

It was a windy night on October 7th this year and every time I turned over on Duke of York Square at the Glass Door Sleepout I lost the cardboard I was wrapped in as the wind blew it away. I was very tempted to call it a night as I chased my bedding across the square, yet again. But- thoughts of your wonderful sponsorship and our guests who, if Glass Doors nightshelters didn't exist, would face this inconvenience every night- and much worse, kept me there until 5 am. If you've ever done a sponsored walk, sponsored swim, or even a sponsored sleep-out, you'll have been aware of the responsibility you feel towards not only those you are aiming to support by your engagement, but also those who are sponsoring you.

Walking for others- whether round the park or from Lands End to John O groats has established itself as core to the charitable fundraising scene in a peculiarly anglo-saxon way, and in a way rooted in the churches. Yet this Advent season, is perhaps the time when the Church is above all, most clearly, out-of-sync with the rest of society. It is as if we are in a time warp in the church, steadfastly refusing to join the rest of society in its headlong rush to celebration. As night after night we host Christmas Carols for this, that and the other charity, we're saying on Sundays, no, no, no, not yet. Don't light our candles, don't sing the carols, don't eat the mince pies until Christmas Eve- by which time the rest of our community has moved on to the Sales.

And I wonder where this out-of-sync ness has come from. Is it just commercialism rampant over all? Or, is it, I wonder, also, that we as Christians have the wrong end of the stick about Advent? Is it because we have taken Advent and interpreted it- primarily- in light of the coming Christmas celebrations, rather than in light of the End, the eschaton, judgement, the hope. The wrapping up of all things in God's rule. St Paul, surely helps us here in today's reading from the Letter to the Romans.

The Church in Rome hadn't sponsored Paul, in fact he was perhaps rather afraid of its power, size, influence. He'd never been there, he'd hoped to visit, but it hadn't happened, until he was sent there as a prisoner. But he'd heard about it, a lot- and wasn't impressed by what he heard. It was clearly a

divided church- hence his appeal for unity, among rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, vegetarian or meat-eater, all members of the church. His appeal, twice, in the verses we heard is 'welcome one another'. In fact it's really stronger than this. It's more like 'fully accept', 'take to yourself', as one might a partner or close friend.

Walking for others means, not only welcoming others, not only receiving others, but taking them to ourselves, positively hearing their story, respecting their experience and insights, learning from others and using our position to protect and encourage the other- as Paul says- live in harmony, as he says 'the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same mind set as Jesus' in order to truly live as God asks.

Advent, perhaps, then, is a time to do just that, to take time to ask searching questions about God, us and others. Ben Quash, Prof of Christianity and the Arts at Kings College, London, in his book calls this 'Abiding'. He uses the example of Moses and the Burning Bush, Moses sees it and stops, he sees it is burning but not being consumed, so he turns aside from his walking, and stops and looks and sees. He abides. It's only when Moses has turned aside that God opens himself up to him. Taking time to turn aside, step off the treadmill, is crucial if we are going to walk for others, for only when we stop, can we see what truly surrounds us.

That's what Paul was asking his fellow Christians in Rome to do- stop, take the opportunity to see what you are doing, to each other and yourselves. Abide-

look, listen, understand. That way leads to purposeful, compassionate action, rather than headless chickenism, activity for the sake of it.

Perhaps it is also what John is doing in the Gospel we heard, with all his camel's hair and locust eating. He calls people to stop and re-consider their lives, to re-align priorities and behaviours, to live lives open to God and therefore to others. To walk for others- to be changed, turned around in our thinking, speaking and living- after all, that's what our baptism means.

In Advent we are called to take the long view, to stop and reflect on why this pre-Christmas frenzy. And to see this Christmas not as an end in itself, not something that is over on 26th December, or 6th January or 2nd February- depending on our

ecclesiology, no. But rather preparing ourselves for something new which bursts out into the open on Christmas Day, yes, but cannot be put back into the box with the ornaments and trinkets, or put out for the dustmen or charity shop among those gifts so kindly meant.

God's solidarity with all humankind, which we see supremely in the birth and life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, needs preparation- yes, in taking time, in abiding, with this God who comes, day after day, hour after hour, constantly present, urging us, with his generous heart, to walk for others, to reach out to the homeless and hungry, the imprisoned, and naked, the cold and destitute, to touch as Jesus touches and to bring transformation through walking with

others. Waiting, abiding in order to be makers of justice and reconciliation, wholeness and healing, hope and peace. As Paul urges that ancient Christian community in Rome, so I urge each of us in this community in Chelsea, in St Luke's and Christ Church, to become the peace we want to see, by stopping, abiding, seeing how to be different, to walk for others as Christ himself has done. How are we using the power and influence we enjoy, the contacts we have, the resources we own, the social and work relationships we inhabit? It's not too hard to start- stop for 10 seconds with the Posada in front of you, pause before supper, put aside a small sum of money to give to the foodbank each day, say the Lord's Prayer in the shower, talk to the Big Issue seller in Sloane Square, abide, stop, look and listen,

in order to walk for others, like St Paul, like St John the Baptist, like Jesus of Nazareth.

And we shall be changed, for walking for others brings us to walk in the light.