

Advent –



The Waiting Time

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| welcome to this study, welcome to Advent | |
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You may like to begin each study with this:

A Song of Praise for Advent: The Desert shall Blossom

1 The desert shall rejoice and blossom;
it shall rejoice with gladness and singing.

2 The glory of the Lord shall be revealed:
and the majesty of our God.

3 Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened:
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

4 then shall the lame leap like the hart:
and the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy.

5† For waters shall break forth in the wilderness:
and streams in the desert.

6 The ransomed of the Lord shall return:
and come with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads.

7 They shall obtain joy and gladness:
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35:1, 2, 5, 6,10
Glory to the Father and to the Son: and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now: and shall be for ever. Amen.

**My hope is that through these reflections you may greet Christmas Day
with a new sense of the love God has for you and for all the world.**

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Welcome

Welcome to this study

This study has been designed to be undertaken in two different contexts: by groups meeting in parishes or other ministry units (for example, schools or workplaces), or by people on their own to do at home. You might want to do it as a family.



It's happened in response to a request for an Advent study, a way of helping people reflect on this season and what it means to prepare for the coming of Christ.

Welcome to Advent



The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival.”. This is the season when we focus on the celebration of the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Coming, and the anticipation of the return of Christ the King in his Second Coming. We look forward as well as looking back. Advent gives us a special opportunity to remember that we live “between the times” – between the first coming of Christ and his second, and that we are called to be faithful stewards of what has been entrusted to us as the people of God.

Advent runs from the 4th Sunday before Christmas (Advent 1) to the Sunday immediately prior to Christmas (Advent 4) and on to Christmas Day. It's about 4 weeks long (shorter than Lent, that other season of preparation), depending on which day of the week Christmas Day falls. If Christmas Day is a Monday, we have Advent 4 on the morning of Sunday 24 December, and Christmas Eve in the evening. This study, though, is only 3 sessions, not 4 – because I know how busy things get at this time of year.

1 Advent – the waiting time



Photo: Andrik Langfield, Unsplash

Advent is the season when we get ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Christ in his First Coming. It's also when we anticipate the return of Christ the King in his Second Coming. We look forward as well as looking back.

In this double focus on past and future we affirm that

- Christ has come
- he is present in the world today
- he will come again in power.

When you think about it, this should probably affect how we live. We live “between the times” – between the first coming of Christ and his second. We're called to be faithful stewards of what's been entrusted to us as the people of God. Of course, this is true of our life in all the seasons, but Advent gives us a special opportunity to remember this.

It's far more than preparing for Christmas – it's about preparing for the rest of our lives as God's people in our particular places. The idea behind Advent is that it's marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, of longing.

- eagerly anticipating the coming of Christ at Christmas and preparing for that.
- expecting Christ to come again, and longing for that.

There's an issue here, isn't there: we're waiting not just for God, but for "Christmas" – and there's often so much to do to get ready for Christmas that getting ready for Christ takes a back seat. This is especially so in the Southern Hemisphere where we're getting ready for the end of the school year and the long summer holidays. One of the challenges of Advent is to free ourselves up to make room for Christ's arrival in the midst of all the busyness.

❖ ***How will we make room in the busyness of our lives to receive Christ when he comes this Christmas?***

So Advent is the time when we wait for something to happen. And waiting is not always easy.

❖ ***What have been your experiences of waiting? Good or bad?***

❖ ***What was your most recent experience of waiting like?***

We spend a lot of our lives waiting – and sometimes it's not much fun.

Waiting

- for the bus
- for things to arrive in the mail or be available online (young people in our families or our congregations may be waiting for exam results at the moment)
- for family or friends to visit (or to return home)
- for medical results to come through
- for Covid to be "over" or for the Cyclone Gabrielle damage to be repaired.

