



AD CLERUM

Advent 2021

Dear Colleagues,

With the sudden drop in temperature, it feels as though we have moved from autumn to winter overnight. Strong winds have brought down the remaining leaves from the trees and summer has become a distant memory. Rowan Williams captures the season perfectly in his poem, 'Advent Calendar'.

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like the frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.

© Rowan Williams

The coming of God into our midst brings hope in these uncertain times: Emmanuel: God with us. It is always good news, but we need to hear it afresh this Christmas. It's been another tough year and the pandemic continues to cast a shadow over us with the emergence of the omicron variant. Of course, until the whole world is vaccinated, new variants of the virus will emerge and they will spread to Britain. We may be an island nation, but the virus does not recognise national borders. It is in our self-interest as a nation not only to facilitate a speedy roll-out of the vaccine in the general population, but to be at the forefront of the distribution of vaccines to less developed nations.

Covid 19 and the omicron variant

The emergence of the omicron variant has led to the Government reintroducing some rules such as the compulsory wearing of face-coverings on public transport and in shops. For places of worship, it is still up to individual churches to decide the precautions they wish to take, based on their own risk assessment to protect others and themselves. However, in line with the national Church of England guidance, we would encourage you to take a cautious approach and to give serious consideration to the use of face-coverings in other settings, not just those mandated by Government. This is in addition to observing public health precautions with which we are all now familiar, such as regular handwashing, observing physical distancing and ensuring good ventilation indoors. Needless to say, we would also encourage everyone to have a booster jab as soon as possible.

There is much we do not yet know about this new variant, but we are likely to have much fuller information within a few weeks. Until then, we need to exercise both patience and caution. Please check the website of the Church of England for updates: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance>. The archdeacons will be holding a webinar on **Monday 13th December** at 4pm which I hope will be both informative and reassuring.

Pandemics are thankfully rare, but they have happened before. In the fourteenth century it is estimated that the Black Death killed between 40% and 60% of the population. In Exeter work on the Cathedral stopped, the windows of the nave left empty of stained glass because all the glaziers had died. Weakened by the effects of the First World War, the flu pandemic in 1919 decimated the population of Europe, resulting in 23 million deaths. To date, the coronavirus has killed over 11 million people across the world.

It is sobering to reflect on these statistics. They summon us to vigilance. They remind us how precious God's gift of life is. If the walls of our churches could speak, they would tell us of the heartbreak of earlier generations who came to pray in their loss. But they would also tell us about those who found the courage to serve others in their hour of need and not allow death to have the last word.

Which is why, in company with my senior colleagues, I want to record my enormous and heart-felt thanks for your hard work and resilience. Sustaining the morale of congregations and communities, particularly when people are anxious or fearful, is a costly business. I am conscious how tired many clergy, readers and lay officers continue to be, some to the point of exhaustion. Our Diocesan Staff based at the Old Deanery have also been working long hours under huge pressure and are equally in need of putting their feet up and spending quality time at home. So I hope that we can all rest over the Christmas break. We cast our anxieties on God, knowing that God cares for us (1 Peter 5.7).

Please don't forget...

One of the unexpected by-products of the pandemic has been rekindling connections with people who might be described as 'the fringe'. A key way of connecting with your local community and ensuring that you do not lose track of your 'fringe' will be through advertising 'in person' and 'online' your Christmas services and events via www.AChurchNearYou.com. St Augustine famously said that 'We are an Easter people and alleluia is our song'. By contrast, the late Bishop Michael Perham asserted that Anglicans are really Christmas people. I don't know whether 'Ding, dong, merrily on

high' is our song, but in all the busyness of the next few days, let's not miss a trick and make sure we advertise our services properly. Furthermore, let's make the most of the opportunity to signpost people to the next event or service that would be suitable for them to attend. In ways like this, we rebuild our congregations.

Clergy Quiet Days

Next year I will once again be hosting a series of Quiet Days for licensed clergy in the Cathedral and Palace. Last year I led a series of meditations online based on Exodus because gatherings were not permitted. In a large diocese such as ours, these days offer a chance to renew contact with colleagues whom we seldom see as well as providing an opportunity for prayer and reflection. Please note the dates in your diary now: Thursday 3rd March, Monday 7th March, Wednesday 9th March, Monday 14th March, Wednesday 16th March. If you want to book a place, an online system is in operation using this link <http://exeter.anglican.org/bishop-roberts-quiet-days/>. Sadly, it has proved impossible to include Saturdays which might have been more convenient for SSM colleagues. Constraints on numbers also mean that I cannot extend a general invitation to retired clergy either. However, any retired clergy holding PtO who would like to come are welcome to enquire with my office and, if space does permit, then we will be glad to include them.

Diocesan Clergy Conference: 20-23 June 2022

I am delighted to confirm that our residential conference for all licensed clergy will go ahead next summer, a year later than we had anticipated because of the pandemic. Under the banner of **Pray, Grow, Serve 22**, the conference will be held at the Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester. We have a great line up of speakers: Fr. Damian Howard SJ, head of the Jesuits in UK, Professor David Wilkinson from Durham University, and Baroness Helena Kennedy QC, one of the great champions of civil liberties and social justice. Our Bible Readings will be led by Bishop Emma Ineson and the after-dinner speaker on Wednesday evening will be the actor and comedian, Hugh Dennis. Please put the dates in your diary now and make this a priority. Booking forms will be sent out early in the New Year.

Christmas

In spite of the current uncertainty, we are in a very different place from this time last year when we were on the cusp of another national lockdown. The vaccine and booster rollout is continuing at pace, and we have cause to be cautiously hopeful as we go into the New Year. As we seek to speak God's word of hope to our anxious world this Christmas, here is Ursula Fanthorpe's poem, 'BC :AD'

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect

Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

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May God bless you, your friends and families with peace this Christmas and give you eloquence to speak to others with joy of the Word-made-flesh. May many find themselves walking haphazard straight into the kingdom of heaven.

With my thanks for our partnership in the Gospel,

+ Robert Exon