Mark Oakley is Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral. He is a writer, broadcaster and visiting lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College, London. He is the author of *The Collage of God* (Canterbury Press, 2001, reissued 2012) and *The Splash of Words: Believing in poetry* (Canterbury Press, 2016), and the compiler of *Readings for Weddings* (2004, reissued 2013) and *Readings for Funerals* (2015), both published by SPCK.

A GOOD YEAR

Edited by
Mark Oakley

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For my colleagues
Simon Carter, Elizabeth Foy,
Donna McDowell and Barbara Ridpath,
who help to make the year good.

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Introduction

Mark Oakley

In the Church of England's service of the ordination and consecration of a bishop, it states that bishops 'are to feed God's pilgrim people, and so build up the Body of Christ'.[1] At a time of discernible spiritual hunger, both inside and outside the Church, one of the ways in which that feeding can be done is by enabling and encouraging the Christian community to learn. In their ministry, bishops are asked to secure the integrity of the Church, which means making certain the gospel is explored for all its mysterious richness, and to ensure the scrutiny of ourselves and society. It also involves mining the Christian tradition for inspiration and, at the same time, making sure the questions of the contemporary world are addressed with honesty and openness. Christians learn not necessarily because they like information but because they desire formation: a forming of themselves into a better likeness of their Lord, out of gratitude to the one who made them. What they discover in the gospel, and the ways it has inspired and changed people before them, begins to translate into the ways they speak, listen and relate in their own day. It starts to shape priorities and to distil what matters. For the Christian, to

learn is to deepen communion with the Origin of life and with those with whom we share that life. As St Benedict taught, a Christian community is a little school where we learn to relate to God, each other and ourselves. Learning is communion.

Because of their calling to feed the Christian Church and to secure its integrity, the St Paul's Cathedral Adult Learning Department invited bishops to come to teach some Christians and other exploring people about the way the Church divides the year into seasons. These seasons take shape so that faith can breathe in the poetic beauty of Christian belief through all the ways available to us: Scripture and preaching, hymns and songs, movement and colour, drama and debate, prayer and stillness. Because the passing into a new season of the Church's year can sometimes make its greatest impact in a place only by the changing of the altar frontal, we asked the bishops to tell us what they believed would make a 'good' observation of each season. How would a good Lent be spent? How can we journey through Holy Week fruitfully? How might we celebrate Easter well? What would a Christian Christmas look like? Four bishops came and delivered thoughtful talks that prompted a lot of honest and practical questions from the audience. You can view these events on the St Paul's website at <www.stpauls.co.uk/learning-faith/adult-learning/videos-podcasts>. Although Christians live the mysteries of the Christian faith simultaneously, the Church's tradition lays them out in a linear fashion and asks us to observe the particularity of those mysteries through a 12-month cycle. It became very clear during the conversations at St Paul's that this would be a tradition lost at great cost.

The Church of England had not yet ordained women bishops when we held the talks under the dome of the cathedral. When some asked whether we planned to publish the talks, we decided that we would but only alongside reflections on other seasons of the Church's year by women bishops – once they had arrived! In 2015, the first woman to be ordained and consecrated into the episcopate was Bishop Libby Lane, and we are thrilled that she agreed to write for this collection.

The tone and style of the contributions are inevitably varied. Some were originally written to be heard, some to be read. Some took shape 'on stage' with an audience; others were written in a quiet study. The bishops come from different traditions within the Church of England, so varied theological emphases occur. What unites them all is a deep passion for the seasons of the Church's year to be celebrated imaginatively and faithfully for the feeding of God's pilgrim people and the building up of the body of Christ.

Sarah Mullally begins this book by focusing us on the season of Advent. In the Roman Empire, when an emperor came to power and ceremonially entered a province or city, it was described as his 'advent' (Latin *adventus*: 'arrival'). A gold medallion found at Arras shows such an 'advent' in AD 296 of Constantius Chlorus at the gates of the City of London. Latin-speaking Christians borrowed the word and concept for Jesus Christ, their only Lord and Emperor, and invested it with the meaning of their Saviour's arrival. The second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr wrote, 'it was foretold that there would be two advents of Christ: one in which he will appear in suffering and without honour and beauty; the second in which he will return in glory to judge

all people'.[2] Over the centuries, Advent developed this dual significance, commemorating incarnation and preparing ourselves for the liberation of judgement, when we are seen at last, and recognized, for who we really are.

