

Can you remember the good old days, when NHS finances weren't under such great pressure? At regular intervals you were invited to your GP's surgery for a health check. Well Advent is the spiritual equivalent for Christians; the season of just four weeks when we are invited to reflect on and check out what we actually believe; a time to meet Jesus afresh.

It's a time when we wait for Jesus' arrival. Firstly as a baby in Bethlehem BUT also on his second coming when Jesus will return in glory on judgement day.

Time however, is linear, not cyclical and when that end of time will be, is known only to God, as we are told in verse 32 of Mark's reading:

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”.

IF Jesus, the 'Son' doesn't know when that day will be, how are we expected to know? But coming it certainly is.....just like those other certainties in life.....that night is followed by day.

But we live in dark days, not only because we are approaching the winter solstice but also because the news we read and hear about each and everyday so often seems forbidding and dark.

A small flickering light. We lit it because we are not only a people of hope but also a people of faith; now is the time to check out our faith against the faith of those in the Bible. Because in the Bible we find person after person – demonstrating what faith means.

#### BIBLE READING 1 Hebrews 11: 1-12

We heard about, Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham. They were Old Testament characters who were all commended for their faith; their willingness and obedience to look beyond their own situations. True faith begins with God and one way of measuring the health of our faith is in how we respond to God.

As we heard, Abel responded more worthily to God than his brother Cain and therefore received God's approval.

Enoch responded by living in a way that pleased God.

Noah responded to God's warning by building an ark.

Abraham responded to God's call by setting out for another country.

So the question we need to answer this advent is not how strong is our faith but how should we act on whatever faith we do have?

That is the key measurement of how healthy our faith is. All we need is just enough faith, for us to respond. Just enough for us to place our trust in God.

Let's look at the affirmation of faith on page 2 in our order of service. The words 'believe and trust' are coupled together no less than 7 times. They are absolutely 100% at the heart of being a Christian. That we believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now look immediately below at the intercessions. Each section of David's prayers will end with the word Maranatha. As you can see it means “Come O Lord”. That too is at the heart of Advent; we wait with anticipation for Christ's return.

#### READING 2 Mar 13: 24-37

You can tell Christmas is coming. Not only is every shop full of Christmas decorations but also a number of houses in the village have illuminated Santas and sleighs in their front gardens to distract you as you drive past. Major and minor stores are battling for attention in so called must see TV adverts and promotions. What a waste for all the other stores.....there is only one M and S.....there is only one Paddington Bear!

First century Jews believed they lived in the 'present age' and there would be an 'age to come' after death. Two distinct and separate ages. The present age where evil was pervasive and active and the age to come where God would have put everything right and they would live eternally with him in his restored new creation.

As one world ended, the other would immediately follow, that sudden transformation triggered by a conquering Messiah.

But as St. Paul specifically taught, Jesus' death and resurrection meant that the inauguration of a new creation has already begun. What started on Easter day is continuing until this very day and will not end until Jesus comes in "in glory to judge the living and the dead".

This is the difference which Jesus brought to the table; the present age and future age are no longer two distinct and separate ages and since Jesus' death and resurrection we live in the period between Jesus' first coming and his second coming.

The first time Jesus came he came in weakness and humility. When he comes back he will come with great power and glory as we heard in verse 26.

There are over 300 references in the New Testament to the second coming of Christ. But until then there is the inevitable period of waiting. And during this waiting period our task is quite simple in one sense – Jesus tells us 4 times what we must do:

Verse 23	Be alert
Verse 33	Beware, keep alert
Verse 35	Keep awake
Verse 37	Keep awake

In obedience to Christ's command we must be alert and keep await in anticipation of what is coming. The problem though is that we are not very good at keeping watch.

We aren't very good at waiting because the society we live in wants things NOW. We want our food now...that's why we have microwaves and take aways. We want the latest gizzmo or app upgrade NOW so that we can be the first to show it off to our friends. Football managers are sacked in increasing numbers each year because fans and owners want success NOW.

And what has happened to the anticipation of receiving a carefully and well crafted letter, lovingly sealed in an envelope, addressed, stamped and delivered admittedly several days later by post? Emails, mobile phones, twitter and all sorts of social media demand our attention NOW.

We have simply forgotten how to be patient, to watch and wait. I wonder what our physical and spiritual health would be like if we re-learned the art of silence; re-discovered how to relax, or dedicated one day in seven to rest as God intended us to?

Who knows, maybe I could stretch this sermon to 20 minutes without you getting fidgety and regularly checking your watch.

We do not know when Christ will come again, but until that day arrives how should we behave as we keep watch and wait? Fortunately, Peter gives us a steer.

READING 3 1Peter 4: 7-11

Peter believed Christ's second coming was imminent, and tells us we should live our lives in the light of that return: to be prayerful, to offer constant love to one another; to serve one another using our God given gifts and always to do it for the glory of God. That is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian and is also what we have been trying to encourage throughout this year; to become more like Christ.

We have started our season of Advent by lighting a candle. What I'd encourage you to do is turn your Advent into an Adventure. I'm not going to suggest you do something where you do not know the outcome or you start on a daring enterprise like Indiana Jones. No, something a little more sedate and grounded in Peter's advice in verse 7:

"Be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of prayer"

Each night as you retire I would invite you to be disciplined and sit on the edge of the bed for 1 minute; bring to memory this one small candle's flame and pray silently or out loud that you believe the flame represents the hope that is Jesus who came out of darkness to be the light of the world.

Pray that you are thankful that you are one who shares in the promise that is Jesus.

Pray a commitment that you will keep watch for his second coming. That you are waiting for the Lord.

Waiting is difficult. Waiting and faith go hand in hand. Waiting is also the embodiment of faith and trust.

Don't wait and see. Wait and watch. A mustard seed's worth of faith will see you through, not only till Christmas but till he comes again in clouds with great power and glory.

Amen