

## **Advent: Four Weeks and Four Carols**

It is true. The older one becomes the faster the years seem to fly past. I cannot believe that Advent, a time that has been celebrated by Christians since the fourth century, has arrived once more.

The word Advent comes from the Latin word "adventus" which means coming. There are four Sundays in Advent which anticipate the first coming of Jesus Christ into the world on Christmas Day. Whilst the lights, decorations, parties and other festivities in normal times might suggest that Christmas has already arrived, the Christian Church has a different message. Christ is coming but he has not come yet!

In Advent, we are encouraged to leave, for a while, the merry making to the rest of the world, to take some time out and to reflect upon firstly our own lives and secondly our relationship with God so that we are ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day.

We are also reminded that Christ, who came into the world as a defenceless baby, will come again as a heavenly king in all his glory bringing judgement to his world and to his people.

When I was a child I would go with my parents each Christmas Eve afternoon to listen to my brothers sing in the Church Choir Boys' Carol Service. They were truly memorable occasions. When I think back upon those services I am reminded of the familiar tunes, the beautiful words and the wealth of Christian truth set out in those well-loved carols.

I hope that you can join me this Advent as I reflect upon just four of them.

With my love to you all,

Jackie

***"Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed".***

***Romans 13:11***

## **O Little Town Of Bethlehem**

O little town of Bethlehem,  
How still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by;  
Yet in the dark street shineth  
The everlasting Light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary,  
And fathered all above,  
While mortals sleep, the angels keep  
Their watch of wondering love.  
O morning stars, together  
Proclaim the holy birth  
And praises sing to God, the King,  
And peace to men on earth.

How silently, how silently,  
The wondrous Gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven.  
No ear may hear His coming,  
But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive Him still,  
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin and enter in,  
Be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell:  
Oh, come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Emmanuel!

***"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Micah 5 verse 2***

The words to this beautiful carol were written by Rev. Philip Brooks in 1865 after visiting Bethlehem. In his day Bethlehem would have had a couple of thousand inhabitants. Maybe it did seem quiet and peaceful to him. I doubt it was quiet the night that Jesus was born. Bethlehem after all was a small, insignificant town in an occupied land full of visitors who, we are told had turned up for the census. Micah might have prophesied that the Messiah would be born there. It was the birthplace of King David. But otherwise it didn't have much going for it. After all, when the wise men were following the star and seeking out the new born king they immediately went to Jerusalem, the capital city. A much grander and more suitable place for the birth of God's son.

**What do you think is the significance of Jesus' birthplace?**

Bethlehem was not quiet when I visited it. We were on a day trip from Cyprus, some twenty years or more ago. I found it to be a bustling, rundown, somewhat dirty and very noisy town full of haggling marketers and gift shops selling tacky souvenirs. We joined the long queue of tourists waiting to enter the Church of the Nativity. This was built by Helena, the mother of Constantine the first Christian emperor to mark the site of the birth of Jesus. Tour guides argued with each other and pushed and shoved their parties down into the grotto. People were herded together whilst trying to catch a glimpse of the star that was built into the floor and marked the spot of the manger.

And then I saw her. A nun. Kneeling silently, offering her prayers, oblivious of the chaos around her. She was transfixed.

Most of the tourists were busy with their cameras, snapping photos and trying to record the moment. The nun was enjoying the moment and truly receiving blessings from God's heaven.

**Spend a moment to think about the ways in which God is blessing you this Advent.**

Have you noticed that the last verse of the carol ends with a prayer? It asks that Jesus, God's holy child would come to us, forgive us our sins, enter our lives, and be born in us today.

**What added value does Jesus bring to your life?**

**How can you share this extra dimension with others?**

## **While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks**

While shepherds watched their flocks by night,  
All seated on the ground,  
The angel of the Lord came down,  
And glory shone around.

“Fear not!” said he, for mighty dread  
Had seized their troubled mind;  
“Glad tidings of great joy I have  
To you and all mankind.

“To you, in David’s town, this day  
Is born of David’s line  
A Saviour, who is Christ the Lord,  
And this shall be the sign:

“The heav’nly Babe you there shall find  
To human view displayed,  
All meanly wrapped in swathing bands,  
And in a manger laid.”

Thus spake the seraph and forthwith  
Appeared a shining throng  
Of Angels praising God on high,  
Who thus addressed their song:

“All glory be to God on high,  
And to the earth be peace,  
God will henceforth from heav’n to men  
Begin and never cease.”

***"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." Luke 2 verses 8 -9***

When Jesus was born shepherds were at the bottom of the pile of Palestinian society, on a par with tax collectors and dung sweepers. Shepherds were thought to be dirty, smelly, and ritually unclean. They were deprived of all civil rights. They were usually referred to in belittling terms. To buy wool, milk or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would not be theirs to sell. Shepherds were not allowed to fulfil judicial offices or appear in court as witnesses. They were classified by the Jewish teachers as sinners. They had to look after their flocks on the desert plains outside the city. They had no time to worship in either synagogue or temple. Doubtless some shepherds deserved their poor reputation. Who is to say that they all did?

And yet ... .. Luke tells us that the greatest birth announcement of all time came first to a motley group of shepherds.

**Why do you think that the shepherds were the first to hear about Jesus' birth?**

**Who would be first today and why?**

The shepherds were clearly troubled by the angel's message. Yet they decided that it was worth investigating and they hurried back into town. God often comes to us when we are least expecting it. He comes to interrupt the ordinariness of our lives with his extraordinary presence. Then we have no option but to follow where he takes us and to do what he says.

