

Do please be seated.

I want to preach today on these verses from our NT reading:

“You know what time it is: it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.”

Let’s pray:

*Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord, to your perfect love.
Speak to us, call us, draw us to you, this Advent, we ask. Amen.*

INTRO: Screwtape begins

Well, I say I want to preach on these verses ... Actually I’ve been really busy this week, so didn’t get around to writing a sermon. But I found this interesting letter lying around at the back of church, so I thought I’d read it to you. It says:

My Dear Wormwood,

What you say is true; unfortunately, we have to admit that Christmas has been very successful.

Oh, I should explain. In the 1940s, C S Lewis leaked letters written from a senior devil, Screwtape, to his apprentice, Wormwood.

Wormwood was like the opposite of a guardian angel, a personal demon, assigned to one human, and Screwtape advised him from below on how to prevent his human knowing he was loved by God, and when – in spite of this – his human came to faith, on how to

*confuse the man, sow doubts in his heart, make his faith ineffectual.
“The Screwtape Letters” revealed Satanic strategies.*

From what I found in church here, it would seem Screwtape is still active. Let me get back to his letter. I’ll start again:

Dear Wormwood,

What you say is true; unfortunately, we have to admit that Christmas has been very successful.

Billions of people celebrate a day dedicated to the Enemy’s foul trick of becoming a human alongside them. Is there nothing he won’t stoop to? Has he no dignity?

The question is, how are we to respond?

1. TURN DEFEAT INTO VICTORY: THE SUBVERSION OF CHRISTMAS

We seem to have lost this battle: the festival is so entrenched, we have no hope of rooting it out of their affections or calendar. OK. We may have lost a battle over Christmas, but we can yet win the war. Let me explain.

They want Christmas? Fine, let them have it. But we can use even this. As a family gather for this day with the Enemy’s very name inscribed on it, our cause seems lost. They make it the most special day, with the finest food; they give presents, echoing the Enemy’s unashamed giving of himself to them. Horrible!

But what if we turn the Enemy’s seeming strength here against him? The day is *special*; well, then, let us convince the hosts of each celebration it must be *perfect*. (Better still, with a couple, convince one it must be perfect; let the other not care much. What fun!)

Anyway, convince them it must be special, so they work tirelessly to make the meal, the tree, the presents perfect. The anxiety this

creates, the sheer tiredness, means the exhausted cook may snap at her excited family, and, if we play our hand well, frustration over the bread sauce can be escalated into a full-blown family row, rehearsing endless unrelated grievances. Do *this* to Christmas Day, and our counter attack is strong.

We can do deliciously bad things around presents too: exploit even the best intentions, where lovingly chosen gifts aren't appreciated. Oooh. And less subtle tactics too: good old greed and envy can be encouraged, perhaps especially among children (advertised to by adults). Focus them on "I want", not on what they have from God, which every other gift is meant to betoken, and the point of the season is buried beneath a vice. Sweet.

And use all of this among the poor to create genuine misery: convince them, yes, this must be special, and to do that they must over-spend. Aggrieved that they cannot normally afford what they *need*, plant the thought that, at least at Christmas, they will have the *best*, meaning the *expensive*, especially for their children. (Remember, one of The Master's greatest lies is: "Christmas is for the children.") So, their Christmas comes to mean not the Enemy's free gift, but their *debt*!

Oh, such splendid malevolence! Delightful! *Christmas means ... debt?! I wonder how we pull it off! But we do! Sometimes our genius surprises even us.*

Do I make our basic tactics clear? I hope so.

2. Advent

But don't imagine the enemy is so easily overcome. He may pursue the utter folly of loving the humans; but he is no *fool*, and he knows our ways.

Therefore, his servants have long realised that to celebrate Christmas in a way that will bring them it's true gift, they must prepare.

They call this Advent: a season for reflecting on their Enemy's Christmas coming. This is a real threat to us.

Worse still, they also contemplate the Enemy's promised *return*, and their readiness for that; soon, they're remembering their mortality, and serious spiritual work is happening. Potentially disastrous.

From their detestable book they read:

"You know what time it is; it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light."

Exactly what we must not let them do.

