvellous Collect of Advent.

Amen, Come Lord Jesus!

Readings:

Romans 13. 11-end

Matthew 24. 36-44