



THE  
MERCERS'  
COMPANY

**The Advent Sermon**  
**11<sup>th</sup> December 2025**

**Preacher: Rt Rev'd Graham Usher, Bishop of Norwich**  
**Master: Mrs Alice Hohler**

**Reading: Philippians 3.7 – 4.1**

Advent is a season of waiting. It is the season of some of the great texts of scripture. During it we are to listen to the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness”, to heed the need to “prepare the way for the Lord [and] make straight paths for him”, so that “the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.” It is the season seeking to “comfort, comfort my people”, to “be still, and know that I am God”, and one in which, during the busyness of these weeks, to “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”

Thank you to The Master for inviting me back. I have already given a Lent sermon and a previous Advent sermon here. I've resisted the temptation to dust that one off!

As well as being a season of waiting, Advent is also a season of watching and warning. Take tonight's text from Philippians and these words: “*Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour.*” As we travel this Advent road, it asks us, “where do we truly belong, and where should our loyalties lie?”

Alan Bennett's film *The Choral* has just been playing in the cinemas. Set in 1916 in a Yorkshire mill town, it explores how a local choral society responds when so many of its male members have gone off to fight in the Great War. Conscription, national duty, patriotism are all explored as the choir reject German composers' works and choose to sing Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, a deeply emotional and spiritual piece. Grief, loss and hope meet as the community re-finds its singing voice, interrupted by the arrival of a pompous and arrogant Edward Elgar. The film reminds us that there is a more profound form of patriotism than a superficial pride in a land of hope and glory - one built on a shared suffering, collective memory, and redemption.

*“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour.”*

We have seen more and more on our streets what is, to me, a frightening form of so-called patriotism from those who wave the St George's cross as a weapon to provoke, intimidate, create fear, and stake territory; ways that such a cross-imbued flag should never be made to represent. When this has happened, with some carrying placards saying they are upholding Christian values, I've asked myself, “Do angry flag wavers look like Jesus, or do they look more like those who jeered at him on the way to Calvary?”

Faithful patriotism is different. It starts with the recognition that God comes first - before any flag. It is about a humility of presence. It seeks to convene rather than divide. It recognizes the cracks in our nation and our society and seeks to mend them. It refuses to scapegoat. It is committed for the long haul. It seeks honesty, repentance and renewal because no country is perfect; every flag flies over both good and bad histories.

Welcoming those from other places has long been part of our national story. Indeed, let's not forget that we changed our patron saint so that we would have a foreigner! Born in Cappadocia, now modern-day Turkey, to a Palestinian mother and a father of Syrian heritage, Saint George served as a Roman soldier and was martyred for his Christian faith under one of Emperor Diocletian's persecutions. Now here is the surprise for some: he never set foot in England! George replaced Saint Edmund as our patron saint largely because he was championed by Richard the Lionheart who during his reign lived mostly in France, barely visited England, and didn't even speak a word of English! Perhaps our Advent warning to be watchful is to notice the growing movement of the Far Right and Christian Nationalism that has strong doses of racism, xenophobia, antisemitism and Islamophobia hard-wired into it. Though not everyone involved in protests and flag waving belong to these groups, or are racist, xenophobic, antisemitic or Islamophobic, my fear is that more people will be seduced by those evils because they offer easy answers to complex challenges.

That is not to diminish that many people understandably have concerns about the numbers of those seeking asylum in the UK, have concerns if there is accommodation for migrants in their community, have concerns about young men bored and aimless walking their streets, and have concerns when there are local crimes, including sexual violence. The danger is that we can so quickly scapegoat and stereotype, lumping others together. Fear stokes fear.

Too often asylum seekers are being blamed for wider systemic problems we face as a nation, because that is the easy thing to do, rather than fixing issues of work, housing, access to health care, poverty, family breakdown and social fragmentation, uprootedness and integration – a mix of genuine moral and material needs.

Perhaps our Advent warning to be watchful is to notice how so many local churches are good at bringing people together, including working through projects funded by the Mercers that build communities and make them stronger, especially in some of the nation's most economically challenging places.

Churches can so often be islands of coherence in an ever widening and deepening sea of chaos. Rarely do I visit a church in the urban areas of Norfolk, and often in rural communities, that has not welcomed and integrated refugees. I have met individuals and families who have experienced oppression, torture, violence and war. Their stories are powerful and moving. They have fled their homelands in utter fear and found a welcome in Norfolk, rebuilding shattered lives and integrating well, often with the support of kind- and open-hearted local Christians who are living out God's commands to love the stranger (Leviticus 19:33-34). who are deciding to say, 'let there be light', rather an 'let there be darkness'. People who are opening doors of hope.

One of the most joyous afternoons for me is each July when we have a garden party at Bishop's House specifically for refugees. Many of the 300 or so people who come bring food to share, and I provide that exquisite British delicacy – a Mr Whippy's ice cream van dispensing 99s to everyone! Among them is Mahmood who anointed me with the oil of chrism at my installation in the Cathedral to remind me of my baptism; one baptised Christian to another. Mahmood was forced to become a refugee because he was found with a copy of St John's Gospel and narrowly escaped execution. He decided to follow in the footsteps of the one who was made a refugee as an infant fleeing the despotic Herod, and who had nowhere to lay his head.

Christ's enemies are not people groups or nations; they are sin, death, the powers of darkness, injustice, and rebellion against God. Christ's reign is redemptive: he defeats the forces that dehumanize and divide humanity. In his Kingship, God's vision finds fulfilment as all things are united in him. His kingdom includes people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7.9).

No nation has a monopoly on Christ; no flag owns him.

It is in his coming Kingdom, that Advent prepares the way for, where we find our primary citizenship and where we find our true identity as Christians. Nations rise, empires fall, but the Kingdom of God endures forever.

*"Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour."*

Being reminded of this will enable us to claim back the St George's cross as a sign not of superiority, but of sacrifice; not a claim of ownership, but an offering of self-giving love. A sign that symbolises the Kingdom of God which comes amongst us whenever we pursue peace, practice justice, reject racism, and show hospitality to the outsider by loving our neighbour.

When, this Advent, the flag of St George flies over clenched fists, churches will continue to fly it over our open hands feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick, and tending the earth. When, this Advent, the flag of St George flies over placards that speak of defending Christian values, churches will continue to fly it as a reminder that St Paul teaches us that those values are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness" (Galatians 5.22).

Friends, this is the way of Christ, the slow building of a land of God's Hope and Glory, built not on might but on grace. A task that the Mercers' Company have been such a part of over your long history.

And it is to the God of hope and glory, we accord all joy and thanksgiving this and every day of Advent.