



## REFLECTION BY ANNE BURDEN

*Advent 3 - Luke 3 v 7-18*

We're half way through Advent - so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by the recurring question "Are you ready for Christmas?" I dislike the question because I know that the answer is "No - I'm not ready" - and I can easily start to feel bad. After all, I'm retired - so there's no good reason why I'm not further ahead with plans. Yet the truth is that I'm enjoying the Christmas lights my neighbours over the road have put up - but my Christmas tree is still in the loft. And I sold a good number of my 'hand-crafted' Christmas cards at the Church Christmas Fair on Sunday - but there's not been a single card written with my name at the bottom - let alone cards being posted or delivered. I don't really think people are criticising when they say "Are you ready for Christmas?" - it's a friendly, conversation maker. The judgement is all in my head!

"Are you ready for Christmas?" The question is generally about plans and invitations, writing lists, doing the shopping, spending money. It's my brain which puts in the extra words ... "Are you being successful ...." - and I know the answer is .... "Actually - no - I could have done this, that and the other thing, and I haven't". This is a short step to feeling guilty - and that's surely a waste of energy. Better to think about the positives and the bigger question ... "what is Advent really for?"

One of the things I have done is to decide which charities I'm going to support this Christmas. This is something I've done for a number of years - actually since my mother died and I felt the sadness of not being able to buy her a present anymore - until I realised that of course I could buy her something, and simply give it to someone else!! This seems more like the spirit of the Christmas season as I understand it - asking "what can I do to make Christmas a bit better for those in need - those who are suffering" rather than focussing solely on "how can I make things really nice for me and mine". There's nothing wrong in being generous to those we love, of course - as long as we don't forget that God's family is much larger than our narrow little one, and he can't show his love for his hurting ones unless we help him.

The other thing we hear in our Churches in Advent is that it is the season of waiting and reflection. Waiting for God's gift of the love which is Jesus at Christmas time - and hoping that if we join in the sharing of that love, we can help to build a better world. Advent waiting shouldn't be passive - like waiting for a bus which might never come. There can be an active waiting as we ask the questions ... "how best can we use this time?" ... "how can we meet God and allow him to lead us deeper into a life of faith and love.

Our Gospel reading for today may help us with this (Luke 3, 7-18) It's about John the Baptist who is shouting the message ... "The Messiah is coming - repent of your sinful ways." And the crowd who have come to John for baptism ask the question ... "what can we do while we wait for the Messiah?" John the Baptist is full of advice. People should share any good fortune they have - possessions and food - with those who have none. The tax collectors should be honest in applying the rules, and not include a rake-off to benefit themselves. The soldiers shouldn't extort money by threats or lies - and be satisfied with their wages. These suggestions belong to a particular time and circumstance, but are any of them good for us today? Is there anything we might focus on in the remaining days before Christmas comes? The practical tasks and the shopping will happen - or be forgotten about - but the waiting with God, the insights and the resolutions, can change the way we greet the dawning of Christmas - and indeed our lives for the future.