Think of all the ways we have lulled them into sleep, while convincing them they are awake! I mean, the very busyness of life; if we have them always hurrying, never able to stop and savour the moment, then they do not experience life as the Enemy's gift. Food is not a gift; it is a bother to get a meal on the table. Children are not a gift, but endless work. Work is not a gift, in doing or providing useful things, and earning a living, but a burden. Church is not a gift, but a headache to maintain.

That's good. Even better: as we keep their eyes down on the one-thing-after-another of life, they don't stop to wonder what it is all for, how they come to be here at all, and where they will be beyond it.

The Enemy wants them to receive life in all its details as his gift, and live awake to the giver of it all – him – day by day.

"Thank you for this meal, generous Father".

“Walk with me through this difficult day at work, brother Jesus.”

“I feel afraid today, Lord: keep me safe with you in this life, and beyond it too.”

He loves them to be like this. And he wants their souls, of course, as we do. (Though we are different: he foolishly lets them have greater possession of those very souls once they have given them into his hands; so, they are truly themselves as his servants in this life and the next. We of course, just want their souls ourselves, to devour them.)

I digress. The point is, we must not let them be lured by the Enemy to stop and think, or feel, be still, silent, reflect, reach out to him from either the joy or the pain in their hearts.

Advent is cunningly designed by the Enemy to create space for them to do that. There is real danger for us here, Wormwood.

3. TURN DEFEAT INTO VICTORY: THE SUBVERSION OF ADVENT

So, we work on Advent as we have worked on Christmas: let all the busyness of the preparations for the day make any advance spiritual preparation impossible ... or seemingly so; it is not impossible, but it must seem to be.

“Pray? In Advent? Well, it’s the worst time of year for that!”

That’s the response we want.

If their church suggests ways to create spaces to pray, let them think: “Well, maybe next year.”

Or:

“Pray? In December? Huh! You’re obviously not as busy as I am!”

If there's an opportunity for them to reach beyond some of life's more trivial aspects, quick: bury this in *more trivia than usual*. While they cunningly strip the church of bright decorations so that Christmas, when it comes, will really shine, we must fill every space of Advent with things that glitter ... a bit. Make "Christmas" start in the shops around the end of October, then it has no chance of ever really coming at all. It's our Judo move again, turning its seemingly overwhelming strength to our advantage, so Christmas and its necessary Advent preparation are both lost in the busy blur of something vaguely, tepidly, festive.

Ah, Wormwood, it is a fine line between food, decorations and gifts that celebrate and proclaim the love of their God, and us using these things in a way *just* detached from him, to hide him altogether: this is delicate work.

Do it well, and they'll never get round to considering what works of darkness they might need to lay aside – those sins they know *are* sin, but are loathe to relinquish. Advent could give them pause to reflect, and turn. Distract them.

Imagine, if they actually use the season as they could, some might – for example – recognise they hold grudges against fellow believers. We like few things better than those who pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" ... and will not do just that! We can really use that! In Advent, if they stopped and prayed, some might realise this work of darkness *is* happening, and choose to lay it aside, and actually forgive. Don't let them get near that, for badness' sake.

And just as important, do not let them imagine their faith has implications in the world around them, which Advent might give them cause to reflect on too.

We are currently working such dark wonders in their world, encouraging hatred and fear, getting one group to blame another

group, race or religion for their woes (when reality is of course never so absurdly simple). We are doing so well, currently. We do not want Christians to awaken from any sleepiness about *this* and become vocal in calling for the things their Christmas-master would: love, generosity, kindness, wisdom. We are making such strides, I have real hopes of a new Dark Age for the world, with hatred and ignorance reigning, and discrimination, hunger and war coming.

Do they “know what time it is” in relation to these things? This Advent, don’t let them realise it, nor awaken to our wiles here.

CONCLUSION

Well, I think I have made our aims and our approach clear, Wormwood, have I not?

Never forget, we *want* their souls. The Enemy has already purchased them in his foulest trick of all; (we will talk about Easter another day); but we can prevent them *knowing* this. Advent is a dangerous time, if they use it to wake up to the Enemy’s total, absurd love for them.

So, turn the seeming success of Christmas into the rout of Advent! Keep them shopping, stressing, rushing, sleeping – anything but praying or reflecting.

Oh – and do not leave this letter lying around; Satan-forbid they should realise this is how we play them.

Your Affectionate Uncle,
Screwtape.

“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.” Amen.