

Order of Service

First Sunday of Advent

29th November 2020



Worship led by Ishbel Smith
Music from Martin Petty

Welcome and Announcements

Call to worship

Hymn 189 – Be Still for the presence of the Lord vs 1& 3

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.

Come, bow before him now, with reverence and fear.

In him no sin is found, we stand on holy ground.

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place,

He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace.

No work too hard for him, in faith receive from him;

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

David J Evans, 1986 Thankyou Music

Opening prayer and The Lord's Prayer

We ask this in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray:

ALL: Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 40: 28-31

Luke 1: 5-25

Reflection

I have a confession to make.

I am going home after this service to put up a Christmas tree. Those of you who know me may be a little surprised as it is a fact universally acknowledged that I am a bit of a Christmas snob. While I love - like really love – Christmas decorations, I have always clung to the rule that they must not be put up until considerably nearer Christmas than this, the first Sunday of advent.

And yet I have a feeling that by the end of today, our house will be as festooned as the main hall of Jenners. And I cannot wait.

I cannot wait. Why this year in particular can I – and my children – literally not wait to put up our Christmas decorations? Why this year are the Christmas lights up early in many homes and why are most people actually pleased to see them?

Well, I think its fair to say that it might that little thing called COVID that has changed so much about 2020 not least how early we start decking our halls. What's wrong with a little light and brightness this year even if it is a little early?

While hindsight is of course 2020 vision (see what I did there) I suspect when most of us first heard of the virus way back in February we never seriously thought it would have such an impact on our planning for this most traditional of festivals, Christmas. Our celebrations of Christmas are indeed mainly about tradition. Every family has their own tradition – where the stockings are hung; when you open the presents; what food gets put on the table; when you eat and whether you listen to the Queen's speech or not.

Traditions are important to us – they connect us to our past, they remind us of the importance of passing on good things to future generations, they make us feel secure, safe and stable. We look forward every year to this festival because of the traditions that lie at its heart.

Of course, I don't need to remind you that the season of Advent is all about waiting for Christmas. What is your experience of waiting in advent like normally? While yes there can be stresses and strains about shopping, gift wrapping and working out who's turn it is to cook the turkey, normally we enjoy the waiting for Christmas because normally we think we know what we are waiting for.

But whatever Christmas is going to look like this year – whoever we end up having over the door, however we plan to share food and gifts and whether or not we have an open air dinnertable or zoom style dining experience – the Christmas we are

waiting for in this 2020 advent is going to be different. For most of us, perhaps for the very the first time, we do not know what kind of Christmas we are waiting for. When preparing for this service, I did some reading about our traditions. I thought I was fairly clever knowing that many of them and indeed the date for Christmas came about primarily due to their close connections with the pagan festival of the equinox. But what intrigued me was that some scholars believe that advent originally had very little connection with Christmas. Instead it was a season of preparation for the baptism of new Christians at the January feast of Epiphany. During this season of preparation, Christians would spend 40 days in penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare for this celebration. It was Lenten in style and discipline.

By the 6th century, however, Roman Christians had tied Advent to the coming of Christ. But the “coming” they had in mind was not Christ’s first coming in the manger in Bethlehem, but his second coming in the clouds as the judge of the world. It was not until the Middle Ages that the Advent season was explicitly linked to Christ’s first coming at Christmas.

In other words, if you had asked early Christians in 420 – what are you waiting for in advent – they would have said “baptism”. If you had asked Roman Christians in 720, they would have said “Christ’s second coming”. It wasn’t until less than a thousand years ago that Christians might have answered – “I am waiting for Christmas” when you asked them.

So – as a 2020 Christian, what are you waiting for in this 2020 advent? What are we all waiting for?

As humans, we don’t like waiting when we don’t know what we are expecting. While we know in our heads that we can’t control anything, we still like to pretend we do. That’s maybe why the festival of Christmas is so important to us – there is enough of the same routine each year – enough of the same tradition to feel as if we are in control of something.

If covid has reminded us of anything, it is that we are not in control of anything. This Christmas makes that all too painfully clear.

So how as humans – and as Christians – do we respond to this enforced waiting for the unexpected?

When I originally planned this service, I thought we would read how Mary responded to the visitation of the angel – after all, if anyone had an unexpected Christmas it was her.

