Advent Quiet Day

Yearning & Hoping

# Schedule

10:00 Morning tea (talking)

10:20 Move to chapel

First address

Silence

12:00 Eucharist in chapel

Lunch in friary

1:30 Second address (chapel)

Silence

3:40 Evening Prayer (chapel)

4:00 Afternoon tea (talking) friary.

# Session One

Advent God,
Who was, and is, and is to come,
Be with us now as we turn our hearts our minds to your arrival,
Make us hope.
Make us yearn.
Make us alive to Advent.
Amen.

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The Lord be with you.

## Why are we here?

* Schedule
* What do you hope to achieve today?
* What do I hope to achieve?
* You are welcome to interrupt me at any time with questions

## Introduction (Slide 1)

* Tell me about Advent – give me some words.

## Arrival (Slide 2)

Advent is by definition a time of anticipation. As the year draws to a close we all know that something is coming. There is a change in pace and orientation as we deliberately begin to turn our hearts and minds towards Christmas: that day which is the **e**vent of our **Ad**vent. Because of that **e**vent we must be cautious. We cannot allow ourselves to see Advent as a holy countdown.

[Play first clip]

* Was that a very thinly veiled excuse to play a sequence from Thunderbirds?

Possibly. Possibly not. I might argue that Scott Tracy and Thunderbird One receive unmerited attention at the expense of Thunderbirds 2 through 5. But a classical education might classify any comparison between super-marionation and the incarnation of our Saviour Jesus Christ as travesty.

Nevertheless. If you get caught up in the countdown-to-Christmas mode you are bereft. You have missed out on what it means to engage with this important season of the church. You will become one of those people who see the year as culminating in the exchange of presents, or a brief reprieve from work, or a source of anxiety caused by complicated family dynamics unfolding over an awkward lunch.

And so, let us set all that aside and reorient ourselves – quite literally.

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In the first instance Advent is a new beginning – it is the start of the liturgical year. All those new year’s resolutions people make on January 1, really belong to Advent 1. That’s when we are called to start again. And I use re-orient in its literal sense of turning to the east; and of observing the rising sun. In our English–speaking tradition the language of ‘rising sun’ has always invited a deeper significance. It is at Advent that we anticipate the arrival of God on earth.

But sometimes I wonder whether we have confused the *anticipation of Advent* with plain old ‘waiting’. Waiting is what we do in supermarket queues and bus stops: a passive way of killing time – a frustration. Advent anticipation is meant to be much more than that. It’s a mixture of expectation, preparation, and yearning.

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In Mark’s Gospel, John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, / make his paths straight.” God’s return is imminent. For the first century Jews the Messiah was imagined as a great king travelling through the wilderness on a highway headed to Jerusalem - a royal procession descending on the holy of holies. This scene was meant to evoke images of the frenzied preparations that would be necessary to welcome an important potentate. Such preparation requires action (and elephants).

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In many homes throughout the western world the weeks leading up to Christmas are indeed a time of preparation. There are:

* Advent calendars (elaborate Christmas countdowns filled with chocolate elves)
* Christmas decorations of all sorts
* Christmas trees
* Seasonal songs
* Carol evenings
* Frosted glass – because what’s a southern hemisphere Christmas without a little fake snow?

Lots of time consuming, costly rituals that have become established practices. And I’m not asking you to give any of those up. However, they were not the rituals the church intended when it made Advent up. For ‘make it up’ is precisely what the church did.

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As you know, Easter is the preeminent Christian festival. It is the defining moment for Christianity, and it enjoyed a long build up. As the significance of the incarnation (God made flesh) was given more thought it was felt that a Lenten-style preparation for Christmas was also appropriate. It just so happens that about 40 days before December 25 we celebrate St Martin’s Day. And so about 1500 years ago, Advent was launched as St Martin’s Lent.

“Martin was born about 316. Like his father, he joined the army but found this incompatible with his Christian commitment.” He famously cut his cloak in two to share with a beggar. Ultimately became a monk and worked to convert the countryside. Patron Saint of France. Relevant? Not really, just a popular saint whose day of remembrance fell about 40 days before Christmas. Over time that 40 day period has been reduced to the four weeks we are accustomed to now. While we light candles for peace, hope, love, joy Advent has always been intended as a time of self-examination and preparation.

[Slide] Yearning

The reason we make these preparations is because we earnestly desire God’s return and we want to live as though Christ is on the way. We yearn for it like the return of a loved one after a separation, or like we cry out for relief from pain. Yearning is not an intellectual preference so much as a physical and spiritual need to receive something.

Augustine of Hippo sincerely wanted people to yearn, he wrote:

Give me one who yearns; … give me one far away in this desert,
who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the Eternal country.
Give me that sort of man: he knows what I mean.