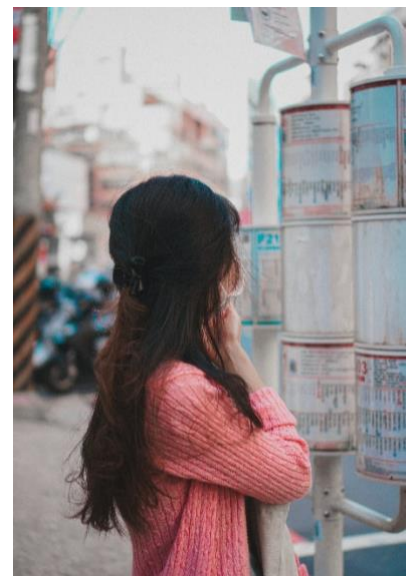


Photo: Lisanto, Unsplash

Waiting can be boring, frustrating, or even scary.

Here is one experience of waiting. (Would two people like to read this?)

WAITING: ONE EXPERIENCE
from *Waiting for Godot*

ESTRAGON: facing auditorium.)
Inspiring prospects. (He turns to
Vladimir.) Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for
Godot.

ESTRAGON: (despairingly). Ah!
(Pause.) You're sure it was here?

VLADIMIR: What?

ESTRAGON: That we were to wait.

VLADIMIR: He said by the tree.
(They look at the tree.) Do you
see any others?

ESTRAGON: What is it?

VLADIMIR: I don't know. A
willow.

ESTRAGON: Where are the leaves?

VLADIMIR: It must be dead.

ESTRAGON: No more weeping.

VLADIMIR: Or perhaps it's not
the season.

ESTRAGON: Looks to me more like
a bush.

VLADIMIR: A shrub.

ESTRAGON: A bush.

VLADIMIR: A—. What are you
insinuating? That we've come to
the wrong place?

ESTRAGON: He should be here.

VLADIMIR: He didn't say for sure
he'd come.

ESTRAGON: And if he doesn't
come?

VLADIMIR: We'll come back
tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: And then the day
after tomorrow.

VLADIMIR: Possibly.

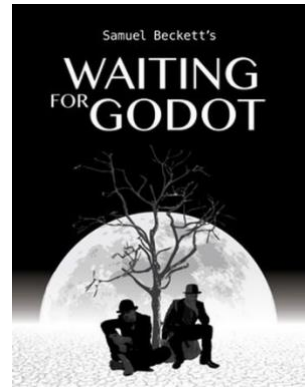
ESTRAGON: And so on.

VLADIMIR: The point is-

ESTRAGON: Until he comes.

Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett
London: Faber and Faber, 1956.

The characters in the play are waiting for someone, but they're never entirely sure whether he will turn up – or what he will look like, if he does come. Will he really come? Will they recognise him? Almost all the play is spent in waiting, and sometimes it seems fairly meaningless.



- like the situation of those (eg Simeon and Anna) waiting for the Messiah to come?
- like our situation as we wait for Christ to come again?

Part of the tension in *Waiting for Godot* is whether Vladimir and Estragon will get tired of waiting and simply wander off, getting on with their lives. Part of the tension for us as Christians is that, over the centuries, we've got tired of waiting for Christ to return, and – like Vladimir and Estragon who have trouble believing in Godot's promised arrival – we've gotten on with the rest of our lives.

❖ ***Do you agree?***

❖ ***Do you know anyone who is actively waiting for Christ to return? How do they do this?***

❖ ***Recall a time in your life when waiting was unpleasant (painful, scary, frustrating or just plain boring): How did it feel?***

❖ ***What would have made it different?***

Sometimes waiting isn't a negative experience. Here's another story – but before you read this, let's acknowledge that such a reading, and the focus on "baby Jesus" in Advent and Christmas, can be painful for those who haven't been able to have children.

WAITING: ANOTHER EXPERIENCE

from *Motherhood and God*

Nine months is a long time for enjoying the knowledge that you are pregnant, but for me it was not a day too long. I had a tremendous sense of physical fulfilment, and I saw my body move into a new stage of development for which it had waited since puberty. Within a few weeks I had read all the latest books on pregnancy from cover to cover several times over, and had enrolled myself — or rather ourselves, for husbands were expected at all sessions — for a course of natural childbirth classes with England's leading teacher, Sheila Kitzinger. Meanwhile my body slowly evolved.

