Advent talk for Antioch

December 2022

I don’t know about you but I always struggle to still myself enough to enter into the Advent season in the way that I’d like to…I’m too busy rushing around before Christmas. If only it could be at another time of year!!

And yet there is so much in this beautiful season of the Church year that invites me and all of us to still ourselves and to draw closer to God …

As the Advent weeks progress, we hear in the church readings more and more about the beauty and majesty of the One that we are waiting for. The Gospel readings all talk about the events leading up to the birth of Jesus and as we read about Mary, Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth there is a strong sense of God’s spirit at work in all the events and responses to them. In other readings from Isaiah there is a sense longing and expectation and hope around the coming of the Messiah and a growing inner stillness and joy as we realise that he for whom we are waiting has already arrived and speaks to us in the silence of our hearts.

Above all Advent is a season of hope and this is the focus of my talk. Hope is described in Scripture as the anchor of the souls and this reminds me of Linda Perry, who always loved a hymn that started “Will the anchor hold”. It held for Linda right until the end of her life and I dedicate to her what I say today.

 Those of you who were at our community anniversary weekend will remember Dan’s excellent talk that was about lamentation and hope and there are a couple of truths that Dan said about hope that I’d like to re-visit today…

## The first is that our hope is fundamentally oriented to the life of the age to come, not to this life only.

Advent derives from the Latin word “Adventus” meaning coming and during Advent Christians are celebrating 2 comings of Christ - we remember the first coming of Jeus, the long-awaited Messiah and revisit the expectancy around his coming and as we do so, we grow in longing for his Second Coming.

Dan reminded us that the New Testament speaks of the Kingdom of God as both "Already and Not Yet…

 The kingdom of God was brought near through Jesus the word incarnate, his life, death and resurrection; we taste of it now as we follow him and live in community and share the gospel, but it’s in the future that the kingdom will be fully realised: it will come in glory when Jesus the king hands it over to his Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead – this is a line from the Apostles Creed that many of us regularly say at church. He will come again, the just judge.

So we hope, over-and-above everything else, for the "not yet", the fulfilment of all things, for the time when Christ will come again, when sin and death will be destroyed.

The book of Revelation, the vision of John, points forward to this time of judgement and the Second Coming and gives us a vision of the life and worship of heaven and the time when we will be fully with the Lord:

The picture given in Revelation is beyond all that we can yet imagine:

*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them…He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*

*He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making all things new!”*  **Revelation 21: 2-5**

This is our hope, this is where it’s going – being with the Lord fully with every tear wiped away.

One of the Advent readings from Isaiah 11 also foretells the coming of the Lord and of his judgement and justice which will lead to a kingdom of peace. There is a beautiful picture given of utter peace and harmony in creation:

*The wolf will lie down with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat…the infant will play near the hole of the cobra…*

*They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,*

*For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord*

*As the mountains cover the sea* **Isaiah 11: 6-9**

One day there will be no longer any need for safeguarding, for protecting the vulnerable, but all will be safe and all will be well.

 In Ephesians 5 25-27, Paul writes*: Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless* **Ephesians 5: 25-27**

This is the bride of Christ beautifully dressed for her husband – a Church that will one day be without spot or blemish, no more scandals, reflecting Christ purely and in every way

Likewise Peter, speaking about the second coming, urges us to speed this coming by living holy lives and uses similar language to Paul*: So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this… make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.* **2 Peter: 14**

This is ultimately what we are praying for when we pray, “Thy kingdom come”, this is the cry of the Spirit and the Bride in the last chapter of Revelation. This is our cry too as we embrace our ultimate hope: “Maranatha…Come Lord Jesus!”

# Exercising hope…

This is where we are heading and in the meantime we live between these two Comings of Christ, in the not- yet and here is where we need to exercise hope.

Dan said that hope is one of the 3 theological virtues along with faith and love that are so-called because they come from God as a grace and they are directed back to God. Hope is a disposition of the mind that directs us back to God over and above the circumstances we are in. And hope, like any virtue, can be practised and becomes a habit that grows in us. We grow in hope by exercising the virtue of hope in all the various situations in which we find ourselves. As Dan said, hope begets hope

So what does the Advent season offer us as we seek to grow in hope and what are some of the ways we can exercise our hope muscles which will allow us as individuals and as a community to receive the grace that God wants to give us at this time?

