

## ADVENT SUNDAY 2011

Advent is God's SATNAV. Let me explain: If you're searching for your destination, the SATNAV can sort out your needs. You will have to '*stay awake*', however, because one discovers very quickly that the SATNAV can't actually see the road around you ~ it is just talks to you, telling you what to do. Now, I've heard some say that men are 'not good' at having someone else's voice telling them how to drive and where to turn the car. Some men even go so far as to do the opposite -you know, 'I know best!' -well, I can't possibly comment; although Lucinda might ... moving on quickly! Perhaps this foolish behaviour is just a bit like the Israelites, when they were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, and Exodus tells us that they had a cloud with them at all times, signifying that they had God in their midst to guide them. But they kept going off-course ~ again and again! They just didn't learn! Perhaps, some of us foolish men, are rather like the Israelites ~ we despise our SATNAV: "I'm not being told what to do!"; We stamp our foot, petulantly, so that we hear the voice of God, our heavenly SATNAV, but we deliberately turn somewhere else, in what we really know is the wrong direction. There is a pause, after this unlovely display of waywardness, after which my SATNAV says, "Recalculating", in a voice that sounds too calm to be

true. If you look at the story of the Israelites in the desert, it's as though the voice, of SATNAV-God, says, in effect, many times over:

"Recalculating! Well, this wasn't what we had in mind; but, since we're here, you will now need to turn round, and do this and that to get back on track!"

Have you realised that the story of the Israelites is the story of *all humanity*? – not just us men! But it does include us. Like the Israelites, we regularly wilfully go off course. Advent is a time of reorientation. It is a time when we can pause to thank God that when we take a wrong turning, perhaps deliberately, he will always go along with us and pick us up from where we've landed ourselves and get us back on track in the end ~ as a good SATNAV will do (if we give a chance!).

Except that, we are capable of making it rather difficult for God to do that. Therefore, Advent is also a grim reminder that there is another kind of wandering which doesn't carry the same guarantee of ultimate rescue. There is a certain kind of ant which, when it's lost, is programmed to follow the ant in front. This normally works fine, because ants are pretty smart, and someone up ahead will surely know where we're all going. But sometimes, I gather, the ones up ahead will start to circle round, looking for another ant to follow ... And another, and another ... And before too long all the ants will be going round and round, convinced they are

marching in the right direction, but all merely following one another in a great circle. And the result is catastrophic. They all die.

Because of this unlovely and grim reality, Advent both reassures us and it presents us with options. Advent is pragmatic and down-to-earth! It is a season of hope - for us, who know our own human frailties and foibles, and know that we need hope! And it is a warning, for those of us who might emulate ants. The words of Jesus in the Gospel today express the warning mood of this early part of the Advent season, “Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come.” (Mark 13:33) Stay alert. Keep making sure that you aren't like the ants!

During Advent we focus on being alert, whilst we are waiting. Any time we wait we do so because we expect something to happen; we wait for a bus or train because we expect it to arrive. When we wait for a bus or train we cannot see it coming but we *hope* it will come. As we wait in hope for the Second Coming of Jesus we know he is *already* with us in so many ways especially in the sacraments, and in each other, particularly in the needy and marginalised. So, during Advent we are conscious of the fact that *God is present with us, like the SATNAV, helping us, and warning us to stay alert, whilst we wait for the fulfilment of his plans.*

Advent is also the season in the church's year when we try to reflect on who or what we are truly searching for. The Good News of Advent is that God is also searching for us and ***has already come to us***, and **will keep coming to us**. In our searching and seeking, we often fail to see that the gift *has already been given*, the gift of "God with us," the gift of Emmanuel. God's gifts are not just for Christmas!

And the gift of relishing God's presence, within us and around us, is the only gift that will ever satisfy our relentless searching and seeking. Our discovery is that we are all searching for what proves to be elusive. We photograph the perfect sunset, but when we look at the pictures later, it looks rather ordinary. The excitement of a new career settles into the humdrum of a job. The first flush of a new relationship turns into coordinating schedules and dates. What we are all searching for, ultimately, is God. In Advent we are assured that God has got in first, and comes to us. The very word "advent" means "coming," and that refers to the coming of Christ in the past, in the present, and in the future. Advent is saying that there is never a time when Christ is not with you, yesterday and today and tomorrow. At its deepest level, Advent is an invitation to give up our search and *let ourselves be found* by the God who came among us as a baby, and by the God who will always be ahead of

us, to meet us in the future. Say 'Yes' to God; don't ignore your SATNAV!

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus tells his disciples to "keep awake", and to be alert as they look for the coming of God.

Today's Good News is that even as we flit about in our search for truth and meaning, God in his graciousness is already racing to meet us. God is coming. Therefore, don't miss him; seize the moment, choose life! Stay awake!

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