Motherhood and God, Margaret Hebblethwaite
Geoffrey Chapman. 1984. London

This is a more positive experience of waiting — it's a productive time: things are happening to prepare her for becoming a parent, and many of these are things she herself is doing. This waiting is active, not passive. There's a sense of excitement, a feeling of nurturing. This waiting has meaning too for expectant fathers, grandparents, the wider community (getting a room ready, knitting).

Pregnancy isn't the only time of waiting that can have a positive element. There are other possibilities, when we're filled with anticipation or excitement (not boredom or dread) for what's about to happen.

- ❖ ***Recall a time in your life when waiting was more positive: How did that feel?***
- ❖ ***What made that a good experience?***



Photo: Blake Meyer, Unsplash

The experience of waiting will be different for each of us, but there are likely to be some common elements. I suspect one element common to many of us is that “waiting” is not something we actually think about much – we just want it to be over!

Waiting is not a time or season in itself – it is the time before something happens. In that sense, when the Church devotes a whole season to waiting it is quite counter-cultural.

❖ *Has it ever struck you before how weird Advent might seem?*

WAITING: Some Biblical stories

There’s lots of waiting in the Bible, and often this is waiting for God to act, to change a difficult situation or to indicate what needs to happen next. When the Hebrew people were making their long trek from Egypt to the Promised Land the cloud covering the Tabernacle, the symbol of God’s presence with them, indicated when they should set out on the next stage of the journey. “Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.” (Exodus 40:36-38.) This sounds wonderful, but as a longer version makes clear (Numbers 9:17-23) sometimes they’d set off again after just a night, or a few days, or longer than a month. Waiting when you don’t know how long you’ll be waiting is tough!

❖ *What might that have been like for the Hebrews? How would you have coped with this?*

Saul, the first king of Israel, got into trouble because he couldn't wait. He was with the army and was supposed to wait for the prophet and priest Samuel to come and offer the sacrifice. "He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people began to slip away from Saul. So Saul said, "Bring the burnt offering here to me and the offerings of well-being," and he offered the burnt offering. As soon as he had finished Samuel arrives and reprimands him, telling Saul that because he hasn't kept God's commandment about who can offer sacrifices the kingdom would be taken away from him and given to another. (See 1 Samuel 13:5-15.)

❖ ***What lessons might there be for us here?***

Psalm 130: Waiting for Divine Redemption

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.



❖ ***Have you known what it is to wait for the Lord like this?***

Some final questions (for now, or to think about later)

- ❖ *How do you experience the waiting for Christ's coming at Christmas?*
- ❖ *How would you like it to feel?*

- ❖ *How do you experience the waiting for Christ's coming again at the end of time?*
- ❖ *How would you like it to feel?*

- ❖ *What differences are there between our experiences of waiting for the coming of the Christ-child and waiting for Christ to return again? Why are they different?*

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

2 Preparing for the Christ-Child



Photo: Sincerely Media, Unsplash

And so we are waiting. But how do we live while we are waiting? And who is the one for whom we wait?

We're so accustomed to waiting for the Christ-child to arrive that we forget what a surprise it was when God turned up as a baby in the Bethlehem stable – so not what everyone had expected!

The people of God (then the people of Israel) had been waiting for many centuries. They were waiting for God to send someone to deliver them from all their troubles, for a Messiah – an “anointed one.”

Jesus belonged to a world where theology and politics went hand in hand. Behind the concept of a messiah in the Bible is the idea that God intervenes in history by sending a saviour to deliver God's people from suffering and injustice.

- a kingly messiah – like David, only better – who would defeat the powers of evil by force of arms.
- a priestly messiah: arising to save Israel.
- a prophetic messiah, to bring good news to the oppressed – like Moses, only better.

This was very hopeful – and so hope is big in Advent (along with the other themes of peace, joy, and love).

Through the readings in this season, we are walking with those who have waited – with the prophets (especially Isaiah), with Mary and Joseph, with John the Baptist. How do their hopes intersect with our own?

