

## Counting down... or looking forward?

The season on Advent begins today, and we've lit the first of our four advent candles to recognise that. Of course, Advent is the four Sundays in the lead up to Christmas.

But as well as the season of advent we celebrate in church, there's also the phenomenon that I like to call 'commercial advent'. Commercial advent is the first 24 days of December, and you can go out and buy calendars where you open a section each day and get a present, usually a fairly small piece of chocolate, but there are other options. I strongly recommend Lego advent calendars, but there are also other toy options. And calendars that feature a daily present from things as diverse as coffee pods, whisky, and crystal ornaments.

But advent is here, and so we can get on with building up the excitement as Christmas approaches. Of course, Christmas decorations started going up in the shops, and Christmas themed ads started appearing on tv in early November, carols started being played over PA systems soon after. Lots of Christmas parties have already been held. And over the next twenty-seven days those things will intensify.

And they will intensify until they reach fever pitch on Christmas Eve. And the shops will finally close, and all the presents will be wrapped. And the fridges filled to capacity. And the children will be sleeping soundly...

And then it'll all be over in a flash. The presents torn open. Immense quantities of food consumed. Peace on earth, goodwill to all people.

And then we'll have boxing day! And we can take the boxes and wrapping paper out to our recycling bins, and feast on left overs as we watch the cricket and the yachting.

And then we'll have the wonders of December 27<sup>th</sup>.

Except that December 27<sup>th</sup> doesn't really have that many wonders... and even getting excited about boxing day is stretching things a bit. And so much shuts down after Christmas – workplaces closed.. Lots of smaller shops close. Tradesmen on holidays. Post Christmas TV programming. Social groups in recess.

All sorts of things count down to Christmas... and then nothing. Or if not nothing, then something that is not very exciting. Christmas is the climax. And advent is the countdown to Christmas, right?

Except it's not. At least it's not in the liturgical sense – the church sense.

The word 'advent' means 'coming' – in the sense of 'arrival' or 'beginning' or 'start', and it's the time of the church year when we should be focusing on – and looking forward to – the return of Jesus – his kingdom come - when all that he came to earth to accomplish when he was born as a baby in Bethlehem, will be fulfilled, will be completed.

Our bible readings this morning, from Matthew's gospel and from Paul's letter to the Romans, talk about Jesus' return.

Jesus tells us that “about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” – so we can’t know when it will be, as much as we might like it 'if we could. And neither can anyone else. Although over the 2000 odd years since Jesus’ ascension, many have claimed they did know.

And although we don’t know when it will be Jesus warns us to keep watch (Matt 24:42) and to be ready (Matt 24:44). So we shouldn’t count down to a specific date, but we should look forward to a particular day.

Paul picks up the theme in his letter to the Romans – “And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. (13:11)

Our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. We don’t know when Jesus will return, but we know he will, and we know it gets closer every day. We are one day closer to the day when Jesus will return to put all things right than we were yesterday.

We’re a year closer than we were when we celebrated Advent 2021. When the best part of 2000 years closer than when Paul wrote these words to the Church in Rome.

We can’t count down to it, but we do need to look forward to it, to expect it, and to respond to that expectation. Our reading from Romans began “And do this, understanding the present time”. What is the ‘this’ that Paul tells us we need to do?

We can go back to the verses before our reading – Romans 13, verses 9 and 10: The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

That’s what we need to do. We shouldn’t be living as if this world will last forever. And we shouldn’t be living doing whatever we want for ourselves, without regard for God and without regard for other people.

Paul tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves and then adds ‘love does no harm to a neighbour’.

As we wait for Jesus’ return, we need to be loving our neighbours. And although we all know how central to Christian living loving our neighbours is, it is something that we all struggle with.

So, as we grow in the knowledge and love of God, we need to be consciously – and intentionally – sharing that love with others.

It is hard going, and the state of the world is not conducive to loving our neighbours. Many people won't love us. People will put us down, people will mock us and our faith, people will persecute us. We live in dark times.

But Paul tells us in verse 12 that the night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.

Yes, we live in dark times. Yes, we live in a dark world. But that darkness is going to end... so let's not simply try to endure whatever darkness confronts us, let's not simply try to withdraw from the world. Let's reject the darkness, and live as people of the light.

