

BISHOP NICHOLAS HUDSON HOMILY

ADVENT SUNDAY 1(A): CATHEDRAL 30.xi.2025

1. Advent, of course, means ‘coming’.

It refers to a kind of triple coming: the coming of Christ in Bethlehem two thousand and twenty-five years ago; His coming to us in our daily lives; and His coming to take us home to Himself at the end of our lives.

Of course, no one knows when that will be.

Jesus himself tells us to “stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

2. St Cuthbert Mayne, our diocesan co-patron, whom we celebrate this weekend, was certainly taken by surprise.

He knew that that he might be taken at any time – but had no idea when! For more than a year, he’d wandered freely the estates of Francis Tregian in Probus, Cornwall, and beyond – passing, by day, for a steward, donning by night the vestments of a priest.

He was sitting one day in the gardens of Golden Manor when a party of some one hundred men appeared led by the High Sheriff of Cornwall.

He stole away to his room but the Sheriff pursued him and searched his possessions.

3. He quickly found Fr Cuthbert to be in possession of two objects for which he would be sentenced to death.

One was a papal bull; the other an ‘Agnus Dei’.

An ‘Agnus Dei’ was an image on wax of the ‘Lamb of God’ worn around the neck.

You can see it in the image of St Cuthbert Mayne behind me on the sanctuary.

He was imprisoned in Launceston Castle, and put to death in Launceston town-square by hanging, drawing and quartering.

4. Choosing to wear that image around his neck, he had literally ‘put on Christ’ - as we hear Paul urging us to do when he tells the Romans today to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”.

What awaited him - awaits all of us – on the other side of death he will have heard foretold, just as we have today, in that vision of the prophet Isaiah; of how “the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains ... and all the nations shall flow to it.”

From the Book of Revelation too, he will have learnt – in a way that expands on Isaiah’s vision - that at the heart of the heavenly Jerusalem we shall see nothing less than the Lamb of God himself – the Lamb whose seal Fr Cuthbert had set upon his heart and who seeks to make his home in the heart of each one of us.

5. Whenever I hear this vision as described by John, I’m transported, in my heart, to Ghent in Belgium, where I once saw for myself Van Eyck’s depiction of the *Mystic Lamb*.

It’s a wonderful illustration of this very scene, of a Lamb enthroned - with stream upon stream of holy men and women making their way towards him across the green, green fields of heaven.

I saw it with my parents.

They died some years ago.

I think of them whenever I see a reproduction of it; and find myself thinking, “Now they see with their own eyes the scene we looked upon together.”

As they waited, so now do we – for the Lamb, in his good time, to take *us* to himself; and for us to join our loved ones who’ve gone before us.

6. St Cuthbert Mayne reminds us we best prepare by putting on Christ – by *setting ourselves close to him*, as the other Apostle, Peter, put it.

In his First Letter, Peter tells us, “Set yourselves close to him ... so that you too may be living stones making a spiritual house.”

Pray to Christ, in other words; bow down in worship before the Lamb.

Advent is a wonderful opportunity and incentive to pray more; to deepen our prayer.

If we’ve been given the grace to set a time every day to go and be with him in prayer, we might think in Advent of finding a second time in the day to go and do that – to deepen our sense of closeness to him.

7. Paul urges us not only to put on Christ but also to cast off the works of darkness; cast off our sins, in other words.

This time of Advent is a wonderful encouragement to get back to Confession.

Pope Francis I found deeply encouraging to everyone who found Confession hard.

He used to say, “Just ask yourself, ‘How long is it since my last Confession? Two weeks? Two months? Two years? Twenty years? Forty years?’ However long it is,” he would say, “Just go! And you’ll feel so much better for it.”

By way of further encouragement, he would add: remember, when you do go, that it’s not really the priest who waits to meet you on the other side of the door but Christ himself.

He knows your sins already but he wants you to own them and to know his forgiveness.

8. So Paul urges us to put on Christ; and to cast off the works of darkness.

And he adds a further injunction – to “put on the armour of light”.

I hear in that phrase a confirmation of something which I find to be so true of Confession.

It’s that the very things we have the courage to confess we find ourselves receiving the strength – the armour - to resist.

9. We confess our tendency to judge; and we find ourselves, next time we're tempted to be judgmental, able simply to refrain.

More than that, we find ourselves empowered gently to challenge others when they fall into being judgemental too; to match their negative with a positive.

So, if a friend chooses to say something like, "I find Michael very full of himself," we find in ourselves the courage – if it's true – to say, "Well that's not my experience; in fact, I find him quite humble."

And so we're putting on Christ.

We're being given grace – the grace to be more like Christ.

10. Confessing our sins is an act of hope in that grace; and trust too – trust in God and trust in the priest.

I chose for my motto a phrase which I like to think captures both those qualities – hope and trust.

It's a phrase from the Psalms: "In te Domine speramus"; "In you, O Lord, we place our hope."

Hope and trust are so close that hope is often translated in the Psalms as trust.

That great prayer of praise, the *Te Deum*, so often on the lips of martyrs as they were sentenced to death, climaxes with the words, "In you, O Lord, we place our trust", "In te Domine speramus".

11. With the start of Advent, we're fast approaching the end of this Jubilee of Hope.

I was touched to discover that Pope Francis opened this Jubilee of Hope with an appeal to hope and trust – not some general hope and trust but to hope and trust specifically in God's forgiveness.

He wished to reassure us.

"There is hope for each of us," he said. "Do not forget," he continued, "that God forgives everything. God forgives everything. Do not forget this since it is a(n important) way of understanding hope in the Lord."

12. These words of Pope Francis make me think there really is no better way to close this Jubilee of Hope, to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child at Christmas, to prepare ourselves for when the Lord chooses to take us to himself, than to turn back in hope and trust to our loving Father - and confess our sins.

13. To confess our sins - and pray.

Pray more fervently for ourselves, pray for those nearest and dearest to us, for the poor, for those around us who find themselves in most dire and urgent need.

And “pray for the peace of Jerusalem”, as the psalmist urges us today
Pray indeed for all those places where there is strife and suffering – for South Sudan, for Ukraine, but especially, in these days of Advent, for peace in the land of Jesus’s birth.

14. And to pray also for our Diocese, as we embark upon this new chapter together.

Plymouth Diocese’s waiting for a new Bishop has been a very long Advent. Now the work begins – together to deepen our waiting on the Lord, asking him to show us how he calls us to be more the Diocese, the Church he wishes and calls and yearns for us to be.

I’m so happy to be with you at last; and to be embarking with you on this my first Advent in Plymouth.

I look forward with you to our waiting on the Lord in hope and trust - and our seeking to discover together the way he has mapped out for us in future years.