

ADVENT III - Bruton Parish Church
December 13th, 2009
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr

You know, of course, that this cannot be left to the servants. That just wouldn't do, would it? The preparations all decent, traditional, Christians carry out on this, the Third Sunday in Advent, are a spiritual act of preparation for Christmas, for the coming of the Lord Jesus. No-one could do that for you, now, honestly, could they?

So, I suppose you have made ready for this day, ready to do your part? You have the ingredients? 1 lb of cooking apples: Bramleys are best, peeled, cored and finely chopped. 8 oz of shredded suet. 4 oz of self-raising flour. 8 oz of raisins, 8 oz of sultanas, 1 and ¼ pounds of currants, 2 oz of whole mixed candied peel, finely chopped.

Then, as you remember perfectly well, we need 1 lb of soft dark brown sugar (the kind that smells richly of molasses). And where would one be without the grated rind and juice of an orange – for myself, I prefer Seville – and of a lemon. The 2 oz of whole almonds must be sliced into slivers: chunks simply won't do.

1 teaspoon of ground mixed spice: fresh, mind, not stale and left over from the reign of Queen Victoria. The nutmeg you must simply grind yourself (1/2 teaspoon) or, really, what is the point? ¼ teaspoon of cinnamon. 8 oz of breadcrumbs: make them yourself by tearing up stale white bread. Everyone has stale white bread, sliced, because it is morally impossible to eat it.

Four eggs: one each for the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

As a child I was told that the working classes use rum and the lower middle class believes that any old brandy will do, but I do hope we know better: Brandy VSOP, please. Barley wine, 5 fl oz; a nice country touch. And 5 fl oz of stout.

The suet, flour, breadcrumbs, spices and sugar are added together into an enormous bowl. Then the dried fruit, peel and nuts follow, then the apple and orange and lemon rinds.

In a different bowl, beat up the eggs, brandy, barley wine and stout and pour this delicious mess over the dry ingredients. My grandmother used to claim more stout was needed but, curiously, one never saw it put into the pudding bowl. Behold! I show you a mystery!

You need one new wooden spoon for each member of the family with which to stir the ingredients. And you need a sixpence. Or two.

And that brings us to today's Collect: "Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...."

For everywhere in Christendom today is known as "Stir-up Sunday", except where it is not.

My family's practice was for us all to gather 'round an enormous pottery bowl on the kitchen table, the little ones among us standing on chairs so as to be able to reach. And, as we stirred these ingredients in preparation for Christmas, we shut our eyes, and made a wish for Christmas, but not for ourselves, and prayed, but not for ourselves. And, at some moment when we were all intensely stirring and wishing and praying, eyes tightly shut, in principle, our Mother, or Grandmother, would pop the sixpence into the bowl.

Yes, you can buy Christmas pudding. You can even go out to a restaurant and order it but it won't be the same. You would deprive your soul of the moment when the mixture is of the right consistency (it should fall easily from a spoon rapped against the side of the bowl) as in seasons past. The bowl has to be covered with a tea-towel (of course, a clean one: how could you even think otherwise?), and the fragrance will fill the kitchen as it is left overnight. This is true incense, a prayer rising up to God making glad the hearts of children and revealing the kitchen to be a holy place. You can never know such joy and thanksgiving from bought potpourri or Glade aroma candles.

The next day, the mixture is briefly stirred again then packed into white porcelain bowls, right up to the top, each bowl covered with greaseproof paper, and then a pudding cloth, which are tied tightly in place with brown string.

You steam the puddings for eight hours, (keep an eye on the water level: don't boil the pan dry), allow to cool, replace the greaseproof paper and pudding cloth and tie with new string. Store in a cool place, and as our house was jolly freezing in the winter, finding a merely cool place was something of a challenge.

To eat, steam for two hours and serve with brandy butter, never custard. But I trust you knew that, didn't you?

Those who have taste buds and a sense of smell can already savour this delight. The spices! The orange and lemon! The brandy!! O bliss! O joy!!!

Those who wonder why a sermon would begin so lovingly with a recipe, and who ask angrily why that recipe doesn't use electrical kitchen appliances and who needs to go to all that time and trouble in this busy age and time of economic downturn, have self-identified yourselves as Ebenezer Scrooge for the 21st century. You should make an urgent pastoral appointment to see one of the clergy after the coming Feast of the Incarnation of our Lord,

which some do call Christmas. My fear is that such a one has a soul as dried and wrinkled as a raisin; a very poor state to be in. Most un-Episcopalian.

For on this day, the Third Sunday of Advent, the lessons tell us to rejoice. Rejoice, they say. The Lord, the Messiah, is near and, on a silent night in a very few days now, but not yet, we will celebrate anew the coming of God's love, incarnate into the world. And we pray to God asking that God stir up us and our miserable world while we wait, for wait we must. Start in the kitchen, I say. What you do there to prepare Christmas pudding will remind you of why we go to Church.

Advent is a time of preparation. Prepare the tree. Deck the halls with boughs of holly (fa-la-la-la, la-la-la and so forth). Find time to be quiet. Slow down. Like Christmas puddings, you would be better were you to sit and let the flavours of the season intermingle, intertwine within your soul.

Making the Christmas pudding with this old family recipe is one of the happiest memories of my childhood and that of my children. Finding that one's slice of pudding contained a sixpenny bit, small silver coin, I still remember with intense happiness. You don't get to keep the coin but finding it was a sure sign of blessings in the coming year. The coin went back to await another Christmas, and another, and another.

But what about shopping? And choosing presents? The experience we shared cannot be bought in Macy's, or Niemann Marcus, or Trader Joe's.

I talked to my brothers and our children about Advent Three. Do you know, none of us can really remember much about many of the presents, though I'm sure they were tasteful and well-chosen. We all remember making the pudding. Oh yes, and spending Christmas day afternoon writing thank-you letters to everyone while it got dark outside and the wind picked up and the rain or snow beat against the windowpane. Christmas was not about getting things: we learned that in the kitchen. I happen to know that some of you might be beginning to feel a wistful longing for such a true Christmas.

Is it too late? Perhaps too late for a family gathering, time being what it is. But not too late for friends to gather and make a Christmas pudding together. Make one each. Or share them among yourselves.

But what if you don't like Christmas pudding or simply can't eat it? Our Lord would greatly rejoice with you if you made the pudding and gave it to the hungry and the poor. There are plenty of those; they aren't hard to find. There were many such on the night that Christ was born.

The time spent in preparation, especially if that time is offered up to God, is truly an Advent preparation for Christmas. Copies of this sermon and its recipe will be available in the Parish Office tomorrow. Today is the Third Sunday in Advent: get stirring! Christ is coming!