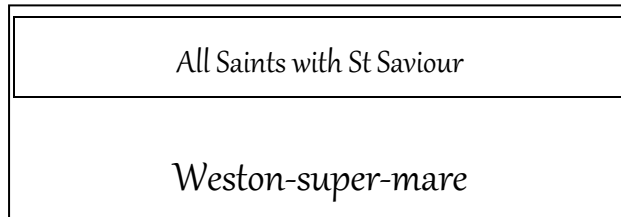




Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

3rd December 2023

Dear friends,

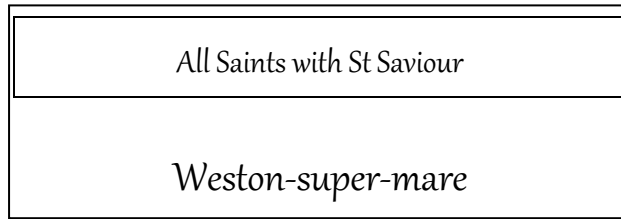
There is a poem by Rowan Williams and it is called 'Advent Calendar'. It is a haunting piece: austere, deep, searching, suffused with wintry aches and longings we recognise as peculiar to this season. The language is as spare as naked trees, tough as hardened earth. It is intended to make us shiver. 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. So I simply want to meditate on each of the stanzas in turn and allow them to help us enter more deeply into this season and its meanings. And because this is an Advent Calendar, I imagine its stanzas taking us through the four weeks of the season up to the point where you open those double-doors and glimpse what it has all been leading up to.

*He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
Has flayed the trees to bone, and earth
Wakes choking on the mould,
The soft shroud's folding.*



Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

Week one of the calendar suggests a violent side to Advent. This kind of dying is not going gently into that good night. It is a sudden judgment visited at the turning of the year when beautiful autumn is abruptly cut short by the wind tearing through the trees stripping them bare of their golden canopies so that only their naked skeletons rear up to the sky. He will come like that. It recalls the daring apocalyptic language in which the gospels speak of the last days, when the heavens are torn apart and the stars fall from the sky like autumn leaves, or the parables where the kingdom of God comes unexpectedly like a thief bursting in at night. Experience tells us that sometimes he does come to us like the god who rides upon the storm, who in the imagery of the psalm shakes the wilderness and strips the forests bare.

Judgment is one of the ancient themes of Advent: last judgment, judgment now and judgment then as we reap the consequences of what we were and did, the endless compromises and refusals whose undertow over a lifetime drags us away from the pull of mercy and grace. When the kingdom of God comes, it presents us with the truth of who and what we are. This is why like the trees, our spirits need to be stripped bare (to quote a poem by Lawrence Binyon) if the sap is to rise again and we are to come back to life.

With my love and prayers,
Fr Brendan