Advent is a season in the vocative. The great 'O's, when we call out to God to come to touch us back into a life worthy of the name, longingly give heart to the season. It is as if we say: 'Come to us and tell us who we have become, so we can admit it and then begin to change – but with your help.' Human bodies are quite good at healing themselves over time; a cut will mend quickly. Human souls are not so adept; they have to be healed from the outside, by being loved and believed in. Advent is the season when we are honest about our incompleteness and the need to be 'saved' by a love beyond ourselves. It is the time when we acknowledge that, for Christians, everything is as yet unfinished and that we will be inspirited by hope and the ability to wait. It is a season pregnant with God. The imagery and words of Advent poetically and riotously work hard to do some justice to our trust in that God who comes to us as we are and as we shall be. God loves us just as we are now and comes in incarnation to reveal this love. However, God loves us so much that he doesn't want us to remain the same; he comes to liberate us from the prisons and limitations of cold, closed hearts, preparing us for a share in his glory.

In Normandy, there used to be a tradition on Advent Sunday of paying children to run around the fields to bash haystacks so that all the rats came out of the harvest. It was a good day to do it. Our rats need dealing with if there is to be bread on the table. Advent is not for beginners. It exposes our darkness and the faults that are usually more forgivable than the ways in which we try to hide them.

Advent tells us to grow up, to face our facts, to cry out for a hand of healing and to be infused with a new story, a new script, a fresh way of seeing everything that might drop down into us and water our parched humanity. We need saving from ourselves and we need to prepare the straw for a birth within us. Advent dares us to stand looking towards heaven and praying out loud: 'We're ready; it's time to wake up. OK. Here goes – let redemption draw near.'

Rowan Williams typically explores Christmas with imagination and insights that feel both new to, and yet somehow at home in, the soul. Beginning with a look at some of the carols we sing at this time of year, he reminds us that difficulty is usually more important than quick clarity, and that the hard lines and incomprehensible images of some of our carols might be more important than we first imagine. He shows us that, although we call on God in Advent, we can never lure him down by being polite or behaving well. God can't help but overflow into a world of his making. Trying to convince God to like us would be as futile as trying to convince a waterfall to be wet.

As I read his reflection, I found myself thinking of those other carols found in the composer Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. Britten wrote this work while on a cramped, airless cargo vessel, travelling from the USA to England in 1942. Not only did Britten have to battle against the crew's swearing and constant whistling but he was also sailing at the height of the U-boat attacks in the Atlantic. The relaxed joyfulness of the music contrasts somewhat with what was a dangerous and precarious journey.

While stopping in Nova Scotia, Britten picked up a book of medieval poems, from which some of the texts for his

Ceremony of Carols came. Britten, as usual, took words that didn't at first appear to be made for song and allowed his music to be true to the language, keeping its lifeblood and earthiness. His choral piece is in 11 movements and is sung in the context of processional and recessional chanting. It is as if the story it celebrates is brought into our midst and then taken beyond our reach, reflecting the Christian desire for the story of Christ to be within us, coupled with the sense that it feels distant, eternal, beyond us. We sense innocence before its loss, a cycle of arrival and departure, reverence and rebellion, devotion and dereliction. We are faced with the fragile, temperamental, imperfect people God comes to and the eternal heart from which Christ comes. In one poem, simple Latin phrases hold the form together and, for me, sum up the celebration of Christmas: *res miranda*, *pares forma*, *gaudeamus*, *transeamus* – marvellous thing, of equal form, let us rejoice, let us cross over and follow.

Libby Lane then takes us on the Epiphany journey. Epiphany has grabbed the human imagination with great force. Not only are the hymns we sing some of the very best we have, the art and poetry depicting the Magi some of the most striking, but also the traditions of Epiphany are great fun – from Epiphany cakes to the blessing of orchards, from the Italian *La Befana* to the blessing of boats. Epiphany in the West first focuses on the Magi but then dives into the baptismal waters of the Jordan when Jesus meets his cousin John. Then it draws us into the first miracle of John's Gospel, the transformation of water into wine. Bishop Libby reminds us that the Feast of St Paul also falls within the season of Epiphany. It seems more than appropriate that the great apostle to the Gentiles is reverenced in this

season, when the gospel's generosity and reach is the pulse of our prayer.

