

## **Views from the Pews Another sort of advent**

This may seem an odd time of year – the beginning of the Church’s year - to think of another sort of advent, but this too represents a new beginning.

You could of course wait until after Christmas to take up this challenge. New Year would be a good time, as it’s a time of rest and reflection, a time of looking forward.

The ‘advent’ referred to in this challenge is that contained in the Book of Acts, and in St Paul’s Letters. The dictionary definition of ‘advent’ (small ‘a’) denotes the arrival of someone or something important or special, and this part of the New Testament fits the bill nicely, because it describes the advent of the Church, and is therefore well worth reading. When challenged about the validity of my beliefs, I point to the set of very human events which followed the Ascension.

These are ‘human’ in that they fit well with our modern understanding of sociology, history, and politics. These later events can only be explained in terms of a very strong reaction to a set of earlier events which left no trace except by word of mouth – the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. And the behaviours described are not confined to those present at the three events. Saul, tasked with wiping out this troublesome sect, undergoes a conversion, and becomes in many ways the lead player in the drama. It is he who physically moves around the eastern Mediterranean, he who maintains a set of churches (some underground) and it is he who wrestles strongest with that key question: ‘Is the Christ Church confined to the Jews, or is it open to Gentiles too?’

But St Peter leads on this question too. At Acts 10;34, he is recorded as saying that God ‘shows no partiality’ , and that ‘anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’.

Brave words indeed, as they were controversial, and potentially divisive. The Gospel events had occurred in Judaea, and it must have been widely thought that Jesus had come to save the Jews only. The Apostles globalized the faith, at enormous personal risk, many being executed for speaking too many inconvenient truths. Others were shipwrecked, imprisoned, banished, and generally shunned.

It is no coincidence that the words ‘advent’ and ‘adventure’ sit side by side in your dictionary. You have joined an adventurous church.

*Richard Swarbrick*