Advent music is my absolute favourite Church music of the year. We are so blessed with our music (and our musicians) here at St Marylebone, at the 11am and on the first Sunday of the month with Prayers for Healing in the evening. Come to the Parish Church next Sunday evening at 6pm to pray, to pray for healing, and to wallow in Advent music, my favourite of the year.

Even at this service at which we don’t have music – the same is true of the words of the service, and do go home and look up some proper Advent music, too.

As always Church music or the beauty of the Prayer Book liturgy at 8.30am isn’t simply entertainment, or pleasant accoutrements. Our musicians don’t perform to us [these words aren’t entertainment], they worship God. It is to Him that our singing and speaking *Glory be to God on high, Holy Holy Holy, Lamb of God* is addressed. They sing and speak (and we are very grateful they do) for us to God. And music and the liturgy carries us powerfully, deeply God-ward even as we simply sit or stand. Advent liturgy and music, all good liturgy and Church music, is packed with theological richness. If we are attentive to the liturgy, we’ll realise that it isn’t mere decoration, it is Bible and sermon and theological treatise and God to us, and us responding to God, all at once. Where our words or thoughts or feelings are simply not enough, the Church’s liturgy and music
steps in and carries us a little further along the way into the heart of God and the heart of our humanity.

And one of the reasons Advent Music is my favourite is because, I think, Advent music does *that* par excellence. Last Sunday, I saw plastered across the Conran Shop window opposite church, amongst their Christmas decorations (up, errr, a little early…) it read in foot high coloured letters ‘The Conran Shop Loves You’. I am no scrooge. I am no grinch. But I confess my first thought was, ‘no’, ‘no it doesn’t’. I really like the Conran shop, it is full of beautiful things that I would like to own. (But there’s no point: putting any of the beautiful things from the Conran Shop amongst my other possessions would be like melting a fabulous chocolate truffle in with a kilo of Dairy Milk – a complete waste of time…) Anyway, I like the Conran Shop, but I am under no illusions that it ‘loves me’.

A shop cannot love us. In Advent to speak of love in that way is simply preposterous.

But, good news, the music and theology of Advent *squashes* such low expectations, and redeems such tragically undersold hope, squashing it like an overcooked Brussel sprout under a Christmas dinner fork.

Advent’s traditional themes are the four Last Things: heaven, hell, death and judgment. Advent music is joyful – *Lo he comes with clouds descending!* It is ancient and utterly humane, like the words of the Advent Prose, ‘*drop down ye heavens from above*’ – calling on our Saviour, from the Hebrews in the wilderness and
in every age since. The stirring Wachtet Auf! Advent music is able to hold the tension of truth and paradox. O Come O Come Emmanuel, Creator of the stars of night.

All these hymns of hope, of Christ our light, tinged with solemn sadness, held in a fragile and precarious honesty, light and darkness. Hope is not undersold, neatly packaged in a ribbon, in deep Advent nothing is tamed, no one is patronised.

Advent is a season of darkness and light, light and darkness. If we tame it and tie it up in ribbons, ignoring the depths of Advent, in music and daily readings, in invitation to spend more time with the Gospels, more time in meditative prayer, more time gathering for midweek worship near home or work, if we miss out on Advent’s invitation to wait in the darkness before the first grey lights of dawn, then we are depriving ourselves and those we love of a central truth, a core reality, of what it means to be human.

If you need any further persuasion, listen on each Sunday of Advent with new ears to the liturgy and music of our worship, come with new ears to next Sunday’s Advent Carols.

And start with today’s Gospel. It is remarkable that on Advent Sunday each year the Prayer Book in its wisdom has us share which Gospel event? A vision of the End? Something from the start of Jesus’ life or ministry? Both sensible ideas. No. Palm Sunday!

It’s a stunning piece of liturgical illumination. To place Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (Donkey, palms and all) as the Sunday
Gospel as we enter Advent, and with it the new Church year, achieves so many clever collocations. Just as we said our music and liturgy holds nuance and tension, and communicates layers of meaning; so by hearing the Palm Sunday Gospel today, the *Passion* of Jesus is put before us right from the start. Jesus as King, Jesus as Saviour/Messiah is clearly announced. The identity and fate of this Baby we’re expecting, His role as the fulfilment of the prophecies (Jerusalem being the stage for all such things), it’s all here. His riding on a humble colt then is immediately at contrast with His coming again, whenever that will be, with power and great glory. Advent, in prayer and scripture and music and everything else is layer upon layer of meaning and mystery and truth. Tension, paradox, darkness and light. Humanity, confusion, and fragility, and Divine purpose and God’s action. These things are the stuff of life, the human condition, and the story of everything. Advent.

The trouble is, it’s hard to communicate all that in foot high letters in a shop window.