

May I speak in the name of the living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well it's great to be with you on this Advent Sunday for this service stream from Bradford Cathedral.

I think Richard Coles said on Saturday Live yesterday, that hearing live music in worship in church, after all this time, is like an oasis in the desert: deeply moving. And this is my first experience of live music. for months. in the context of worship. and Advent Sunday could not be a better day to experience it.

I remember one Christmas Eve, after our midnight communion service - I think I just arrived in in this parish, and I was greeting people at the door afterwards, as they went out into the cold. "Happy Christmas"; "Hope you have a good Christmas, Paul", so on. It was about 10 minutes to one and I got near to the end of a long line of people when one member of the congregation, after exchanging a few words, said to me "Could I just have a quick word with you about our flower festival next May?"

Well that was thinking ahead, trying to get well prepared, getting one step ahead. Presumably Christmas was done in that person's mind and she was onto the next thing. We often think that advent is about good preparation, but as our readings suggest today, it's actually about alertness, and readiness, to respond to whatever God puts in front of us.

If we're ready for, as it were, Christ coming to us now, then we'll be ready for the second coming.

And the Bible shows us that the first Christmas actually depended on women and men responding to God's gracious invitation, to be part of His coming into the world in the baby Jesus: the responsiveness of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the innkeeper, and so on.

Well we've certainly had to respond to what has been put in front of us in this last eight months or so. And actually for me, as the area Bishop for the city of Leeds, it's been exciting to see how many churches have responded creatively to the situation, to their context; not just in terms of worship but also in terms of serving their local communities, in evangelism, and also in growing people's discipleship.

For example, there have been new partnerships between inner city and outer suburban parishes, which have supported food banks. There have been new and innovative ways of doing family and children's worship, which have touched families far beyond the church. We've had new groups, allowing people to explore spirituality, some of them are Rhythm of Life groups, making use of the new Diocese of Leeds material. Churches working together with other organizations, for example under the Leeds citizen banner, to highlight the need to pay care workers at least the real living wage. Alpha courses, set up across our city, and so much more.

And I'm sure you can tell me similar stories about how you as a church have been responding to what God is putting in front of you here in Bradford.

I know for example here at the cathedral that you are responding to the environmental crisis with these 12 tips for the 12 days of Christmas, to encourage us all to celebrate Christmas with an eye on the environmental impact, that we make.

I've been doing quite a few clergy development reviews in the last couple of months, of course on Zoom, and a number have said how many opportunities there have been, even if it has been exhausting, and there's been a need to pace ourselves, and sometimes to say no.

And one of the keys to being responsive, to seizing opportunities, is actually prayer. Ann Morisy in her book 'Journeying Out', which was written nearly 20 years ago now, wrote about how she felt

that her own lack of responsiveness to situations, to opportunities, was actually due to her own failure in prayer. The more we rehearse our lives before God, in prayer, then the more responsive we can be. She says this: "One of the things which prayerfulness brings is timing; timing which enables grace to flow unimpeded."

Let's pray, that we will know how to respond creatively, as Christ comes to us in situations day-by-day. The more we pray, the more we will be alert and ready to meet Christ, as he comes to us this Advent. Amen.