

Bishop Simon's Advent message, 2021

THE HOPE THING

The Church cannot avoid talk of the end of all things, because Jesus, Peter and Paul spoke about it frequently. When you look closely at what they said, however, it becomes clear they were talking about how we live as followers of Christ now, in the light of our future hope. Speculation about the mystery of Revelation is discouraged. After all, the present is the only sphere in which God can meet with us.

As a season, Advent helps us prepare for the coming of Christ – not just his first coming as a child, but his coming reign as king. The next few weeks give us a chance to reflect on how we live for God in the light of Christ's first advent and his second advent. Or at least they would do if our culture didn't get in the way because the season of Advent has been ruthlessly flattened by the steamroller of commercialism.

Gosh, only X more days to Christmas! This always puts the skids under us as there is so much to do. Advent has become a merciless countdown clock, with presents to buy and wrap, decorations to put up and food and drink to stockpile like it *is* an apocalypse. Apologise if I've made your blood pressure rise as you read, but these are the constraints we live with each year.

Advent is more than a pitiless countdown to Christmas; it has its own intrinsic merit – like Lent – in being a penitential season. In a noisy, high maintenance world which deprives us of space to think beyond the next Zoom, Advent asks us an awkward question: am I prepared to meet God? Jesus said: *keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come...What I say to you I say to all: keep awake (Mark 13: 35 and 37).*

Jesus calls us to travel lightly through this world, but instead we walk down the path of life with our worries burdening us like an excess of bulky plastic bags cutting into our fingers.

It is unrealistic to revolutionise our lives in one easy move. But there are steps to be made, as individual Christians and as parish churches.

Just one personal commitment to keep Advent as it was meant to be kept is enough. Perhaps it is an act of generosity to someone who won't return the favour. Maybe it's time to sign up to a homeless charity or a development agency. Perhaps it's a commitment to pray for peace in Ethiopia or Sudan. Or to intercede for Uighur prisoners in the grotesque re-education camps of Xinjiang. Maybe it's visiting an elderly person rather than going shopping one Saturday. It could be committing to spend a short time each day with God – the Reflections for Advent from Archbishop Stephen Cottrell and Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani could be a good place to start.

When we offer hope, we receive it back in spades. And the hope we have isn't a wishful projection into the future, a whimsical punt that things will be better one day. Hope is all around us, in the now. It is the sign of the future breaking into the present - of the kingdom of God drawing near - and it comes in different shapes and at different speeds. At one time, it can be like watching a plant slowly unfurl; at others, like fireworks lighting up the dark night. The resurrection of Jesus assures us of a new creation disrupting and one day replacing the old.

And we are part of that new creation.

Last Christmas was the pits for lots of people, let's face it. In the south-east, we had been locked down for nearly two months already, with many months to follow; local infection rates were through the roof but we didn't really know why; a lethal global variant was incubating in Kent. And then the family Christmas was cancelled at the last minute. Our churches were patchily open and people were afraid to mix.

It's not as if the pandemic has disappeared, but this Christmas there is a chance to make up.

This year, the Church of England's Christmas theme invites us to explore and share with others what is 'At the heart of Christmas'.

We are learning many things through this global crisis, but one enduring truth is there is nothing more valuable in life than the relationships we make. We get enough of stuff eventually, but never of people, and not just those we are close to. It should not surprise us, since Jesus told us these relationships are, ahem, the whole point of life:

Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

Making space for each of these relationships should be the heart of our preparations for Christmas 2021. Communities have been separated, afraid, deprived. There is a different witness to be made, a welcome to be offered, and an everlasting God to be craved.

Bishop Simon Burton-Jones

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