

MY WORDS WILL NOT PASS AWAY

Advent Sunday St Michael Cornhill Sunday November 30th 2014

Alongside the lights in Oxford Street and the great Trafalgar Square tree that the people of Norway give to London in this season each year, there are lots of other familiar Yuletide scenes. One of them is of the Queen, standing outside church on Christmas Day with the Vicar of Sandringham in Norfolk, surrounded by well-wishers. Now that scene itself is harmless enough, but the Queen does have to watch where she treads. For just outside the church door at Sandringham is a big stone container, looking rather like a large kitchen sink and often full of flowers. It would be easy to trip into it.

Now why in the world, you may ask, begin with a sink outside porch of Sandringham Church this morning? Well, first I should point out that it's not a sink at all but in fact it's a very old baptismal font. One of the Queen's forebears brought it back from the eastern Mediterranean when on the Grand Tour, I suppose. It's a fine object and really ought to be sitting in the floor just inside the main entrance to the church. This font, now placed strategically to wrong foot the Queen, is in fact very ancient. Indeed, in the earliest days of the church – not so long after Jesus, all fonts were like that. Rather gruesomely they were made to look like coffins.

Now this all sounds pretty grim, especially as we baptise little Connie, but it's not really as gruesome as it might first sound. The next question is why did anyone think it was a good idea to dig a hole in the floor of churches into which people would fall – and then get soaking wet? It sounds like a practical joke. Then why make them look like coffins? What is this all about?

The answer takes us to the very heart of the Christian gospel – and today is almost the very best time of the year to ask this question. It takes us back to Jesus. When we baptise little ones we say we 'christen' them. Or pronounce it another way – we 'Christen' them. When any of us are baptised we are taken into Christ – we become part of the body of Jesus Christ – that's why 'christening' is not a bad word for baptism. In baptising people *into Christ*, we are taking them to the same Jesus who came first at this season, and who then died and was raised by God.

So the font represents Christ dying for us – we die with Jesus. But the gruesomeness disappears when we realise that Jesus was also raised by God. So, in baptism we too are raised in him. In these old fonts people would walk down steps into them, be drenched – even drowned in Christ. Then they would come up – out of the water raised with Jesus. They even went in in their *old* clothes. When they came out they were dressed in *new white* clothes. They had gone from darkness to light.

Now we begin to make sense of all those lights bedecking Oxford Street, Regent Street and the Christmas Tree in Trafalgar Square. Think how romantic it is to walk through London at night time, before Christmas. Against the blue-black of the sky, the lights shine out of the darkness. Today is the start of all that – it is Advent Sunday. It's the first day of the Church's year. It's the first moment when we begin to look forward seriously to the coming of God among us in Jesus. Christmas is not here just yet, but the darkness is soon to be pierced by the light of Christ.

Today's *collect* – the prayer for today is my favourite in all the Prayer Book. Just listen to some of the words again:

‘Almighty God, *give us grace* that we may cast away the works of darkness and *put upon us* the armour of light.’ They are marvellous words. All that is dark, all that is evil, all that holds us back is banished in light by God.

We don’t do it ourselves. God does it. Listen to the words of the collect again: ‘. . . *give us grace* that we may cast off the works of darkness. . .’ God’s grace does it. Then a moment later again ‘. . . *put upon us* the armour of light. . .’ We don’t do it – God does it, just as God makes Connie today part of Christ’s body. She is christened, Christened. This is a most marvellous time of the year. It is the time of *hope*. Our readings tell of the terrors of the darkness – the prophet Isaiah warns. Jesus says that ‘the sun will be darkened.’

But at the beginning of St John’s Gospel, which we shall hear on Christmas Eve we shall once again read of light. The words actually say: ‘And the light shined in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not. . .’ That means that the darkness did not understand the light, but nor did it overcome it. The darkness did not put it out. It did not snuff the candle.

So – every time you see the lights of Oxford Street, or the Trafalgar Square Christmas Tree – remember Connie’s baptism and Emma’s baptism and Alice’s baptism and your own. Our baptism reminds us of Advent and Christmas – Once we were in darkness but now in light. That’s what Christening, ‘Christening’ means. We belong *now* to Christ.

Amen

Reading

Advent I

Isaiah 64. 1-9.

I Cor. I. 3-9.

Mark. 13. 24-end.