The people waiting for a messiah were expecting a grand figure: wise, powerful, outspoken. What they got was a baby – a very unexpected “expected one.” We should never underestimate God’s capacity for surprise.



Photo: Mindy Olson P, Unsplash

❖ ***How do we cope with surprises?***

❖ ***How do we react when things aren't as we expect?***

Do we discover a sense of fun, or find ourselves able to go with the flow? Or do we respond with disappointment, resignation, or anger, and perhaps feel God that has let us down?

The old hopes of a messiah who would come with power and might and make it all better still linger. Deep down, where we may not want to admit it, we find ourselves longing for God to ride to the rescue on a white charger – a “superman Christology”: a Saviour who would swoop down and catch the skyscraper before it falls on us.

But God continues to surprise us.

- Where we expect Superman, what we get is a baby.
- Where we look for a powerful figure who will change the world by lunchtime, what we get is a change that begins, small and weak, inside us, which has to be slowly and carefully nurtured.

God doesn't always send us what we expect. And God doesn't always look like what we imagined.

THE MANY DISGUISES OF EMMANUEL

Emmanuel, God-with-us,
long awaited, eagerly anticipated,
delicious dreams of royal robes,
a messiah enthroned with elegance.

False notions and easily accepted illusions.

A few open ones, full of surprise,
heard the fresh, full cry of life
echoed in the uninhabited haven,
the only place ready for a birth that was ripe.

Shepherds, sages, and scribes,
drawn by angels and stars,
discovered this divine simplicity,
then hurried from the hillside
with news that amazed them all.

But many years later the cry goes unheard,
stifled in the roar of unyielding opinions,
submerged in the noise of hasty judgments,
masked in the false folds of cultural glitter.

The Surprising One continues to come,
entering the world in endless disguise,
concealed in those we have never forgiven,
secreted in the hearts of people we despise,
found in the rejected and unacceptable,
hidden in the ones we ignore and criticize.



Photo: Zhivko Minkov, Unsplash

Joyce Rupp,
Out of the ordinary: prayers, poems, and reflections for every season
Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2000.

Part of the Advent task is to realise that the God for whom we wait may not look like how we imagine God to look. Part of the challenge of this season is to get us ready to recognise God wherever, and in whomsoever, God is encountered.

❖ ***When was the last time you encountered God in an unexpected way?***

❖ ***Why was it so unexpected – and how did you react?***

WAITING: Some Biblical stories

One of the readings that comes in the days after Christmas is the story of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:21-40). These elderly people had the joy of recognising that this baby being brought by Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord was the promised Messiah. We rejoice in their rejoicing! What we often forget, however, is that Simeon and Anna had spent many days (probably years) in the temple *not* meeting the promised Messiah.

❖ ***What might that have felt for each of them? How do you think they sustained that waiting over so long? Could you have waited like that?***

It's clear from the Gospels that not everyone recognised Jesus as the Messiah. When John the Baptist was in prison he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" In answer, Jesus refers to what people can hear and see: people being healed and the poor having good news brought to them. (Matthew 11:1-5)

❖ ***What's it like, when we not sure if the thing we're waiting for has actually come? How do we deal with the uncertainty, and what might help us here?***

Part of the “big picture” of this season is to remember that the Jesus who comes to us at Christmas as a baby came to grow up, to live, and die, and rise again for us.

THE COMING

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.



RS Thomas, *Selected Poems* Ed. Anthony
Thwaite, London: Everyman, 1996.

There are other challenges of this season. **We are waiting not just for God, not just for the baby to arrive in Bethlehem, but for “Christmas.”** We are expecting, not just the arrival of the Christ-child, but the arrival of friends, relatives, in-laws, either to stay or to join us for meals. Those of us with young children may also be expecting Santa. All this is not easy.

This is a world where Christmas begins late in November. Even in churches, people want to sing Christmas carols right through

December. Sarah Mullally (Anglican Bishop of London) says that “a good Advent is to hold Advent in a Christmas world.”

❖ ***What do you find hardest about all this – what is the greatest challenge that Advent brings to you?***

There’s so much to do to get ready for Christmas that getting ready for Christ takes a back seat.