**Think if there was a time in your life when God "disturbed your life". Recall the events, reflect upon what happened at the time and afterwards.**

The angelic host praised God and brought a message of peace to the earth. There certainly was not much peace in Jesus' time. As we think about our world we probably do not see much peace today.

**What does peace mean to you? Is it an absence of war and conflict, or is it something more?**

**Spend some time praying for people you know who need God's peace in their lives.**

**Pray also for troubled situations in our world today.**

## Joy To The World

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;  
Let men their songs employ;  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as the curse is found,  
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

***"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John 1 verse 14***

In Isaac Watts's day church music was written according to prescribed patterns. He was inspired to break out and write this lively hymn after meditating upon Psalm 98. In verse 4, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise."

**Think about the praise songs that you like listening to or singing as Christmas approaches. Why do you like them? What do they teach you about God?**

Joy to the World isn't a Christmas carol as such but it is sung frequently as Christmas approaches and it is often broadcast by the media. However, if you read the words carefully you will see that there is no particular focus upon the incarnation or the birth of Jesus, nor is there any traditional Christmas imagery. Rather, Watts is proclaiming the fact that the world should be joyful because the Lord *is* come. The lyrics speak about Christ's rule and reign, in the here and now as well as in the future.

What do we mean by the word joy? Joy is not based on circumstances. In fact, joy may not even prevent us from experiencing negative emotions. Rather, joy is a deep-seated sense of assurance in what God has done and what He is doing. It is truly a gift that comes directly from God.

**What impact does the kingship of Christ have in your life?**

**What does it mean to you to be joyful?**

As we recalled earlier the season of Advent is twofold. It marks the beginning of the Christian year as it looks forward to the birth of Jesus. It also looks to the end of all time when Jesus Christ will come again, not as a young, defenceless baby but as a heavenly king in all his glory bringing judgement to this world and to his people.

Watts's words remind us that there is hope amid darkness, trial and tribulations. They anticipate the joy that Christ's future reign will bring and remind us that when Christ comes again, sin will be wiped out and truth and grace will rule.

**Read the lyrics of the hymn again in the light of Christ's second coming. What new meanings do you find?**

**How can we make sure that we are ready for the return of Christ?**

## **O Come All Ye Faithful**

O come, all ye faithful,  
Joyful and triumphant!  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;  
Come and behold him  
Born the King of Angels:

O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
Christ the Lord.

God of God,  
Light of Light,  
Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;  
Very God,  
Begotten, not created:

Sing, choirs of angels,  
Sing in exultation,  
Sing, all ye citizens of Heaven above!  
Glory to God  
In the highest:

Yea, Lord, we greet thee,  
Born this happy morning;  
Jesus, to thee be glory given!  
Word of the Father,  
Now in flesh appearing!

**“All the inhabitants of the earth will fall down and worship him ...”**

**Revelation 13 verse 8a**

The origins of this carol go back hundreds of years, perhaps to a Cistercian monastery. The Latin title is *Adeste Fidelis*. I remember that well. We had to learn the Latin version of the carol when I was at school. The carol is a call for God’s faithful, joyous people to contemplate the “King of the Angels” in Bethlehem’s manger.

I remember vividly the first time I went to midnight Holy Communion on Christmas Eve. I was nearly 16. The church was packed and the congregation was jubilant. What a delight it was to sing the final verse of this Carol.

Yea, Lord we greet you, born this happy morning ... ..

Yes, it had really happened. Jesus was born. It was an incredibly special moment.

**Look back to past Christmases and recall some of your special moments. What do you learn from them when you think about them today?**

The chorus of the carol is repeated again and again. It calls us to adore Jesus. In this context it means to be fond of, or to regard him with loving admiration and ultimately to worship him as God. How can we not respond to that summons?

**Think about the different ways in which we can show Jesus our adoration.**

Later, I realised that some of the Christology in this carol was a little suspect. The second verse is often omitted for that reason. The words do not really make that much sense. I’d probably also disagree with the idea of Jesus appearing in flesh. His life was so much more than a mere appearance.

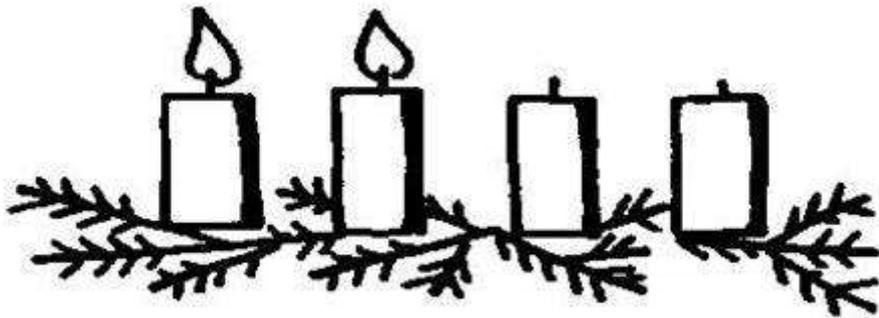
Maybe I am being a little pedantic? The reality is that nothing can detract from the amazing truth that in the life of Jesus Christ we meet God.

So, let us prepare to greet Jesus Christ on Christmas Day in a special way. Let us also remember that each new day, morning after morning God comes to us and wakes us up with signs of his love. Each new day also brings another opportunity to look for God at work.

**Spend some time in contemplation. Where do you see God at work today?**

## **The Collect for Advent Sunday**

Almighty God,  
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness  
and to put on the armour of light,  
now in the time of this mortal life,  
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;  
that on the last day,  
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty  
to judge the living and the dead,  
we may rise to the life immortal;  
through him who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen



Have a blessed Advent and a joyful Christmas.