



Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11

John 1.6-8, 19-28

13th December 2020 ADVENT 3

Christingle

INTRODUCING CHRISTINGLE

This year at Amersham Free Church we are missing the traditional Saturday Christingle afternoon.

It usually begins as we gather in the church hall to listen to Anne and Bob tell us the story of how Christingles began and what they mean.

Then we go to the tables and make our own Christingles, taking them into church for a short service. At the end of which the lights are turned off and we process with our lit Christingles around the sanctuary.

It's then time to go back to the church hall for sausage and chips.

This year it's very different yet still very meaningful.

We remember that the idea of a Christingle first began 1747 in the Moravian Church in Germany.

The pastor introduced it as a simple visual aid that is now well known throughout the world.

The orange represent the globe, around which is placed a red ribbon, reminding us that the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, is a demonstration of just how much God loves every person on the planet, wherever they are.

The four sticks of sweets and fruits placed into the orange tell of God's goodness to us during the four seasons of the year.

Finally, and most importantly, there is the candle which is placed in the centre of the orange, a picture of God's wonderful light shining out over all the world. A reminder that in the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem God came among us as the Light of the World.

This much-loved symbol, the Christingle is now made by children all over the world and this year, at this morning's service, we'll continue that tradition.

Some Christingles have already been made and these will be given to some of the household members of our congregation.

In this most unusual year, the Christingle's message to us all is that God's light still shines over our world, a world God blesses at every season of the year.

STILL A SYMBOL THAT SPEAKS?

I have to admit that I grew up unaware of Christingles. None of the churches to which I belonged ever mentioned them.

However, over the last twenty years it's been delightful to see how popular they have become. In a normal year at AFC the Christingle afternoon draws together children of all ages and some keep coming back way into their late teens because it's a tradition that has obviously come to mean something very special to them.

So, I wonder, can this Moravian visual aid from the 1740's still speak into Christmas 2020?

Well, I suppose every Christingle making session starts with the orange. This fruit represents the world and I also think it indicates a certain breadth of understanding and appreciation by those 18th century German Christians. They viewed, quite rightly I think, that God wasn't just interested in their village, city or state but in the whole earth. Many of us learnt John 3.16 at Sunday School that *God loves the world...*

Our world seems battered and bruised this year. The Prime Minister must smile when he recalls a tweet, he sent to all his followers on January 1st saying 2020 was going to be a fantastic year for Britain. Be careful what you wish for!

There is, I think, a sense in which the events of these last ten months have felt utterly universal. The virus journeyed from one continent to another, we charted its spread and have lived with its consequences. This isn't Asia's problem or Europe's misfortune, as a Pandemic it is, by definition, a worldwide challenge.

In our first ever house exchange, to Adelaide in Australia, we teamed up with a minister who grew up in Dunstable before becoming a £10 Pom to the Lucky Country. Tony used to say to us whenever he landed at Heathrow, he felt he'd come home. The joy was, he said, whenever he landed back in Adelaide, he felt exactly the same way.

The oranges on our Christingles today remind us that we belong to the world. It's been good for us to learn over recent months of what's been going on in Mozambique as our link Missionaries in the port city of Beira have sent us updates. And in a year when it could have been so easy to become inward looking it was thrilling that we had one of the largest harvest offerings of recent years in aid of much needed tree planting in Tanzania.

This is God's world and we rejoice to have sisters and brothers in every continent, each of us neighbours to one another.

As the youngsters at Junior Church today make their Christingles the second thing they'll probably do is stick the red ribbon around the orange.

Originally intended to represent the blood of Christ shed on Good Friday offering forgiveness and new beginnings to all.

Today it's become the thing to wear a ribbon to support a cause. The Christingle ribbon reminds us that the care, love and help of God encircles our planet. We are blessed, all of us.

There is, I think, a wonderful inclusivity in the Christmas story that never goes out of date. The manger attracts not just shepherds but magi, two disparate groups of people who came from opposite ends of the social spectrum.

Shepherds could be found everywhere, magi just in ivory towers. Shepherds could only bring a lamb, magi offered gold, frankincense and myhhr.

Don't you just think it's a great part of the story that it's the promise of the Christchild that brings these groups together in worship and wonder. Before God we are all equal. No matter our station in life we are loved by our creator neither more nor less than our neighbour.

That ribbon goes all around the orange as God's love goes all around our world. Can we see God in the other, or do we just see a 'threat' in the other? There is difference in the Christmas story, not blandness, yet whether you arrived on foot from the hills or astride a camel from the East, before Jesus both shepherds and wise men kneel.

The next part of our Christingle doesn't always make it home; the cocktail sticks with sweets and raisins, representing God's goodness to us in each succeeding season of the year.

Counting our blessings must surely be one of the most important of all spiritual disciplines.

It was easier, I sense in the first, rather than second, Lockdown. As the drawbridge came up we found ourselves in one of the brightest and sunniest springs on record. Set against a troubling backdrop many found enormous comfort in the reliability of spring time. As blossom gave way to leaves and buds burst forth into flowers our hearts were glad and many of you sent in photos of your gardens for our weekly orders of service.

Rejoicing in creation during a November lockdown was perhaps more challenging, yet still possible. Because aren't we able to see wonder around us at any season of the year.

Counting those blessings is one reason we have set up an EcoChurch group at AFC. Along with thousands of other congregations we want to do as much as we can to live gently on the earth. We are so blessed to live at this time. This year we have seen the importance of science and scientists. We will all benefit from the work that's been done in finding a vaccine. And the natural world, of which we are a part, will benefit from the development of renewable energy which has made such progress in these last twelve months in Britain.

As people who love the changing seasons and the wonders of nature all around us, the fruits on a Christingle remind us of the blessings that come our way in every season.

And the same is true in the seasons of our own lives, for nothing stays the same, yet as the hymn writer puts it:

*Through all the changing scenes of life
In trouble and in joy
The praises of my Lord shall still
My heart and tongue employ.*

As we move on in the seasons of our lives from child to adult, from parent to grandparent, from employed to retired, from carer to cared for – in the challenges, and maybe even because of them, there are fresh blessings to be experienced along the way.

Now our Christingle is almost done.

The final, and most important addition, for this is, after all a celebration of the ChristLight, will be the candle. Lit, or turned on at AFC, as the lights go off and a procession makes its way around the Sanctuary. It's a deeply moving sight.

We will soon be at the shortest day of the year, and then as Christmas comes so, ever so gradually, will the longer days once

more return.

On December 1st as I sipped my morning coffee at the breakfast table and looked up I saw, against the blue sky, the clouds were streaked red with the flecks of midwinter sun. It did my heart good, at the start of this advent journey thinking about the promise of the light.

One of my favourite Advent hymns, a rather old fashioned one I suppose, has that opening line: *There's a light upon the mountains and the day is at the spring.*

That candle in the Christingle speaks of hope and reminds us of Jesus, the Light of the World.

An orange, a red ribbon, sticks with sweets and a candle. Every part of the visual aid from Germany's Moravians of the 1740's still speaks and has a message for us in 2020.

May God's light dwell in your hearts and shine upon your path this Advent and always. Amen

Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham