

It barely seems possible that we are at Advent III already! Of course, Advent did start on November 27th, which is the earliest possible date for Advent I, but Advent always seems to go by faster than it ought to. Even for people who don't recognize Advent, and who start with the decorations and the music as soon as Hallowe'en is over, if not sooner, these weeks just fly by.

But then for those who celebrate Santa-fest, or Winter Holiday, or whatever the fashionable term is now, December 25th is the finale of the celebrations. (Just take a short drive on the 26th and see how many Christmas trees have already been thrown to the curb!)

Even church-going Christians don't always seem to know that the 25th is the first day of Christmas, not the last. [I remember having to explain to parents why the "three wise men" craft I was doing with my Sunday School class, on Epiphany Sunday, was NOT a leftover from Christmas!]

We all get swept up by the rush-to-the -25th tidal wave, because we all have a lot to get ready for. But that works out quite well, because just as the rest of the world is finished with it and is moving on to the next thing, we can enjoy our twelve days of Christmas in peace and tranquillity.

The danger in getting swept up, though, is losing our way in the 'winter holiday' business bonanza. We are bombarded with messages about what we ought to be giving to our loved ones, and about this or that amazing product that is absolutely guaranteed to make us glamorous, or popular, or happy this Christmas.

If we detach ourselves from some of this hype, it's actually quite funny to stop and think about what the commercial world asks us to believe.

- A face cream that will make me look two decades younger??
- A drink or a candy that will instantly melt away all the extra weight I've accumulated over the last 40 odd years??
- Or how a diamond necklace from my beloved would make my Christmas Day perfect. (I find this one really amusing: my beloved is the person who shares all of my bank accounts,...!)

In comparison with some of the wild things we are being asked to believe at this time of year, our belief in angels and shepherds and a baby born in a stable is pretty straightforward and plausible!

But there is another part of all the December hype, that undermines all of that greedy noise. There are some stories that our culture especially treasures at Christmas. They are stories that convey the Christian message in ways that our culture understands: stories to read, or hear, or see in dramatization.

If we heard that there was a strange man living in the wild, dressed in animal skins, eating bugs, and calling everyone to repent, it might come up the cell phone feed as a crazy story for the day, but it's unlikely anyone would pay much attention. That just too 'first century' to reach us. But sit us in front of a television, or in a cinema or theatre seat, and now we are listening.

And the stories that we love the best at Christmas convey the message of John the Baptist in a way that the modern world can understand. There are two enduring favourites, which have been adapted and updated and retold many, many times, in many, many formats. Who doesn't love "It's a Wonderful Life" and "A Christmas Carol"?

- * When we hear that Ebenezer Scrooge is "a grasping, scraping, covetous old sinner", who cares for no one and begrudges every penny he has to let go of, despite being disgustingly rich, we know that he's got it all wrong.
- * When we see the Cratchits huddling around their little fire, drinking tiny helpings of gin punch out of cups with broken handles, just happy to be together, we know that **they** have got it right.
- * We rejoice when George Bailey learns that the value of his life is not measured in the money and possessions that he never acquired, or the exciting deeds that he never did. The wealth of his life rests in the love and friendship that a lifetime of faithfulness and caring has built around him.

Repentance means turning away from all the misleading enticements and recognizing what is really of value, and these modern day parables convey that message in a way that we can understand. Perhaps they remain popular, and come back every year, because,

deep down, everyone knows how easy it is to mess things up. Even people who deny God altogether can understand that.

Ignoring what is of real value in our lives, and believing that we ought to have, or even that we deserve, what we don't have, does no end of harm. It may not lead us to a life of crime, but it can make us miserable. Longing for things we don't have keeps us from appreciating what we do have. And not appreciating what we have often puts us on the path to losing it.

Today we lit the JOY candle. The order of the candles is not random. The first candle represents HOPE, and the second represents PEACE. If we have been successful in focussing on hope and peace, then what follows has to be joy.

*The joy that is all around us at this season.

*The joy that we get from preparing ourselves to celebrate.

*The joy that warms our hearts when we think of those we love.

*The joy that we share by sharing our joy!

Amen.