- Sending cards, baking special foods
- buying and wrapping presents (let alone thinking what to give people!)
- extra shopping
- in Aotearoa New Zealand this also coincides with end-of-year activities and social functions for school or the community (it’s not like this in the northern hemisphere).
- extra church services and activities

By the time the Christ-child is safely installed in the manger I’m tired and cranky (is this just me?).



❖ ***What’s it like in your household?***

One of the challenges of Advent is to free ourselves up to make room for Christ’s arrival in the midst of all the busyness.

How do you get ready for someone you’re expecting? When I’m waiting for someone special to arrive, there’s a lot of cleaning up and tidying that goes on – vacuuming away the cat-hair on the couch, checking the fridge for old leftovers that really shouldn’t be there any longer, putting flowers on the table and in the spare room. That sort of thing. Perhaps this is a useful metaphor for preparing for Christ to come.

- ❖ *What parts of our spiritual life could do with a little tidying?*
- ❖ *What might we need to get rid of or attend to in order to be ready to welcome Christ?*
- ❖ *Have we been hanging onto any beliefs or attitudes that have past their use-by date?*

Some final questions (for now, or to think about later)

- ❖ *In what ways has God surprised us in the past?*
- ❖ *How is God with us today?*
- ❖ *How will we make room in our lives to receive Christ when he comes this Christmas?*

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS

3 Preparing for Christ to come again



Waiting for Christ (Micekamo Hrista)
Dejan Zivanovic

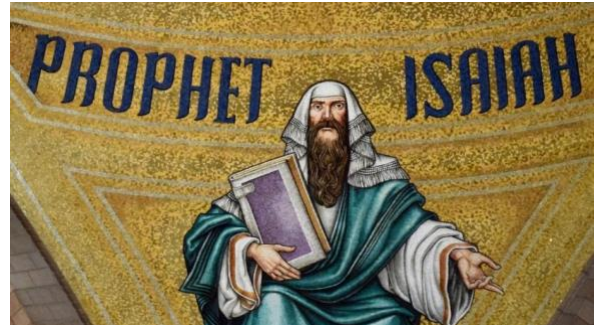
Waiting for a baby to be born in Bethlehem isn't the only item on the Advent agenda. We're also waiting for Christ to return. How do we live in *this* waiting?

Advent proclaims the Church's belief that this world is not all that there is – there is something more, and better, that comes after it. Christ will return to bring to fruition the kingdom, the reign of God.

But “the end of the world” isn't exactly trendy amongst some denominations, while in others people get worked up about the end-times, trying to interpret biblical prophecies into “this is going to happen any day now.” Or it get buried in jargon – “the Parousia” (the Second Coming), “eschatology” (the last things – usually noted as death, judgement, heaven, hell). One of the deans at my seminary once said, “the students may not understand what eschatology means, but it's not the end of the world.”

The real point of thinking about / preparing for the Second Coming isn't about when it will happen and how it will happen. Jesus was clear there will always be people who will look for signs that say "now is the end-time." (That's been the case for centuries.) Looking for signs of an imminent end is a distraction from a more pressing question: ***how do we live while we are waiting for Christ to return?***

Some of the readings during Advent connect us with the prophets (Isaiah especially, but sometimes also Jeremiah, Malachi, Zephaniah, and Micah), and with John the Baptist, a prophetic figure in the New Testament. Prophets were an unsettling presence, known for criticising authority, for speaking truth to power. It was a difficult role to have, and prophets were sometimes unpopular.



❖ ***When do we do this? How do we use the power that we have?***

❖ ***What might we need to speak out about?***

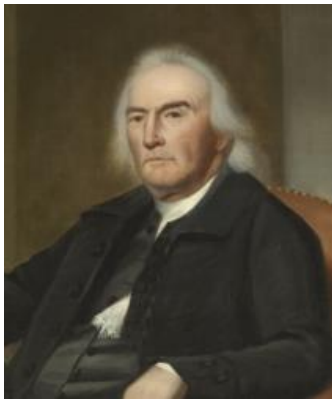
Advent is about acknowledging that this world is not all there is, and that Christ will return. It's about recognising that we live "between the times" – between the first coming of Christ and his second. This challenges us to use this time well. After all, if you have to wait, it's helpful to have something to do while you are waiting! (Who else has reached for their cell-phone when stuck at traffic lights?)