You are the light of the world, Jesus said. You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:14a, 16)

And here in his letter to the Romans, Paul urges us to put on the armour of light. Armour, of course, was much more common in Paul's time than it is now, and he talks about it not only in his letter to the Romans, but also in his letters to the Thessalonians and the Ephesians. Each time it's a bit different. But each time, he's urging his readers to wear this metaphorical armour to protect themselves. I guess if Paul were writing to 21<sup>st</sup> century he might be urging them to put on the hi-vis vest of light.

In John's first letter, he writes "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." (1 John 1:5-7).

We need to be people of the light. We need to be the light of the world. The source of the light is not us, though. The light comes from God, as we read at the beginning of John's gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. [John tells us] The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-5,9,14)

God's light came into the world in Jesus, and it shines through us today. We need to be showing the world God's light, and showing the world God's love.

And we do that, by living as the people of God. Living as God wants us to live. Trusting in God, trusting in the salvation Jesus has won for us by his death on the cross. Relying not on our own strength, but on God's strength.

At the beginning of verse 13, Paul says “Let us behave decently”. And really, that shouldn’t be a hard thing to do, should it? Behave decently. Do the right thing. When we’re given a choice between light and darkness, then choose light.

Of course, sometimes things aren’t so clear cut. And, of course, sometimes we will do the wrong thing, whether through our own selfishness, or our ignorance, or because we just can’t figure it out for ourselves. But God understands, and because of what Jesus has done for us, we are forgiven – as we’ve reminded ourselves this morning, and as we remind ourselves each week here at church.

Our sins are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

So let us behave decently, as in the daytime (again, in the light), not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

They’re really the things of the world, aren’t they? Drunkenness, sexual immorality and debauchery. It’s pretty easy to go around not murdering, and not stealing, and most people don’t do those things, but there’s other stuff which doesn’t count as ‘behaving decently’ or ‘living honourably’ as other translations put it, which is tolerated – if not accepted, by wider society.

We might not think too much about it, but jealousy is huge in our society. People are often envious of what other people have. To some extent jealousy drives our economy. Keeping up with the Jones’s is an everyday thing for most Australians.

I often contemplate that those who promote ‘Christian values’ will speak out against sexual immorality, but not so often about jealousy or dissension or exploitation. But they are all problems, they are all problems that get between us and the way God wants us to live.

Paul says, in the last verse of our reading from Romans (14), Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

This time the imagery is clothing ourselves with Jesus, and earlier it was the armour of light, but either way, it is about taking on the protection that God offers, instead of following the ways of the world.

Many translations substitute “desires of the flesh” for “desires of the sinful nature” and I remember when we were organising Hazel’s baptism, with her godparents, we went through the questions that they would answer as part of the service part of which was “Do you renounce the...false values of the world and the sinful desires of the flesh?” and David, her prospective godfather, contemplated that for a moment and joked “I don’t know... the sinful desires of the flesh sound pretty appealing to me”.

And clearly, the false values of the world and the sinful desires of the flesh or the desires of the sinful nature are appealing. Because we do see people following them day after day.

Our challenge though, is to not follow them. Some of those ‘sinful desires’ will be easier to resist than others – and our challenges will all be different, and will change over time. But we need to meet those challenges: by clothing ourselves in Jesus, or putting on the armour of light, or whatever imagery speaks to us, but at its heart it is about putting our faith in Jesus.

Not just in what he’s done in his death and resurrection, but what he will do on his return. The return that we can’t count down to – but that we can – and we should – be looking forward to.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:51-52) “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

So we live, day by day, as Christian people, knowing that with each day, Christ’s return is nearer than when we first believed, and that we are one day nearer home.

And we wait. We don’t count down to just a day’s celebration. But we look forward to a bright and everlasting future.

And we wait. We don’t count down to Jesus’ return, but we look forward to it.

And we wait for that trumpet to sound – living in love for each other, trusting in the God who loved us, with hope – that certainty in the future of life with God forever, growing in the knowledge and love of God, and so living like people of the day, having moved out of the night, out of the darkness, to be the people of the light that Jesus brought into the world.

Amen.