



**GRAY'S
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Gray's Inn

St Nicholas Day, 2020

Isaiah 61: 1-3 & Gospel of Mark 10: 13 – 16.

We are in the season of Advent, a time of waiting and looking forward. Advent comes with its sombre themes of human sinfulness, death and judgement. Such things are not very popular today. Fire and brimstone sermons do not go down well. Like the earnest young preacher delivering his Advent sermon on the parable of The Ten Virgins, and reaching his climax with the unfortunately-worded challenge: **"And so, I say to you, you have a choice. You can wake with the wise virgins, or you can sleep with the foolish ones"**. Well, if it's all the same to you, I think I'll go for....

So this is Advent, a time to prepare for Christmas, not to anticipate it. But that's more difficult this morning because today is also the feast of St Nicholas, the original "Santa Claus". Saint Nicholas was a bishop in the fourth century, and I'm sure you know the story of how his gifts rescued three maidens from destitution and the danger of prostitution.

St Nicholas is the one who gives, reflecting the grace of God through all his generous acts. From events in his own life, or miracles attributed to him afterwards, he has become the patron saint of – wait for it! - children, prisoners, bankers, pawn-brokers, **scholars, orphans, labourers, travellers, and merchants. There's more: judges (yes, judges!), paupers, marriageable maidens, students, sailors, victims of judicial mistakes, and perfumers.** And the list goes on: Nicholas is the patron saint of archers (I assume the military rather than the Radio Four kind), and even thieves and murderers. So, a very early example of multi-tasking!

Now the challenge is to hold these things together. Advent and St Nicholas. On the one hand we cannot hide from the realities which we know only too well. The Advent cry, **"Come O God and save us"** echoes all around. The pandemic, obviously. But we also live in a world engulfed in economic crisis and ecological threat. And somewhere, deep in the heart of our own selves, maybe increased by what Covid has done, we know that yearning for peace, for love, for coming home to God. **And so we sing "O come, O come Emmanuel", and redeem us.**

And it is in the midst of all of this that we experience, and we seek to proclaim, the gracious acts of God. So where can the kind of grace-fulness of St Nicholas, reflecting the generosity of God himself, again make its impact?

I offer these simple thoughts, based on the two readings set for today.

The prophet Isaiah said that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, bringing good news to the oppressed, proclaiming liberty to the captives and the opening up of the prison gates for those who are bound.

We could quickly spiritualise that, and yes, it does speak to the oppression and **imprisonment which we may feel in our own souls, it does offer comfort and joy, as we'll see in a moment.** But today, remembering St Nicholas, patron saint of so many and

various "conditions of men", we might first apply it more directly. What does it mean to say that Jesus comes to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening up of the prison gates for those who are bound?

First what about those who are actually in prison. There must be Judgement, whether in the civil and criminal courts, or in that greater judgement of us all of which Advent speaks. But there must also be a place for generosity and forgiveness. Can we claim that for ourselves without offering it to others?

I've asked before from the pulpit: why is it that we British put so many people in prison, think we can forget all about them, and then seem surprised that when they're let out they return to a life of crime? We need Law, yes, but we also need grace, and those who have fallen foul of the law need it even more. We wait to see what the COVID restrictions will allow in our prison chapels this Christmas, but the Chaplains want to be able to hold Carol Services, to offer the Eucharist, and to witness to the coming of Christ.

St Nicholas, patron saint of judges and prisoners, would like that.

And secondly there are those who are literally oppressed. Living under unjust regimes, forced to flee their homeland, experiencing COVID without recourse to the kind of Health Service we enjoy. And those at the bottom of the economic scale, whether in this country or overseas. Is this really the time to walk away from the allparty commitment to using 0.7% of GNP for International Aid? This week both Archbishop Justin and Cardinal Vincent have condemned the cut.

I have a feeling that St Nicholas, patron saint of orphans and paupers, would agree with them.

And so we come to that second reading, from the Gospel of Mark. The disciples had been quarrelling about who was the greatest. And Jesus places a child in front of them. If you want to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, he says, become like a little child. For **that's how God came**, in this Christmas season we are about to celebrate. Not in power and might, but in the birth of a baby. And once we get behind the sentimentality of that **it's actually quite tough. It's about ordinariness, about vulnerability, about trust.**

God enters into our world not to dominate but to invite, not to control but to suffer, not to judge but to embrace. As a child. And **that's how we need to come before him. Not childishly – there's enough of that kind of religion about – but with the simple trust of a child.**

St Nicholas, patron saint of children, would like that as well.

So we await the coming of Christ. Not in fear - ignore the fridge magnet which bears **the message "Jesus is coming – look busy"**. We wait in trust. And, as the Advent response says: may the Lord when he comes find us watching and waiting. Amen