We are called to live holy lives:

- less about looking over one shoulder waiting for Christ to come and sweep us away
- more about how we get on with the tasks we have been given
- being faithful stewards of what's been entrusted to us as the people of God.

So let's accept the Advent reminder that Christ will come again, and start to work out how we want to live while we are waiting.

There's a lovely story about New England's "Dark Day" in May 1780, when the daytime sky was darkened (not an eclipse but probably a combination of smoke from forest fires, a thick fog, and cloud cover).



As it got dark, the Connecticut state legislators were meeting, and many of them panicked and wanted to go home, thinking it was the end of the world. They called for an adjournment. But one of them, a Senator Abraham Davenport, stood up and said, "I am against adjournment. The day of judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought."

That's a good way to live, regardless of what difficulties might try to unsettle us in our own lives, in the community around us, or in the wider world. This – while we're waiting for Christ to return – is the time to live as Christian disciples, as people with a relationship with God.

❖ ***What does "doing our duty" mean for us? What is the work we are called to do while we are waiting?***

WAITING: Some Biblical stories

It's clear from what Jesus says that we will know "neither the day nor the hour" when he will return. We wait, not knowing how long we have to wait. Waiting is a key theme in several of the parables, in particular the one about the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13). They were all waiting for the bridegroom (who represents the returning Jesus) to arrive, and it got later and later and they fell asleep. When the bridegroom eventually turned up, their oil lamps had all gone out.

Five of them had equipped themselves with extra oil, so they were able to do their job – but the others had to go off and buy more – and when they got back they found the door closed.



❖ ***What could this be saying to us, about our lives?***

A consistent theme in the New Testament letters is that Christ’s return will come suddenly (“like a thief in the night”). There’s some guidance for how we can live while we’re waiting in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11: keeping awake, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and encouraging one another. That last bit reminds us that we are members of a community – we don’t have to wait on our own.,

❖ ***In what sort of ways might we encourage each other? What might this look like in practice?***

Happy New Year

Advent Sunday marks the beginning of the Church’s year. It’s far more than preparing for Christmas – it is about preparing for the rest of our lives as God’s people in our places. So Advent helps us work out how we want to live while we are waiting.

❖ ***When Christ returns (whenever that is) – who do we want him to find? (Not just what we want to be doing, but who we want to be.)***

❖ ***What type of person do we want to become?***

❖ ***What is it that we most desire?***

Here’s one take on ringing in the New Year:

RING OUT, WILD BELLS

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.



Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)
from *In Memoriam A.H.H*

Tennyson, writing in the northern hemisphere, assumes New Year is in winter. We need more imagery that speaks to our lives here, in Aotearoa New Zealand – like the hymns of Shirley Erena Murray and Colin Gibson.

- ❖ ***Have you ever made New Year's resolutions on Advent Sunday, for the God-stuff in your life?***
- ❖ ***What do you think of that idea?***
- ❖ ***What might you want to "ring out" and "ring in" for the new Church year?***

Advent, lived properly, gives us an opportunity to ask things like this of ourselves and to search out some of the answers.

Advent is a time of active waiting, looking back for what God has done, and looking forward to the promise of hope. Hope isn't the same as optimism. It's a conviction about the future which shows itself in our present: we feel secure in the here and now, and ready for God's future, sure that the best is yet to come and certain that God's justice and mercy will triumph in the end. We are called to be messengers of hope, that God is present in our world.

Some final questions (for now, or to think about later)

- ❖ ***How will we live in the next liturgical year as messengers of hope?***
- ❖ ***What things will we do more of? Less of?***
- ❖ ***What will we continue to do?***
- ❖ ***What will we do differently? Or with whom?***

THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS