

Sunday 3rd December 2023 (Advent 1)

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Advent 1

Advent is a time of preparing for a new baby, a time to create space for reflection and wonder.

As we begin our preparations, preparing to make space for this new baby, we open boxes and discover treasure from the past, reminders of stories and times shared, of past times and times past. There will be stories that challenge, stories of change, pain as well as joy.

Advent God, **in our preparations challenge us.**

May we be a discerning people, recognising that on a journey we cannot carry everything. As we discover more may we accept when something has had its time and learn to let go.

Advent God, **in our preparations challenge us.**

In our preparations may we see your glory in the everyday, glimpses of wonder in the ordinary, and the promise of hope in each moment of life.

Advent God, **in our preparations challenge us.**

As we light this, our first Advent candle, may we let go of what swamps us and serves no purpose for us, so that we can meet the challenges that lie ahead of us.

May our ordinary lives be enriched by your extraordinary love for us. **Amen**

Readings

1 Corinthians 1:2-3A & 4-9 ([JB Phillips](#))

Mark 13:24-37 ([JB Phillips](#))

Reflection

On the first Sunday in Advent the Lectionary year changes, we have been following year A with its emphasis on Matthew but from today we follow year B with an emphasis on Mark. Mark's was the first gospel written, probably between 60 and 70 CE, and it is widely thought that both Matthew and Luke used Mark's gospel as a source for their own writings with many similar stories in all three.

Two and three weeks ago Matthew gave us parables from Jesus which were about being ready for the end of times, and in our reading from Mark today we have a similar theme, the return of Jesus being seen as the end of the world as we know it. Mark was writing at a time when it was still widely accepted that Jesus would return and everyone would be judged, and this would happen soon. The same theme is found in our reading from 1 Corinthians, written around 50 CE, Jesus will return. Matthew was writing after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and it was becoming harder to be as certain about the return of Jesus in the immediate future. Mark and Matthew are both keen to point out that no one knows when exactly Jesus will return, and use this to encourage their readers to be prepared.

Preparation is a key theme of Advent but what are we preparing for? Many people see it as preparation for Christmas and Advent calendars encourage this idea but in the church calendar it is a time of preparation for the second coming of Jesus. These days the notion of the second coming is highly debated and for many it has become a bit of a red herring. Originally it was associated with the release from oppressive government, release from captivity and a general judgement involving punishment. These days it is widely accepted that the Old Testament concept of judgement is about being put right with God, about oneness in God. This is something which Jesus talked a lot about, and which many of his

parables encouraged his listeners to think about, and today many see the second coming as being linked to the moment when someone commits to following the way of Jesus rather than some apocalyptic world event.

For many Advent has taken on a new meaning and is about taking time out to review and evaluate our journey in God. Journeys are meant to go somewhere but often the period of Advent seems to symbolise a journey which is going round in circles and perhaps the emphasis on waiting, which is very much part of second coming idea, has confused things. We tend to do the same things Advent after Advent rather than preparing for moving forward in our journey. Preparation has an active emphasis and is associated with being aware, alert, attentive and awake. It is about making the most of life and living in the moment. So how can we use this time to refocus and move forward?

We can take time to look back at the plans we had for the past year and evaluate the outcomes. Very rarely does everything go to plan, situations change, our actions have unforeseen results and take us down a new path, sometimes world events overtake our plans. However we can still learn from our experience and use that learning for future planning but a word of caution – we should not allow ourselves to become so focussed on future events that we fail to be spontaneous and respond to God's signposts. God's guidance comes in many different guises and often takes us by surprise.

- God's guidance attracts us, challenges us but leaves us free to choose.
- It happens when we are simply doing what we have planned, it can be part of an ordinary day but we have to be looking out, alert and attentive.
- Stepping off the well trodden path can be a bit scary so we need to learn to trust God even when we cannot see the outcome clearly.
- Recognising God involves all our senses.
- When we choose to follow God's guidance it will feel right, although sometimes it will lead us where we might not want to go, new things can be frightening.
- God's guidance is never just about me but is part of an awareness of oneness and is about building a relational, interdependent world.

Advent is also a time to explore our ongoing relationship with God and like all relationships we have to work to deepen that relationship. There is a difference between knowing about God and knowing God, one is theoretical and we can find the answers in a book whilst the other is practical and involves time and effort. Sometimes it feels like a game of hide and seek as we glimpse God briefly and then lose sight again but that is an important part of the journey.

There is a story told of a conversation God had with the angels. God was looking for the right place to hide, knowing that humans needed a journey to grow into their oneness. The first angel suggested he hide at the deep in the earth but God said no humanity will learn how to mine and discover me too quickly. Another angel suggested God hide on the moon but after some thought God again said no, humanity will learn to fly through space and explore the moon and find before they have grown enough. There was a pause whilst everyone thought and then another angel timidly suggested God should hide in the hearts of humans, they would never think of looking there. God clapped his hands and said perfect. We look everywhere to discover what we think is God but it takes us a long time to think of looking inwards to God in our hearts but the journey is about our growth in love and wonder that enables our understanding of our oneness with God.

Perhaps it is about being more aware of God's presence around and within us, and living that as a reality, and that is about choices. Advent is a time to commitment to living, loving choices. God's guidance is always about being better, and thinking of others, loving others as if they were ourselves. Advent gives us space to consider how we could have chosen

better. The nature of God is always to lead us towards a greater fullness of our humanity, to be the best that we can be, and that starts with our choices. Everyone has a choice, although in our flawed world some have more choice than others. As Dumbledore said to Harry Potter it is how we use our choices that matter.

To make the best choice requires us to be aware of the lesser options, the temptations that would distract us and take us away from God. We have all been tempted, but we are always forgiven, however we are also encouraged to learn from every experience. Choosing life in all its fullness is not a once and for all choice but a series of choices and something that we grow into as we come to know God within us better. How do we know we have made the best choice – we will feel in tune with ourselves whether the choice was large or small, we will know we have made a difference, brought good from bad and better from good. Alternatively when we are tempted and make a lesser choice we will feel at odds with ourselves, something will niggle deep within us.

Advent then is about space, preferable every day like a time advent calendar, to reflect on our journey, assess our awareness and readiness seek God in every aspect of life, and to commit to being more aware and alive to the choices we make. To consider how to live in God and make the best choice that we can in any given moment. To prepare for the next stage of our journey with renewed commitment to growing in our relationship with God.

Story – Becoming Me by Martin Boroson ([Watch here](#))

We are not alone for we are held in the love which is God and united with others who are also called into the way of life that is love. It can be hard to stand out, it takes courage, but that is what being a follower of Jesus means and it is what gives us strength.