

Some years ago, Mag, Vina and I went along to Lyla's house where her mum was hosting a Scentsy party. By the time we got there the party was in full game mode and we entered the game of what did you have in your handbag. Now Mag carried everything she might need for every eventuality in her handbag and more much as I do in my trouser pocket. Vina also had a few useful things so when asked for needles, Elastoplast, scissors, even a USB stick and some odd things we had them and we well won the game. As a youngster in Guides our motto was Be Prepared. Lord Baden Powell wrote a book called Scouting for Boys which was our Google of the day. Even in my blazer pocket at school I carried a tool with a knife and screwdriver, Elastoplast, hankies, sewing kit and many other things. We learned to pack our rucksacks for expeditions and holidays with all sorts of handy stuff and to put them in the right place so that when the rain started your cagoule or rain jacket wasn't at the bottom of your pack.

Today, this first Sunday of Advent we officially begin to prepare for Christmas. Many people of course have started their preparations, some have even finished them, because there is a huge list of things to be prepared for Christmas. Christmas trees, lights, decorations, Christmas cards or Facebook greetings, shopping, cooking and more.

Advent is a time of preparation. A time to receive again the coming of the Christ child into the world but also a time of going towards the coming again of the Messiah. It is a time of great expectation and great anticipation. We all know when Christmas is coming, but when will Jesus come again? The Bible says that no one knows the hour of his return. Not even the angels who announced his birth know when he will come again. It is fun and exciting to prepare for Christmas, but we must also be prepared for that day when Jesus comes again.

For the many who faithfully observe the consumer Christmas, Advent often is the prelude to disappointment. For many people Christmas just doesn't measure up to their fantasies or the fantasy of the Christmas movies. For those homeless and/or penniless, in our own country and throughout the world in countries suffering earthquake, flood or war the consumer Christmas is a fear or pressure that emphasizes their loneliness or their sorrow. But the Advent we celebrate in church has nothing at all to do with the number of shopping days left until Christmas and should be different. The lighting of the first Advent candle, the giving to our Advent box to show our love for others in difficult circumstances, the gradual decoration of the church, the preparation of the Christmas tree, the prayer and the praise all invite us to dream of a better world and allow expectant hope to rise in our hearts. Both the passage from Isaiah and the words from the Gospel of Matthew express the Christian hope for a different, brighter future.

When the prophet Isaiah thought about the advent of God, he envisioned a world unified in worship of God and committed to peace. Isaiah dreamed of a time when the nations and people of the world would join together in recognizing the sovereignty of God and declare, "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that God may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths." In the world of Isaiah's vision, war was a thing of the past, and the nations of the earth lived together in peace. The way we see Advent and Christmas is important and will determine our approach to the celebration. Is the essential work of Advent hanging decorations or is it more about opening our lives to the coming Christ and learning to live in peace? Will Christmas come only if we do all the right things to get ready for it? Or, is Christmas a gift from God that arrives whether we're ready for it or not?

Even a casual reading of the Bible reveals that the Advent of God is much more about surprise than predictability, more about revelation than decoration. The message of Advent is "Watch and wait! Be prepared because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect

him." God takes the initiative to break into our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. Christmas will come whether we get ready for it or not.

Today we switch from Year C back to Year A and into the gospel of Matthew who tells us that the disciples are talking to Jesus about the Second Coming. They want to know when that's going to happen, so they can be ready for it. Jesus reminds the disciples that in the days of Noah, people were living their lives with little concern for God. They were eating and drinking and marrying and celebrating. And suddenly, in those days, the rains came. Only Noah and his family were wise enough to listen to God's warning and seek salvation. Jesus tells his disciples that when he comes again it will be like that. Life will be going on as usual, with people doing what they normally do, buying and selling, working and playing, just doing ordinary things. And suddenly, without warning, the Lord will return. When that happens, some will be ready, and some will not. Some will remember Jesus' admonition to be ready for the coming of the kingdom, but some will not remember, and other things will have become more important to them. Those who have forgotten or disbelieved will be greatly disappointed on that day. The disciples asked Jesus about the timing of the Second Coming, but Jesus said that's the wrong question. Their question should be what are they supposed to do in the meantime, while they are awaiting his coming. The question is the same for us. What should we be doing? What is the quality of the life we are living today? How should we be prepared for Jesus coming again?

Jesus calls his disciples and us to live together in the world as Kingdom people, as Advent people with an active faith which challenges the ways of our world. Isaiah echoes that call. "O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Advent invites us to look to the future, but its most demanding challenge and most exciting promise is that the present is Kingdom time, too. Whatever our lives look like God sends the Messiah to come to life in it. Jesus has told us that the kingdom of God is "breaking in."

Tonight, we have an opportunity for some quiet space, not an easy thing to achieve in Advent, to reflect on the coming of the Messiah. Our prayer time on Tuesday presents another opportunity to share with others in preparing our souls, hearts and our minds for Advent and Christmas. The Hustings on Thursday involves us in wrestling with the many questions of how our country should be governed and by whom and presents the opportunity to prepare us for voting. Through the Advent season God invites us to live in the present aware that God often breaks in to our lives unexpectedly. We cannot know the time or the day of our next encounter with the holy. That's why there are FOUR Sundays in Advent!