But instead I found myself drawn to the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. They also found themselves with unexpected news but instead for something they had waited for all their lives. How did they react?

Well, there's a few things to notice here. Firstly, when the couple are introduced to us they are described as a couple who lived blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. If ever there was a couple who would have followed the coronavirus legislation to the letter, this was them. Yet despite following the rules, they still didn't get what they were waiting for – they still didn't have a child. Yet they did not abandon God in all that apparently wasted waiting. Zechariah still served as a priest and indeed it was in the temple that the angel appeared to him to tell him that his prayer had been heard. In other words, despite their age, despite the apparent futility of still waiting for a baby, he still entrusted God with his prayer – he still hoped. He hoped even for something that he didn't believe was possible. He told the angel that and was struck dumb because of that disbelief. It wasn't belief then that carried him through – it was his hope.

His hope that against all evidence, God would still be there to listen. His hope that God would still be there to give generously to him and his wife. His hope that for God all things were possible, even when he himself believed it impossible.

What do you hope for this advent? What is it about Christ's coming – as a poor vulnerable persecuted baby in a manger that gives you hope, even when you struggle to believe, even as you struggle to wait for an unknown future?

2020 has all too often been compared to a campaign of war. Far too many analogies have been expressed with the world wars and so I apologise if I continue this trend but I couldn't help but think of one of my favourite theologians, a man called Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote extensively about what waiting in advent meant.

Except this young man wrote most about it from a Nazi prison cell where he was imprisoned as a passionate advocate against his fuhrer for two years – a prison cell from which he was taken and executed aged 39, 10 days before the fall of the Reich. For two advents he sat in a cell with literally no idea what Christmas for him would be like. If I had time (and don't worry, I know I don't!) I would read all that he had to say to you about it. It's inspiring. Instead, I will suffice with two quotes for you to ponder:

Firstly, in a letter to his parents, he wrote this:

"We can, and should also, celebrate Christmas despite the ruins around us...I think of you as you now sit together with the children and with all the Advent decorations--as in earlier years you did with us. We must do this, even more intensively because we do not know how much longer we have"

Secondly, in a letter to his fiancée he said:

Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas-tide. We shall both experience a few dark hours--why should we disguise that from each other? We shall ponder the incomprehensibility of our lot and be assailed by the question of why, over and above the darkness already

enshrouding humanity, we should be subjected to the bitter anguish of a separation whose purpose we fail to understand...

And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.

What kept Bonhoeffer going? Was it the same hope that took Zechariah back to the temple to worship and pray to God? Was it the certain hope of a love, the scale of which we cannot imagine? A love that we wait for? A love that we celebrate at Christmas time.

Hoping in the heart of waiting. Believing in the face of the unknown is what our faith – our God – promises. This is what Christmas brings, no matter how that Christmas looks and no matter how we can celebrate it. Hope that in the face of darkness that love is ever present, that God is there and that – despite everything – he comes to be with us wherever and whoever we are.

But what will sustain us in our waiting until we meet that love at Christmas time? Well, that's where the words of Isaiah maybe keep us in that place of hope even when we feel too tired to believe that love will indeed conquer all.

“The lord is the everlasting God – he does not faint or grow weary – he gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless – those who wait for the lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles and they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

However weary we feel this advent, however uncertain we are about the future, however unsure we are about the promises of our faith this is perhaps what this particularly uncertain advent can remind us of. Love will come at Christmas. Let us pray that the strength of God sustains and enriches us all as we wait in hope for God's presence that this Christmas will bring to us all.

Amen

Hymn 273 Come O Come Emmanuel

O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O come, thou Lord of might, who to thy tribes, on Sinai's height,
In ancient times didst give the law in cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell thy people save, and give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, thou Key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery:
Rejoice! rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

John Mason Neale, 1818-66

Responding to God's word

Our offerings are given for the ministry and mission of the church. If you wish to make an offering, please place your envelope in the plate at the front door as you exit the Church building. Contributions can also be made via the 'Donate' button on the Church website.

Prayer of thanksgiving and dedication

Hymn Those who wait on the Lord x2

Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall rise upon wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint: help us, Lord; help us, Lord, in your way.

Rev. Douglas Coleman

Blessing

Receive the blessing of God and go in peace: