

Christ is Coming Back: Advent

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Matthew 24:23-44

I'm not one for liturgy, many of you might know that, but one of the things that I really love in our nine o'clock service is the prayer of confession. We say these words together:

"Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we have sinned against you and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, and through our own deliberate fault."

I think they're amazing words.

I'd like to start with a moment of confession, because I've always had a bit of a love-hate relationship with waiting. I don't know whether anyone else has that as well. There are times when I'm not very patient at all. I may look as though I'm gliding around everywhere, but sometimes inside me there's a real impatience.

I could give you a whole list of things I struggle with, but I'll just give you one example. When we're going away as a family - myself, Dan, Millie and Alice - my lovely husband Dan decides that just as we are all walking out of the door he is going to clean the windows. Don't ask me why he does this, but he does it every single time. So we can all be sat in the car with all the bags, the dogs in the boot, tucked into the packed lunch, and Dan is cleaning the windows. So next time you hear that I'm going on holiday, please pray.

But Advent - the first season of the church year - begins with a word, and no, it's not chocolate: it's wait. We are told to wait. I looked up the word Advent and it comes from the Latin 'adventus'. I'm not very good at Latin, so if I've said that wrong I apologise, but that's how it's spelt. It means "coming" or "arrival".

So, Advent is a season where we wait and prepare for the coming of Jesus. And here's the thing: Advent isn't just about looking back to Bethlehem, to that baby in the manger with the donkeys and the kings and the camels and the lovely nativity scenes we see. It's also about looking forward to when Jesus will come again in glory.

So, Advent has this kind of double vision. We look back with gratitude at the birth of Jesus, but we also look forward in hope. And hope is something that we all desperately need. We live in a world that often feels short on hope. The news can be grim. Our lives can feel stretched and pulled in different directions, and sometimes our faith can feel a little bit tired.

But in the midst of all of that - the busyness, the sadness, the tiredness - Advent whispers to us, "Hold on. The story's not over yet. Just hold on."

And that's what this amazing passage from Matthew 24:23-44 is all about. It's Jesus reminding us that when the world seems uncertain, he is coming again, and his coming is the anchor of our hope.

In verse 23, Jesus begins by warning his disciples. He says:

"If anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it." – Matthew 24:23

In other words, "don't fall for false messiahs!"

Now you might think, "Well, I've never been tempted to follow a false messiah." If that's you, maybe you need that prayer of confession, because false hope comes in many disguises. False hope says, "Once you have the perfect job, then you'll be fulfilled." Or, "If you just fix this one thing about yourself, then you'll finally be happy." Or even, "Once everything calms down, then you'll find peace."

But these are only temporary hopes. They flicker and then fade. They don't last.

Jesus says his coming will be like lightning - unmistakable, powerful, brilliant. In verse 27 he says:

"For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." – Matthew 24:27

In other words, "you're not going to miss it." There are no secret codes, no conspiracy theories, no anxious searching. When Jesus returns, every eye will see him. We will all know that he is here.

That's the difference between false hope and true hope. False hope is noisy, demanding and fleeting. But true hope - the hope of Jesus - is steady, certain and eternal.

Then Jesus says something fascinating, and for those who don't like waiting, a bit frustrating. He says:

"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." – Matthew 24:36

"No one knows." That's a challenge, isn't it? Because we love to know things. We plan, we make lists and schedules, we have calendars and countdowns. Some of us probably have multiple Advent calendars - a chocolate one, a candle one, one with Christmas socks, and there is probably someone here who has one with tiny bottles of gin in it as well!

But Jesus doesn't give us a date. We can't schedule him into our diaries. Instead, he gives us an attitude: "be ready."

The hope that Jesus gives isn't about having all the answers. It is about trusting the one who is the answer. He is the answer.

And if Jesus himself doesn't know the day or the hour, then the man on Instagram who has a spreadsheet and is convinced Jesus is returning at 9am on the 2nd of November 3034 probably doesn't know either.

Our hope doesn't rest on knowing when Jesus will return. It rests on knowing that he will.

That means we don't need to panic about the state of the world. We don't need to despair when things look dark. The other day, as Alice was going out to school, she looked back at me and said, "Mum, I hope your day is full of joy and peace today." She lives in this world in such a carefree way, and I think we should take a bit of that on board. Let's have some joy and peace in our day.

Even when we can't see the plan, we know the person. And he is faithful. That is real hope - not wishful thinking, but confident expectation based on who God is.

Jesus then says in verse 37:

"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." - Matthew 24:37

In Noah's day, people were eating and drinking and marrying, just living ordinary life, and then suddenly the flood came. Notice that Jesus doesn't say they were wicked - just that they didn't know what was about to happen. They were too caught up in everyday life to see what God was doing.

And we can be the same. Busy, distracted, endlessly scrolling on our phones, rushing around - and we can miss the presence of God right in front of us.

How many times have we said, "God, where are you?" when actually, he is right there?

So I like to think of Advent as God's gentle alarm clock. It's not a big, blaring siren. It's a soft voice saying, "Wake up. Don't sleepwalk through your faith. Hope in me."

Jesus continues:

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." – Matthew 24:42

"Keep watch" sounds exhausting, but Jesus isn't saying "don't sleep". He's saying "don't drift". To keep watch is to live with spiritual alertness - to live as though today could be the day we meet him face to face.

That doesn't make us fearful; it makes us faithful. It means that in the ordinary - the school run, the work emails, the washing, the cleaning - we live with holy purpose. What we do now really matters. Every small act of kindness, every prayer prayed in faith, every moment of forgiveness - it all prepares us for the day when Jesus will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

That's what real hope looks like when it's alive. It doesn't make us lazy; it makes us loving. It doesn't make us escapists; it makes us engaged. And it doesn't make us afraid of the world - it helps us bring his light into it.

Right now, we live between two great moments: the first coming of Jesus, a quiet, humble birth in a stable, and the second coming of Jesus, glorious and unmistakable. We are living in the in-between - the waiting room of faith.

Waiting is never easy, but Advent tells us that waiting is not wasted time. It is holy time. God does his best work in waiting. He shaped Noah's faith in waiting. He strengthens our hope in waiting.

Hope is like a muscle. It grows when we use it, especially in uncertainty.

So we wait - not passively, but purposefully. Not wringing our hands, but opening them in faith.

If we really believe that Jesus is coming again, it will change how we live today. Maybe that means choosing forgiveness where resentment has taken root. Maybe it means daring to hope again after disappointment. Maybe it means slowing down and noticing how God is already at work in our lives.

We light candles during Advent. But the hope of Advent isn't fragile - it is a steady flame. "It declares: the light has come, and the light is coming again."

Maybe that's the challenge for us this Advent: to carry hope into our homes, into our workplaces, into our conversations. Because when the world grows darker, it is our job to shine the hope of Jesus even brighter.

Where else would our hope come from? We can go for lovely walks and feel better for a while, but where is the hope when everything goes still and quiet? What is our hope unless Jesus is at the centre of our being?

His death, his resurrection, and his return - that is our hope.

As I finish, Jesus ends this passage by saying:

"So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." – Matthew 24:44

That isn't meant to scare us; it's meant to steady us.

So, this Advent, let us be people who stay awake. Not fearful, but faithful. Not restless, but ready. Not hopeless, but hopeful.

Because the same Jesus who came in love will come again in glory. Every injustice, every tear, every sorrow will finally end in him.

As we light the first candle of Advent - the candle of hope - we remember that hope isn't something fragile that we cling to. Hope is a person who holds on to us.

So we pray, with the Church across the ages: "Come, Lord Jesus."

Amen.