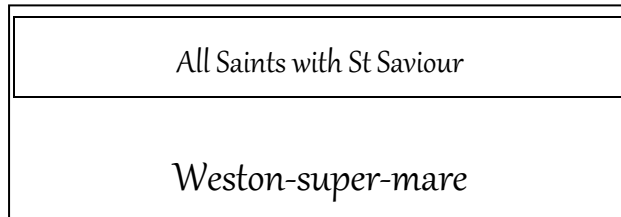




Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

24<sup>th</sup> 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.*

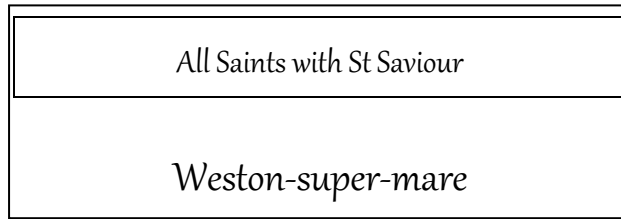
Here's the fourth and final stanza:

He will come, will come,  
Will come like crying in the night,  
Like blood, like breaking,  
As the earth writhes to toss him free.  
He will come like child.

After the wintry death, judgment and hell of the first three stanzas, fierce, freezing and dark, the final week culminates in a marvellous surprise. The threefold 'will come, will come, will



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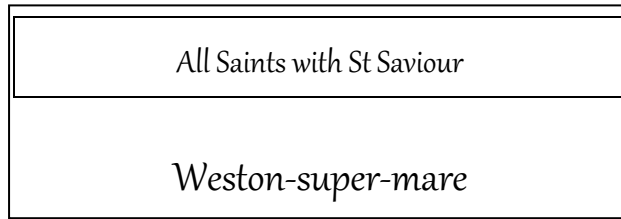
Arms of All Saints

come' echoes those three comings like knocks on the door. The repetition delays the disclosure we wait for and heightens its importance, for here is something new: not the inanimate forces of winter but a voice, something alive and breathing in a forlorn and icy world, something 'crying in the night'. It's a reference to William Blake's 'an infant crying in the night, an infant crying for the light' – and this is precisely what we ourselves have been, outside in the bleak midwinter where the third stanza has left us.

Is it the echo of our own cry that we hear? If it were, it would be the ultimate mockery, for we would know that we were alone out there, lost and helpless. But we are not. Warm blood and the energies of breaking and writhing tell us that something else is happening, something eucharistic that says that life can begin again and we can be thankful. There is a birthing that will give us our lives back again. 'He will come like child.' That wonderful last line gathers up all the earlier comings and humanises them, no, it divinises them in the simple truth that all our hopes and hungers and longings find their fulfilment in the birth that will heal and save us. For this Child, a child of the earth and son of man as we are, is 'tossed free' (a resurrection image as well as a birthing one) and therefore makes us free too. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul speaks about creation's birth-pangs that will one day make us not only free but more than conquerors, thanks to this Holy Child who has come out of love for us to be the firstborn of a new, redeemed humanity.



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We have arrived at the final doors of the Advent Calendar. The comings of truth and judgment in wind and cold and dark were needed, are always needed if our lives are to be cleansed and our vision purified. We need Advent to recall us to what is fundamental to human living: as individual men and women, as communities and societies, as churches, as a race. The word 'judgment' is *krisis* in Greek: life's storms and frosts and darkness do not always feel survivable. If we are to face *krisis* with equanimity and live through it, it will only be by the grace and truth of the Holy Child. Many voices clamour for our attention in Advent. His, the Voice that cries out to us in the night, is the one we must hear, and turn to; and when we have found him, we must never let him go.

Wishing you the happiest of Christmases with loved ones,

Fr Brendan