

Well we've made it to the new church year, it doesn't feel like a new year because our secular calendar is counting down, counting down to Christmas, counting down to the end of school years, the end of the working year, counting down to summer holidays for many people, but our focus is on a new year, what is to come. Like with much in scripture we hold together what has gone before with what is yet to come.

We approach advent as a season of preparation, both in the sense of preparing to celebrate the historical event of the birth of Jesus and the fulfilment of prophecies from of old, but also in the sense of preparing to come face to face with Jesus in our future as scripture clearly states. So, all at once we are in a season remembering what is past and at the same time looking forward to what is to come.

Now the easy part of that is the 1<sup>st</sup> purpose of advent, preparing to celebrate the event of Jesus' birth. It's easy because it has happened. We know the story, it was foretold for centuries that a special intervention of God, a messiah, would come into the world and our reading from Jeremiah gives us a glimpse of one such prophecy. That a branch would sprout from the line of David to do what is right amongst God's people. We see the fulfilment of that prophecy in Jesus, the child born from descendants of the house of David, in the town of David, just so there could be no confusion.

We know how that story unfolded, we know that not everyone recognised Jesus for who he was but those who were looking found him, right from the beginning. Shepherds and wise men were the first to discover something special about the child and many others throughout his life came to know the truth. They linked back to the prophecies in their minds and realised this was the messiah they were waiting for, when they wrote his story down in the gospels, they even mentioned the prophecies which related to him. We don't need to get caught up in the signs when we celebrate what has gone before, God's purpose has already been worked out before our eyes and we are left with the simple proposal, accept or reject Jesus as the Christ.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> purpose of Advent is far more important, but far more difficult. This requires us to be like those first disciples had been before Jesus came into their lives, we have to be ready, waiting, looking for signs because we have no idea when our time to encounter face to face our saviour will be. Jesus tries to tell us in the gospel reading that just as it was when he came into the world, so shall it be when he returns, there will be signs, just like in nature one season follows another and sprouting leaves are a sign to all who see them that summer is near, so it will be when the kingdom of God comes near. This is difficult, how do we know when a sign is THE sign? There have been disasters, tsunamis, earthquakes. There have been tumultuous periods of human history, all of which we are told will be signs of the coming of the Son of man in glory, but it hasn't happened yet.

So how shall we be ready, what can we do to prepare. Jesus answers the question he himself raises. He tells us not to become despondent or weighed down with life's worries, because when we get caught up in the minutiae of life's little problems we no longer see the big picture. Just like when we work on intricate craft projects or get into a good book we can lose track of time and even fail to notice when the light

grows dim, so it is in our spiritual lives. If we focus in on the physical, getting bogged down with worry and worldly things, we will be unable to perceive the spiritual things that are necessary for our wellbeing.

We also must pray, Jesus says, pray that we will escape the tumult and that we will be able to stand before the Son of man. This is a prayer for confidence, a prayer for calming of the nerves. Just like when we speak publicly, in order to be confident before Jesus we need to be prepared, to know what we are all about, to know our audience and through prayer we build up a relationship with Jesus whereby meeting him becomes an encounter with an old friend rather than a terrifying ordeal before a distant and unknown ruler.

But more than anything, we need to remember that God doesn't operate in the way we might expect. If there is one thing we can learn from the 1<sup>st</sup> advent period, it is that those who were watching and waiting had a fixed idea of what they were looking for which was pretty far from what they got. They were expecting a powerful king, we got an itinerant preaching carpenter. They were expecting righteousness to look like the overthrowing of the Roman occupiers, we got a messiah preaching love and forgiveness and indeed anything but force and violence. They were expecting someone chosen by God to speak in his name, we got God incarnate, the word made flesh.

God did not approach the problems facing humanity with a solution anyone on earth expected. There is no reason to think that any future intervention will suit our imaginations and predictions either. So, I ask again, how shall we be prepared?

The answer hasn't changed either, we remain hopeful, just like the hope represented by the first candle on the advent wreath. Living in the Hope of God's promise will bring us inner peace and even joy despite the difficulties facing the world and even our own lives at this time. Living in hope allows us to rise above our own minutiae of anxiety and look at the bigger picture, the eternal picture, of which we are just one small element.

We also pray, we maintain our relationship with Jesus, we keep it real and personal and we listen as well as speak. Prayer will lead to other things, it will deepen our faith, focus our bible reading, call us into loving action as we give ourselves more and more into God's service. We will do it in the encounters we have throughout advent, catching up with various friends and family at end of year wind up meals and meetings. In all these things we make ourselves ready to stand before the king of Glory, our route has been made clear by the grace of God, our actions through prayer and gospel living are what give us the confidence to take that route.

May your advent season be a time of hope, peace, love and joy as you make time to prepare not only to celebrate what has already been, but to prepare ourselves for that which has yet to come.