Likewise Mathew Woodley says: “Advent trains us to ache again. Of all the seasons of the church year, Advent is the time to acknowledge, feel, and even embrace the joyful anguish of longing for Messiah’s birth and the world’s rebirth. So we sing our aching songs while we light candles and festoon the church with greenery. That is Advent longing, and we couldn’t imagine it any other way.”

“Advent trains us to ache again” – so writes Woodley, but I wonder whether that is your experience? It is mine, but perhaps not as Woodley understands it. I ache when I walk into a shop in the middle of November and the Christmas trees are out and Jingle Bells is playing. I ache when I hear the words “silly season” and “Christmas lists”; or when negotiations begin around whose turn it is to host Christmas lunch. My back aches when I carry all the advertising out to be recycled. When I am standing in a store in a clerical collar and a retailer asks what I’m doing for Christmas, I ache when they are surprised to hear I’ll be dropping into church.

But the real ache should be the one that remembers the incarnation and anticipates Christ’s return. That’s where the “joyful anguish” comes into play.

The challenge that Christ sets for us at Advent is to slow down and ache, to be joyful and expectant, to yearn.

## Yearning (Slide and song)

Yearning is a powerful sensation. It’s derived from an Old English word — *giernan —* closely associated with ‘eager’. And it’s hard to capture in words because I firmly believe it’s something that you feel.

I have a song that has a certain yearning quality to it – and I invite you to feel it as much as listen to it.

* Cautious, tottering almost trembling introduction; agitated strings; then the voice.

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* What do you associate with yearning? What words come to mind when you think of yearning? (I did Google image search for ‘yearning’ – and I regret it)

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Ps 63)

## Questions (Slide 4)

* “Advent trains us to ache again” – what does that mean for you?
* “Joyful anguish”
* What do you yearn for?
* What do you expect from Advent?
* What does Advent expect from you?

Postcards for reflection.

## Concluding Prayer

Everlasting God,
In whom we live and move and have our being:
You have made us for yourself,
So that our hearts are restless
Until they rest in you.

*Augustine of Hippo (354-430)*

# Session 2: Hoping

A reading from 1 Peter 1:3-9.

*A Living Hope*

﻿3﻿ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ﻿4﻿ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ﻿5﻿ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ﻿6﻿ In this you rejoice,[[1]](#footnote-1)﻿a﻿ even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ﻿7﻿ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ﻿8﻿ Although you have not seen[[2]](#footnote-2)﻿b﻿ him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ﻿9﻿ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hopefully.

Hopefully? Certainly.

Advent is not just about preparation and yearning, but hope. And that’s a theme that runs throughout the Bible. It’s arguably at the heart Messianism – the hope that a saviour will come and things will be different. The Prophets are full of the promise of a saviour: a king, a priest, a prophet, a liberator – someone who would change things for the better.

For those of us who believe Jesus is the Messiah that has happened. At Christmas we remember that God is not just some remote and ethereal being; divine but disconnected but rather that God became fully human and dwelt among us. Not idly but with a purpose.

We have been saved. And the knowledge that we have been saved is a source of hope. All is not lost because we have faith that Jesus died for us. And that Jesus is not just some man, but Jesus is indeed God made man. God loves us so much that he suffered alongside us and gave up his life so that we might have life eternal. We are assured that nothing can separate us from that love. Nothing. That’s good reason to hope.

That’s the hope that looks back 2000 years ago and breathes a sigh of relief – everything is going to be all right.

But hope is a funny thing, it goes both forward and backward. In our day-to-day language it’s almost always future-bound, but we inevitably assess it retrospectively. That tension speaks to a certain uncertainty. Part of the problem is that our word ‘hope’ is derived from an old German word that really means ‘wish for’. And I believe that is generally the sense that we use it as well.

SO, as a school boy I hoped that swimming sports would be cancelled. If I’m at the movies I hope no one answers their cellphone and decides to have a 10 minute conversation about their relationship difficulties. Or if I have a raffle ticket I hope to win. But when I use hope like that I may as well start rubbing lamps and look for genies.

When I turn to Christ in faith, my understanding of hope changes. I have to switch from English to Greek and embrace ἐλπίδα. That’s a much better word because it means “to look forward to something in confident expectation.” It addresses the substance, the cause, and reason as to why we might hope. That’s why we need to shift our language from “optimistic longshot” and “spin the wheel o’ fortune” to “confident expectation”: ἐλπίδα.

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That hope is random: whereas God is ordered. From the very beginning God has instilled order on creation. In Genesis God takes the formless void and makes sense of it: light from darkness; up from down; land from water; and so on. One of the reasons we know Jesus is God is because he demonstrates the same authority over chaos: when the disciples are caught in the storm he stills it; when the waters are raging he walks across them; where there is disease, madness, even death Jesus overcomes.