1. One posture we can adopt is alertness…

In our church, Advent begins with this wake-up call from Jesus in the gospels, using the parable of the man who is not prepared for a burglar in his home…

*Therefore be alert, since you don’t know what day your Lord is coming. But know this: if the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed alert and not let his house be broken into. That is why you must be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect*

**Matthew 24: 42-44**

The call here is to be ready, to keep watch, not to fall asleep at the wheel and it is a similar call that is addressed to the churches in the book of Revelation.

 Perhaps we have had the experience of being blind-sided by life storms that seem to come from nowhere and take us by surprise; we’ve also had such experiences in our community life

Example of our deceased dog Alfie, always on high alert…

However, we are not meant to live our lives in a perpetual state of nervous tension…what ‘s going to happen next, looking for the next besetting difficulty, hardly daring to breathe. We are invited to be neither complacent or anxious, but to be awake and with Jesus, remembering that in every storm, He is there in the boat with us. This is one of the invitations of the Advent season to be awake and alert for his coming again and yet to be aware that we are not left alone, that Jesus is still present with us by his Spirit, with us always.

But the invitation to keep watch implies that some waiting will be involved… in Advent we remember that we are in the not-yet, the time between the 2 comings….

## So another invitation in Advent is to watch and wait well….

Most of us don’t do so well with waiting. In our fast-past lives we struggle to wait for the bus, in the checkout queue, in traffic that isn’t moving.

And then there are the more significant waits – for the reply to a job application, for exam results, for the result of a scan or biopsy, for the right relationship to come, for the baby to be born, for the rift to heal. Some of these waits are accompanied by joyful expectation; others by fear and dread.

And there is also waiting for God to show up. Perhaps you are here today and feeling close to God and desiring to come closer still; or perhaps God feels very far away to you at the moment and prayer is dry.

Advent is a time of waiting, a time of waiting in hope.

There can be suffering and pain involved in waiting and it is in this place that our hearts need to be healed and strengthened. The apostle James uses a wonderful image from nature when he writes about the patience needed as we wait:

***Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until he receives the early and the late rains. You must also be patient. Strengthen, your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near* – James 5: 7-8**

I love this image of a farmer waiting for this crop and at peace that the various rains will need to come first and in the Message translation it describes the farmer in this way…***Patiently letting the rain do its slow but sure work. Be patient like this. Stay steady and strong…***

 This passage helps us realise the need for patience in various waits in our lives, over which we have little control; we are invited to be like the farmer trusting that the rains will come and to put our hope in the goodness and providence of God, even when it’s hard to understand his timing and his ways. Easier said than done of course and it’s worth remembering that the word patience comes from the word “patior” which means to suffer and it links with perseverance. A few verses later in that passage from James we are reminded:

*You have heard of Job’s perseverance and seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy*. **James 5:11**

One way we can practise hope in a time of waiting is to hold on to the encouragement from God’s word. The desert monks and sisters of the fourth century would seek out a word of Scripture that they would ponder, meditate, ruminate on, a word that would nourish them throughout their day. As monasteries developed, Scripture would be read aloud in community and once a monk heard the word or phrase that resonated with him, he would take that word to his cell to dwell with (practice known as Lectio Divina). We too can space in our hearts for God’s word, perhaps something very simple that we can receive and put on with hope and allow it to deepen in us. We can also do this as a community with the words that we hear from the Lord together…allow them to grow as we reflect on them – example.

