

Stay awake!

Heather Smith *reflects on* Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-end

Today we begin Advent. It is the season when children and, increasingly, adults, open the doors on Advent calendars, behind which are lavish and pleasant surprises. It is all quite a contrast to today's readings.

Here, in Mark's Gospel, we hear about Advent's real focus. There are no presents to look forward to and no mention of cute newborn babies. Instead, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give light. It sounds a frightening prospect. But we are promised that Christ will come and, like the Christmas story, there are angels. They come to gather us up from the four corners of the earth; they come to keep us safe.

Isaiah longs for all this to happen: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down". Mark's advice that we should stay awake is wise. We do not want to be surprised by such dramatic events. But after two thousand years it is hard to stay awake. Even a vigil beside the bedside of a sick family member can be hard to maintain, let alone a constant state of readiness for Christ's return. But for these few weeks we can take time to focus on the message. We can consider what it means and allow it to change us so that, although we do not spend every waking hour anxiously waiting, we are better prepared. ☺

Give us the grace to stay awake this Advent, to hear the message of your return and to allow it to change our perspective on the world. May we greet the prospect with joy and preparedness. Amen.

Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

This is the month when our Soay ram, Talfryn, is put to the ewes. Soay is an ancient breed, perhaps brought by Vikings to island of St Kilda in Scotland. They're small, light and quite shy. They all have horns and people often think

they're seeing goats when they come to our tiny farm. I moved from more usual smallholder breeds like the more common Shetlands and Jacobs to these creatures because they drew my heart. I've become quieter through living with them, more attuned to variety as they forage for leaves and weeds. They don't rush you. I've learned to meditate by watching their hidden ways, and to take time, and to taste the variety of what God gives and to find "behold it is very good", even as I have to give up old ways and begin new patterns. I never tire of such delicate company. ☺



Advent hymns

*"Jesus Shall Reign
Where'er the Sun"
(Isaac Watts)*

by Caroline Hodgson

Right up until the nineteenth century many Protestants considered it blasphemous to sing anything other than words from scripture. Instead, psalms were chanted, usually without accompaniment, to very basic melodies.

Enter Isaac Watts. He was born in 1674 into a committed nonconformist household. At sixteen he complained that, singing only psalms, the faithful could not sing about Christ. His

father challenged him to see what he could do and the result was Watts' first hymn, "Behold the Glory of the Lamb", based on Revelation 5. He went on to pen some 750 hymns and is recognised as the "father of all English hymnody".

"Jesus Shall Reign" is a hymn of missionary zeal and many of its verses are no longer sung due to their dated sentiments. The hymn's associations with British colonialism might put many off. Yet it would be a shame for his words to be entirely discredited and for congregations never to be able to join their voices in singing:

"Let every creature rise and bring / peculiar honours to our King; / Angels descend with song again / and earth repeat the loud 'Amen!'" ☺

“The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), poet and Jesuit priest