

## Advent – Past, Present and Future

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega (the A and the Z), who is and was and is to come, the Almighty.” (Revelation 1:8)*

The Theme of our service today is Advent – Past, Present and Future; these words from the very last book of the Bible tell us that God has the past, the present and the future in His hands; He is the beginning and the end of everything, the A to Z, the first and the last; He never changes, and His love never ends.

### Remembering the Past

The story of Advent takes us into the past. The story invites us to look back at events that took place some 2000 years ago, a time long ago now, in a place far away. We look back to the time when Jesus was born; we remember His coming into the world and we are glad that He has come. The Saviour of the world has come. We look back to that time and place and say “thank you” to God for sending His Son into our world to save us.

Today, we are also remembering the more immediate past. We asked you to look back and remember what was hard particularly about the last 2 years, and what you remember with fondness. Remembering is both good and painful. Here are some of your memories:

- ✚ We remember the anxiety with which we have lived because of Covid, the fear of catching the virus, and that for some lockdown came as something of a relief to begin with. But lockdown continued and fear and anxiety grew and for 20 months now, we have lived with Covid and there is no sign of it going away. Many still feel anxious and afraid.
- ✚ For many people lockdown created a whole new set of anxieties: we were told to work from home and schools were closed; families had to juggle all kinds of responsibilities – work, schooling, caring for elderly relatives; some were furloughed and for others, jobs just stopped. Young people had nowhere to go and not a lot to do; many lost any sense of purpose in life. For some, the situation is not yet better and we’re still not sure about future work patterns.
- ✚ We lived with so many restrictions and so much uncertainty: from March 2020 till September 2021, we were not being able to meet in person as Church; we have not been able to travel, to go on holiday or visit family, to eat out, or even to entertain family and friends in our own homes; we had meals in the garage and it was freezing. The sporting world and the entertainment industry closed down; we weren’t able to socialise together.
- ✚ We weren’t able to meet or hug people we love, family, friends; we missed the contact; we have missed family celebrations. We were not able to visit loved ones in hospital or in care homes or attend the funerals of friends. Somehow Covid made the

pressures of caring for people much harder. Our connections with other people have been on the doorstep, in the garage, on the phone or on Zoom; the conversations are not the same!

✚ Some people we love dearly have died; we remember them today, we miss them fondly, and our hearts are broken. We name them in our hearts; Lord, grant us your peace.

We lament what we have lost. Psalm 13 asks: *“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?”* That sense of lament disturbs us but it is a natural reaction to the losses we have endured. Faith has been challenged; it has even been a struggle for some.

But, we also remember that for a time life was simpler. Life was lived at a slower pace; we had time to walk (with or without a dog!), or to sit in or work in the garden; we learned to take time to value and appreciate other people; we got to know some of our neighbours; we mastered new skills; we decluttered; we learned about Zoom for Church services and other conversations; we took more time to read the Bible and to pray; we applauded the NHS and were glad of the care we received; we gave thanks for the scientists when the vaccines were developed and became available; we said we were going to be a kinder society!

When we met as Church during lockdown, we rehearsed many times God’s promise that He would be with us always and everywhere, and that His love for us would never fail.

### **Footprints in the sand**

One night I dreamed a dream.

I was walking along the beach with my Lord.

Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.

For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me and one to my Lord.

When the last scene of my life shot before me I looked back at the footprints in the sand.

There was only one set of footprints.

I realized that this was at the lowest and saddest times of my life.

This always bothered me and I questioned the Lord about my dilemma.

“Lord, You told me when I decided to follow You, You would walk and talk with me all the way.

But I’m aware that during the most troublesome times of my life there is only one set of footprints.

I just don’t understand why, when I need You most, You leave me.”

He whispered, “My precious child, I love you and will never leave you, never, ever, during your trials and testings.

When you saw only one set of footprints, It was then that I carried you.”

(Margaret Fishback Powers)

**The Present                      God is with us now!**

**Reading: John 14:15-21**

*'If you love me, you will obey what I command. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counsellor to be with you for ever – 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. 21 Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.'*

God is with us. That is a statement of faith. We can't see God; we can't prove that God even exists. But Jesus has promised to be with us always and everywhere and we choose to believe His promises. God is with us – a statement of faith.