### There is another verse in Scripture that I have always loved and it is a verse of hope: who dares despise the day of small things Zechariah 4:10 and this is -another invitation to us in Advent

It is often in small ways that this inner transformation takes place. The Advent reading in Isaiah 11 that I referred to earlier and which has such a vast description of the future kingdom, starts with something very small…

***A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom* Isaiah 11:1**

Henri Nouwen in an Advent reflection comments on this striking image in this way:

*Our Salvation comes from something small, tender, and vulnerable, something hardly noticeable. God, who is the Creator of the Universe, comes to us in stillness, weakness and hiddenness.*

*I find this a hopeful message. Somehow, I keep expecting loud and impressive events to convince me and others of God’s saving power; but over and over again, I am reminded that spectacles, power plays and big events are the ways of the world. Our temptation is to be distracted by them and made blind to the* ***shoot that shall sprout from the stump,***

*When I have no eyes for the small signs of God’s presence – the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, the words of encouragement and gestures of love offered by friends – I will always remain tempted to despair.*

*The work of salvation takes place in the midst of a world that continues to shout, scream and overwhelm us with its claims and promises. But the promise is hidden in the shoot that sprouts from the stump, a shoot that hardly anyone notices*

So in the midst of any suffering and temptation to despair that we experience during the waiting times of life, we are invited to notice the small signs of God’s presence that bring us hope in the journey that we are on …. We can practise looking back over our day or our week with the Lord and notice the small shoots that are sprouting up and allow ourselves to take heart and grow in hope as we live life more gratefully.

## d. Walking on tip toes is another Advent hope practice…

On the first Sunday of Advent I attended an online Mass with our elderly Mum and the sermon was about approaching Advent with an attitude of eager longing and the image used was of standing on tiptoe. The Philips translation of Romans 8: 19 put is like this:

The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the sons of God coming into their own…

Advent is walking on tip toes with an expectation that something longed-for is about to happen, but like a parent going into a child’s room and realising the child is asleep and all is well, tiptoeing out again. Like that parent, we don’t want to get in the way. We are invited to a posture of standing back and leaving space for God do what only God can … an attitude of reverent expectation.

Example of Cathy Stayne and how she lived like this, her delight was in letting God be God…

 Even while we want to keep both feet firmly on the ground in the midst of all the realities of our present circumstances, we are invited in Advent to tip toe time…

 It is a wonderful time to take a retreat or to plan one for the new year or to develop a pattern of life that leaves space for God, for listening for God’s voice and waiting upon the Lord.

Another practice might be to reflect on where in my life am I doing something that I can only do by depending on God…

Or a time for awe and wonder as I realise again who God is and that there is no limit to God’s mercy or to God’s power to make all things new. This is a time to fall on my knees and to hear the angel voices for nothing is impossible with God.

 Tip toe time.

### Humility

A posture of humility leaves space for God to be God in our lives.

Another beautiful Advent passage that prophecies the coming of Christ, the child born for us, the king of justice and righteousness states this:

*Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end* **Isaiah 9:7**

May there indeed be no end to the increase of his government and peace in our lives, in our relationships, in our service, in our families, in our community….

John the Baptist, featured in the Advent readings as the precursor of Christ and sent to prepare his way by preaching repentance, says of Jesus: *He must increase, but I must decrease…*We too unite ourselves to this desire as we come to the Lord in humility at this time *He must increase, but I must decrease…*

We come before the Lord as loved sinners, needing his grace in our lives and we come to a God whose mercy is without end. Example of Holman Hunt picture and here is the verse that it is based on, which is a call to repentance given to the church of Laodicea in **Revelation 3:19**:

*Those who I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me* **Revelation 3:19**

We are invited to repent in this season, to get smaller…, to decrease in the sense of humbling ourselves and letting go of our pride and ego and to increase in the sense of making space in our lives for God to be God, to receive and to exercise faith, hope and love. True repentance is not scrupulosity and false guilt about our sin, but it’s a step of humility following a conviction from the Holy Spirit that bring us straight back to God’s heart and leads to joy and freedom and communion with Christ, eating with him and he with me.

# Conclusion

Exercising hope, allowing our hearts to be enflamed by the beauty and majesty of the One we are waiting for in Advent and longing for Him to come again will help us to take heart at this time and to let God be God again. At the end of Isaiah 40, there is a beautiful exhortation which we often sing:

*Do you not know?*

*Have you not heard?*

*The Lord is the everlasting God,*

*The Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He will not grow tired or weary..*

*He gives strength to the weary*

*And increases the power of the weak…*

*Those who hope in the Lord*

*Will renew their strength*

*They will soar on wings like eagles;*

*They will run and not grow weary,*

*They will walk and not be faint* **Isaiah 40:28-31**

Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. Come Lord Jesus!