

Advent Sunday

Well here we are again, yet another major festival of the Churches year that we have been unable to celebrate fully. Still there seems to be a hopeful change in the air. Many of us are now looking forward to better times, the glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel is not a train coming in the opposite direction but actual daylight!

There is the hope of a vaccine to help us beat this illness. There is the hope of returning to something like a normal life before next summer. There is the hope of being able to visit our loved ones over the Christmas period and there is the hope that we can include hymns in our worship again. Of course, the first time I have to remind you to 'sing up' I will be without mercy and remind you of all the times you have told me about how much you 'miss' singing – BE WARNED!

Advent, of course, is all about looking forward. It has morphed, somewhat, into looking forwards to Christmas, but it is actually about looking forward to the return of Christ. That is the difficult bit – looking forward to an event when you have no idea when it will happen. Remember that feeling we all had in June when there seemed to be no end in sight to the lockdown – yep it's just like that but even more so. Yet, as Christians, we are called to keep looking forward, to be prepared and, as Jesus says himself, KEEP AWAKE!

So how do we do that? How do we keep the fire lit under ourselves?

Thinking about this I believe we have four options. First – we can choose not to do it at all. He hasn't come yet, why the heck should we wait, why should we keep working at it? What's the point? I shall call this group the 'Scrooge' group – Bah! Humbug! This group lives in a self-fulfilling vicious circle. You never feel the presence of Christ because you never bother to seek Christ. You don't see the light and the hope because you never look for the light and the hope. Try this for an image – A man stands on a railway platform for two minutes and no train arrives. He therefore decides there will never be a train, calls everyone else on the platform fools for waiting, and leaves telling everyone else outside the station 'there are no trains'. Of course if he had waited the train would have arrived (I'm thinking that this is the Japanese railway system where trains do turn up and not ours :o)) and his hope and patience would have been rewarded.

To live without any kind of hope is a very dull place to live. I know this from my own experience as an atheist. If you have no vision of a better future you try to fill the present with artificial light – and there are a lot of options out there for those who have given up on hope, most of them self-destructive.

The second option is to approach this with a sense of duty; we stay awake and alert because we are told to, end of story. I will call this group 'the soldiers'. In truth there seem to be a lot of 'soldier' Christians out there; and I kind of respect them while at the same time feel very sorry for them. They stand guard, they do what they feel they are supposed to do – usually very diligently – they keep on marching

and marching and marching. Honourable, upright, courageous BUT rarely with a smile and, heaven forbid, that they might break step and actually begin to dance.

This group have hope but it is placed very much 'in the distant future'. They have lost their awareness of hope in the here and now. I confess that I sometimes find myself marching along with this band. Every now and then I feel myself just going through the motions because that is what I should do. Whenever I recognise this in myself I give myself a big slap, and sit myself down for a good talking to. I remind myself, again, of all that God has done for me; all that I have known of his love in the past AND count my blessings in the present. You know what helps me a lot when I am feeling very 'soldier' like? The hymn Lord of the Dance. That chorus says it all. (I have added it to the bottom for those who want to sing it)

Duty can take you a long way but even the most dutiful soldier can be worn down and become exhausted and fall asleep on watch.

The third option is one I dub 'the child'. They are charming, beautiful, and full of hope and excitement – just like a child on Christmas Eve. They don't want to sleep, don't want to calm down and don't want to miss a second. Christians who are young in faith, who have just realised the wonder of Christ's message is for them, often fall into this group. Their eyes have been opened to eternal possibilities and EVERYTHING twinkles and shines.

But of course, every child eventually runs out of steam and, no matter how hard they try, they will fall asleep before Father Christmas arrives. All children grow up and, sadly, some of the children grow up into Scrooges and others into soldiers.

The best way, I believe, to keep looking forward, to be prepared and to stay awake is to be like the wise virgins. Not the best name for a group so let's think of something else, how about just 'The Wise Ones' or 'Magi'

The Magi look forward to an end goal with hope in their heart now. They come prepared for a long journey – food (prayer), shelter (church), maps and guidance (the Bible). They know that it isn't a race – there is no special prize for getting there first, just for arriving. They will take rest along the way ensuring that they refresh themselves in God given oases. They delight in bringing others on the journey with them, because company eases the burden and lightens the load and a joy shared is a joy doubled. They rejoice in the journey itself, valuing the experiences and enjoying the view. They know that, no matter how much energy they give out and how much time it takes, the destination is more than worth it.

The Magi never fall asleep because they take strength and respite in the journey itself and they never lose hope because they keep their eye on the guiding star that is Christ himself. Would that there were more Magi out there!

So this Advent I pray that you too can enjoy the journey, that you will not become over-burdened and over-tired but that you will keep the hope of Christ in your heart and prepare yourself for a joyous, blessed future. Amen.

The Lord of the Dance

I danced in the morning when the world was begun
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth

*Dance, then, wherever you may be
I am the Lord of the Dance said he
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be
And I'll lead you all in the dance said he*

I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee
But they would not dance, and they wouldn't follow me
I danced for the fishermen for James and John
They came with me and the dance went on.

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame
The holy people said it was a shame
They whipped and the stripped and they hung me on high;
They left me there on a cross to die.

I danced on a Friday and the sky turned black
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone
But I am the dance and I still go on

They cut me down and I leapt up high
I am the life that will never, never die;
I'll live in you if you'll live in me
I am the Lord of the Dance said he.