One of the big titles that Jesus is given when He comes into the world is Immanuel; we find it in lots of our Advent and Christmas songs. It simply means "God with us". Advent is about God coming into the world. He is coming and He will save His people. God is with us in the shape and form of His Son, and we celebrate Jesus' coming and we are glad that God comes to the world to stand alongside us in our time of need.

Jesus, in these words from John's gospel, promises that He will not leave us helpless, but he will come to us by the Spirit. He is God with us now. He has promised us the gift of His Holy Spirit to be with us and to live in us and by that promise Jesus is still God with us today. He will not leave us helpless, alone, but will be God with us each and every day of our lives. Advent is no longer just a story to look back on, but is a present living reality in our hearts; Jesus is with us always and Jesus is with us everywhere.

Jesus with us now helps us navigate our way through the past, giving us strength to work our way through what is hard, forgiving our faults and mistakes. Jesus with us now gives us a light by which to live our lives today, shaping our values, guiding us in the choices that we make. Jesus with us now gives us a touchstone by which we measure ourselves and our choices to know we do what is right. Jesus with us now gives us confidence and courage to face the future well, leaning on the promise that He will be with us always and everywhere.

Jesus with us now, knows our life. He knows what we find hard and our struggles; He knows what we enjoy and what makes our hearts glad. He knows the people who are treated unfairly and those who behave corruptly. He knows us and the love and kindness that we show to other people. Because He is with us, He is able to help us live our lives well and is at work in the world by our influence.

We are glad that God is with us now!

**The future: our hopes and aspirations**

We have hopes and aspirations for the future; some of these are closely connected to the memories and regrets from the past. Here are some of the hopes that you have expressed in response to my e-mail request:

- ❖ We long to be free, with no restrictions on family contact, or holidays and travel; we long to have the freedom to live an ordinary life without sanctions, impositions, restrictions or fear. Will there be a time soon when we will have “no masks”? We long for a happy and healthy future.
  
- ❖ When there are family celebrations planned, it will be good to enjoy these and to spend time with people that we love. This family connection and these events were important to us before; they will be important to us again – the birth of new family members, celebrations of love and family life, to support one another in difficult times, and simply able to enjoy being together with people who are precious to us.
  
- ❖ To be a society that values important things: We hope to keep some of the slower pace of life and that the kindness we spoke of last year would still be part of the way we treat one another. We’d hope to remember to value the people who serve us in the emergency services and the NHS; we want to see the need for global care and concern; we’d hope that our leaders make decisions that embrace a world-wide outlook.
  
- ❖ We’d love to see a church once more fully engaged with worship and finding its place in the community, again adding value to people’s lives, and helping people, no matter who they are, to flourish in their faith and in life. We’d see the value in taking time to nurture our faith, to read the Bible and listen for God’s word so that we may live life in the Lord’s ways, maybe more than we did in the past.

Hope and aspirations are good to have; they are part of being human. We like to have events to look forward to; we need to have something to aspire after, either individually, or in a community, or even on a world-wide scale. We hope that life will be better or that the world will be a more peaceful place, a fairer place for everyone. That kind of hope or aspiration comes from a desire to be better or to do more, or to help others. These become our prayers for the future, expressing in prayer what it is that we want God to do for us, and the ways in which we depend on Him.

While Advent is a time to look back to the story of Jesus at Bethlehem, it is also the time to look forward to another “Advent”. Jesus has promised that He will come again to the world, this time as a great King, triumphant and victorious. He will come to judge the earth and to create a new heaven and a new earth. This is the ultimate Christian hope and aspiration, that the glory which Jesus enjoys now, is a glory that we will share. As He has been with us in the days past and present, in the future we will be with Him and share His glory. This is a hope that we don’t talk about very much, but it is real. James S. Stewart was a famous Scottish preacher of the 1950’s and 60’s; he was an old man when I heard him preach, but he had lost none of his passion. He was preaching about this future hope and said something like this: “The hope is real; Jesus promised it and so it will come true.”

All this brings us to the Bible verse that has inspired this service in my mind. It comes from Hebrews 13:8, a simple, single sentence: *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever.”* Jesus has not changed: He loves us just as much today as He always did. The old Advent story from 2000 years ago is all about Jesus; He has been with us in our past, even in the last 2 years; He is with us now by His Spirit, in our present-day, the good days and the difficult days; the future is His – He has promised to shape that future and ultimately to make it a glorious future. Trust Him for the past, the present and the future; follow Him today and in the days to come, following Him even more closely than in the past.