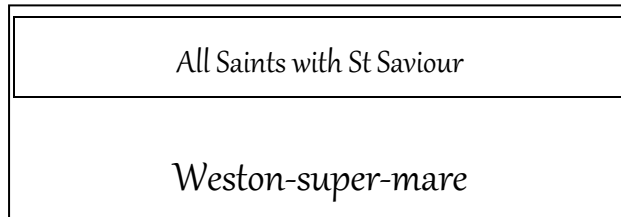




Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

17th December 2023

Dear friends,

Bear with me as each week I repeat this introduction...

There is a poem by Rowan Williams and it is called 'Advent Calendar'. It is a haunting piece: austere, deep, searching, suffused with wintry aches and longings we recognise as peculiar to this season. The language is as spare as naked trees, tough as hardened earth. It is intended to make us shiver. Its dense texture needs patience to grasp its complexity; its flinty Anglo-Saxon words are unsoftened by soothing Latin or French cadences.

The four stanzas each elaborate a different simile: 'he will come like' the fall of the leaf, like winter's frost, like darkness following a late afternoon flash of sunlight, like the cry of night-time. It stands in a long tradition of northern Europe poetry in which the cold short days around the winter solstice echo our wintry spirits when our light burns low.

The point about imagery is that we shouldn't explain it, for that would be to explain it away, reduce poetry to prose.

Here's the third stanza:

He will come like dark.

One evening when the bursting red

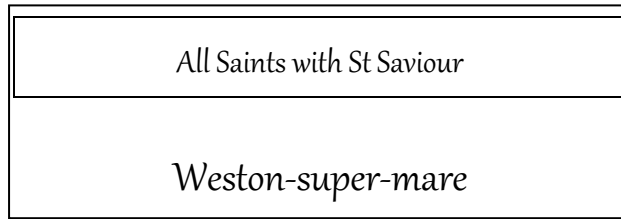
December sun draws up the sheet

And penny-masks its eye to yield

The star-snowed fields of sky.



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Week three takes us on towards the solstice and its 'bursting red December sun'. I imagine this as one of those days when slate-hued clouds hang low over the earth and leach all the colour from a fervour-less landscape ('as fervour-less as I' says Thomas Hardy in another famous wintry poem 'The Darkling Thrush'). Then just as the light begins to fail, there is a clearing in the west and a flash of glory reveals a setting sun. Too soon it sinks below the horizon, and it is dark and clear and cold and the 'star-snowed fields of sky' appear.

So this is not the radiant sun that late in time rises with healing in its wings to warm the land and coax it back to life. No, this is the solstice, John Donne's weak winter sun whose strength is spent at the year's midnight. That phrase 'star-snowed fields' keeps us well and truly shivering.

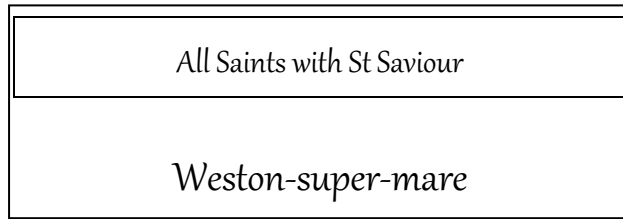
So, the sun's brief splendour heralds night not day. And he will come, says the poem, not like the sun but 'like the dark' that follows its all-too-brief epiphany.

I think that like the first two stanzas, the poet wants us to read the daytime of our life in the light of its ending: just as the leaves fall and the land freezes over, day turns to night and reminds us of the night into which we must all go. And like the wind and the frost, the night brings its own truth to bear upon our condition.

What we are at night, when we are so to speak naked only to God and ourselves, that is the truth of what we are. When this night falls, the poet does not lead us indoors to seek warmth and comfort, or even wrap the darkness round us to protect us. We



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are still **outside in the cold**, watching, waiting, wondering, longing, hoping against hope that in the dark there is a kindness and a mercy. This is Advent. This is life.

With Advent love and prayers,

Fr Brendan