At first, of course, the Magi were thought of as astrologers (hence their concern with the stars) and were said to have come in droves, not just three (nowhere does it say there were three in the Gospels); they stabilized (excuse the pun) at three, no doubt because there were three gifts – one each. No one before Tertullian in the second century ever thought of the wise men as kings. In the wall paintings of the catacombs and in some Byzantine mosaics, the Magi wore Mithraic robes. No one actually named them Balthazar, Melchior and Caspar until the ninth century. These names have led to that other Epiphany tradition of marking our doorways with chalk: writing the year and the initials of the Magi – CMB – which can also stand for *Christus mansionem benedicat*: 'Christ bless this home'. In Syria, though, the Magi are known as Larvandad, Harmisdas and Gushnasaph. The Venerable Bede suggested they represented the entire world – one came from Asia, one from Africa and one from Europe – and so one, from the fifteenth century onwards, is often depicted as being black. If you go to the Cathedral at Autun, you'll see a stone sculpture of the three kings tucked up in bed together (I'm not sure how well this sits with the Bishops' Guidelines!). They are under a large blanket all wearing their crowns like night caps. An angel wakes them and points to the star. One of them has his eyes wide open, one is bleary-eyed and the third is sound asleep. These are the three spiritual states of humanity.

In the fourth century, it was Prudentius who began the business of giving different mystic meanings to the gifts. You find these in our carols: 'Incense doth their God disclose, gold the King of kings proclaimeth, myrrh his sepulchre

foreshows'.[3] Of course, if they were astrologers and showmen, glittering gold and screens of smoke were probably part of their show. To lay those props aside, in front of Christ, then, is more than giving posh presents; it is laying down a livelihood – even a life – built on falsity for the sake of a more human way.

By taking us to the Jordan, Epiphany also helps us to recall the baptism of Jesus and our consequent baptism. All the noise of the shoreline, all the world's harsh and destructive messaging and jaundiced takes on life, is, for one underwater moment, drowned out; the only thing you can hear is your own heart beating. You then emerge, take a gulp of fresh air and listen to the only words that matter – not from the crowd but from heaven: 'You are my beloved child.' Our calling is to live up to these words and not to live down to what the world can tell us about ourselves. This is where we discover our human dignity, rooted in the message of heaven as the water laps over us. As do the Magi, we return home by another road. Our water turns into the intoxicating wine of love towards us and in its jars it overflows enough for us to share it with everyone else. Epiphany is a feast time for celebrating Christian identity and partnership.

Justin Welby takes us into the desert and argues for a less individualistic approach to Lent. The day before Lent begins, many of us tuck in to pancakes – a pancake is a helpful visual aid for what Lent is trying to confront. Pancakes are fat and flat. They are like our modern souls. Lent is an invitation to a spiritual adventure of confronting head on the fat and the flat in us. It scrutinizes how we live our lives, how we have become consumers instead of citizens, how we can buy and eat more and more because of other hungers

that lie deep down. Lent asks if we are a society with lots to live *with* but little sense of what to live *for*. What is it that we really want when we pick up yet another gadget, shirt, book or sandwich?

Lent is not the 'thou shalt not' season but a refreshing snowfall in the soul that asks us gently, without apology, whether our lives are in some sort of balance. It is a time of fasting, of learning what we can live without to bring better proportion to living and relating. It asks us to attend to our needs, not our wants. It asks us to fast, not just from coffee but also from the angry word, the quick judgement, the indifferent credit card. We all need to fast somewhere.

A flat life is one where we kill time before time kills us. Lent throws a lifebelt to us and, in a season of Christian schooling as I mentioned above, calls us back to learn how to relate to God, each other and ourselves. It is a season that places the compass back in the hand to make sure we don't hate our neighbours as ourselves but are loving them as ourselves. It is the season that reiterates U-turns can be good. As we receive ash marks on Ash Wednesday, the first stroke makes an 'I' and then the second crosses it and makes it into the sign of Christ. The sign is made on the (fore)head, that protective case for the brain, the seat of the will. Fragile and bruised by the past, that brain is gently caressed with the ash of mortality in a symbol of eternity. 'Be faithful to Christ', we are told, 'as he is faithful to you.' Self-justification is exhausting and pointless. It has been said that living gracefully is giving more than you owe and receiving more than you deserve. The stark beauty of Lent confirms both insights to be true.

A few years ago, I saw Jacob Epstein's statue of Adam. Made in 1938, it is towering, majestic, full of potential, energy