

Advent is about expectation: so what are you expecting this Advent? One thing is certain, it will be different to what you normally expect.

Perhaps you are usually bracing yourself for the expense of present buying, parties and a bulging fridge?

Perhaps you would by now be getting excited about gathering with family and friends – or looking forward to singing your favourite carols, to candlelit church services and the joy of Christmas day?

This year all our Christmas plans are drastically scaled back and the anticipation of the familiar is replaced with apprehension about the unknown. Just how will it feel? What will we be able to do safely? How will we get through January without the brightness of a traditional Christmas?

The Old Testament prophecies we read in Advent are full of foreboding and apprehension. After returning from exile in Babylon, Isaiah bemoans the anti-climax of life in Jerusalem. God had promised to restore Israel and he hasn't. 'You have hidden your face from us... because of our sins' he writes (Is.64.7). But God's promise was fulfilled – 500 years later in the birth of his Son.

So our first expectation is of a joyful celebration: Christ's birthday – Christ – mas!

In our gospel reading Jesus is looking forward to the end times and a series of extraordinary events. He has already forecast the destruction of Jerusalem and now he says that heaven itself will collapse as the Son of Man comes with power and glory to judge the world.

'the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

In comparison to that our pandemic seems quite a minor matter.

Our second expectation therefore is of upheaval on a massive scale and of Christ returning. Which is why we say during our Communion service,

Christ has died
Christ is risen
Christ will come again

2,000 years may have dulled our expectation of this second coming but it is central to Christian teaching – and it is central too to Advent. God is both loving and just. The world is under judgement. We are accountable for our actions.

And as Mark makes clear, there's no point worrying about how, when or where it will happen – we just need to be ready. Our role is to remain ever watchful and not to be caught napping.

So maybe our third expectation this Advent should be of ourselves, that we should take care to prepare, with both love and justice in mind.

- As you buy presents, think lovingly and prayerfully of those you are buying for...and about those who will receive little this Christmas. Perhaps buy or give something for them too?
- As you prepare food, do the same – and perhaps make a donation to DENS, of food or money
- As you anticipate company, however limited that may be this year, look out for the lonely in your road or among your acquaintances. A kind word, a brief visit (socially distanced) will do so much.

And if you yourself are afraid of loneliness, or you know someone else who is, please contact me or one of our pastoral team and share your concerns.

Perhaps the absence of frenetic activity this Advent may help us to free our minds and our intentions, to turn them outwards towards those in much greater need than us. 'Therefore keep watch' says Jesus. Let us keep watch this Advent for signs of God's kingdom, in the love and generosity we both give and receive, and in the needs of the world which we can help to meet.