When we talk about hope that’s the God we need to remember – that’s certainly the God that Paul has in mind.

Consider for a moment what the Apostle is saying in his letter to the Romans:

Romans 5:1-5 (NRSV)
1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we **boast in our hope** of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and **character produces hope**, 5 **and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.**[[4]](#footnote-4)

This section of Romans is part of Paul’s argument addressing justification and so it is central to how we understand salvation. If you are looking to study a new book of the Bible to celebrate the new church year then I strongly urge you to consider Romans.

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That aside, take note of what Paul does with hope in the first sentence. Because we are justified by faith we receive grace therefore we boast with confident expectation that we will share the glory of God. We are not spinning the great wheel of serendipity and praying for something good to happen, we are boasting with confident expectation.

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Now consider the second part [read]: “endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” Suffering, endurance, character, hope. Ultimately then suffering produces hope?

No!

[Slide]

At least not for most of us. There are those who can hit Monopoly’s chance card, advance directly to “Go”, and collect $200. But most of us have to land on every hotel and utility, and no doubt end up in prison where you fail to roll doubles three times in a row and then have to pay $50, and then you’re still ¾ of the board away from GO again.

I hate monopoly. Monopoly causes suffering, suffering contributes to endurance, and character … what are the chances?

Hope, as Paul describes it in this section of Romans, is established in experience. It isn’t a vague thing; it’s a product. Paul describes a process whereby we move from xxx to xxx. This is not instant gratification

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In the same way that a monarch egg does not transform directly into a butterfly, our suffering is not instantly converted into hope. Instead there is a complex and potentially painful metamorphosis that takes place. One that might repeat itself throughout our lives. If someone were to show us the finished product at the start of the process it would be laughably inconceivable. A bit like telling a child that a caterpillar turns into butterfly. The process of rehabilitation that takes people from grief through suffering to hope is also a metamorphosis.

That kind of hope is earned. I believe it to be altogether different from some vague appeal to serendipity and not like wishful thinking at all. When you have worked through suffering and arrived at hope you are more likely to look into the future with confident expectation.

I want to make an additional refinement to our understanding of hope, just in case you are tempted to confuse it with optimism.

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Generally speaking, I am an optimist. As Oscar Wilde says, I see the doughnut, not the hole in the middle. I know that other people see things differently. For some the glass is not only half empty, but someone else drank it.

In our culture optimism is fairly highly regarded, but it is still something to be a little cautious of.

Jim Collins wrote a book called *Good to Great*. In it he recorded his interview with Admiral Jim Stockton who spent 8 years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Collins was trying to find out what it took to survive the horrors of the ironically named Hanoi Hilton. When asked who was most likely to die in prison Admiral Stockton replied, “Oh, that’s easy, the optimists.”

He added, “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end - which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

The problem with optimists, he discovered, was that they kept pinning their hopes on some future date: I’ll be out by Christmas, I’ll be out by Easter, and so on. Eventually they just lost hope and gave up. That’s the kind of optimism we must be cautious of. It is much better to engage with the truth of our situation – or as Admiral Stockton puts it: “confront the most brutal facts of your current reality.”

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Doug Pagitt reflects: “Christianity has always been the hope of God through Jesus played out in the lives of real people living in real circumstances.”

That makes me want to claim that Christian hope should never be an escape from reality. I say that with a degree of anxiety that may be unwarranted. And I can’t put my finger on what makes me so cautious.

* What do you think? Christian hope should never be an escape from reality.
* What was Jesus Christ’s reality? Rejection, suffering and death
* If we reject our reality do we live in a fantasy world?
* Which world does God call us to be in? Bearing in mind that God chose to live in a very real way.
* Where is Christianity experiencing the greatest uptake?
* Do you see anything significant in the relationship between context, reality, and hope?

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The Sun will Rise.

## Questions for Reflection [slide]

* How has your suffering informed your hope?
* So what are the most brutal facts of your current reality? What hope is there?
* Is there tension for you between ‘hope’ and ‘confident expectation’?
* In Advent which direction does your hope go in?

## Concluding Prayer

Ever-gracious God,
Who can do all things, and
Whose purposes cannot be thwarted.
Give us the courage to confront our realities,
With confidence and hope.
Help us to recognise our salvation,
And claim your peace,
Through your beloved Son,
Crucified and risen from the dead. AMEN.

1. ﻿a﻿ Or *Rejoice in this* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ﻿b﻿ Other ancient authorities read *known* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*, 1 Pe 1:3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996, c1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996, c1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)