

Sunday 1st December 2024 - Advent Hope

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0 : 00] Morning everyone. Great to see you. I know it's a bit damp out there, isn't it? Oh, there we go. But it is that time of year again. Don't be too enthusiastic, that's all right.

The decorations are going up, the Christmas lights are going up. Maybe you've already made a start. You know, the mince pies, the turkey gravy, the tubs of Quality Street and Cadbury's Heroes are well and truly stacked high, aren't they, on the supermarket shelves?

And to be fair, I think they've been there since early November. And of course, all of the Christmas adverts are out there now.

I think my personal favourite probably is Kevin the Carrot. I know Nigel likes that one. Has everyone seen that? I'm not going to be showing the adverts, but just to say.

His mates sort of free the spirit of Christmas from the humbugs this year. That's the theme. And I know it's a bit cheeky, but of all the adverts, I think it speaks to something of the importance of Christmas with a nod to Dickens and the spirit of Christmas.

[1 : 25] So hands up if you've got one of these in your home. Yeah, okay. And that first door, has it been raided? Yeah.

Yeah, good one, Tom. And a mince pie as well. Oh, mince pie? Oh, mince pie advent calendar. That's good.

Well, if chocolate isn't your thing, and of course there are other brands available, I should say. If chocolate isn't your thing, you can always get a cheese-themed advent calendar.

How about that? It's not for me. And of course, yesterday, as Matt was saying, we had our Christmas fair here at St. John's.

And as always, lots of families and folk coming along to enjoy the event and delicious turkey stuffing baps with cranberry sauce and plenty of fun.

[2 : 20] And I know for many, plenty of hard work for all those involved in setting up and running all the different stores and the grotto and all the different things. But people really value that sense of community.

And maybe those that sort of come along wouldn't necessarily, if they're not part of St. John's, describe themselves as particularly religious. And I'm not sure I would either.

But it's their church. Yeah? And for some, the carol service and the Christmas Eve special offers an even deeper kind of spiritual connection.

I guess that kind of gets under the surface. You know, the deeper reason for the season. So if we went down to Sankey's Corner, what do you think people would say if we asked them the question, what does Christmas mean to you?

Well, it's not Sankey's, but let's have a listen to what people say when they're asked that question. Christmas means to me, it means family.

[3 : 38] It means being close to the ones you love and remembering all the good things you have in life. The time when you can spend time with your families, eat loads of food. I'm a new dad and my son was born in March.

So I'm very, very excited about spending the day with him and seeing him open his presents. And then see really his reaction and my family's or his grandparents' reaction.

Plus there's always the advantage of getting a day off work, which is always great. What I really love is on Christmas Eve, going to Midnight Mass and everybody coming together and all the candles being lit and singing carols and songs and things like that.

And seeing all my friends. Presents get told me, family. Money. Yeah. Money. Clothes. Peas. Yeah. Nice big dinner. Yeah. Turkey. Dinner's the best.

Yeah. It means that I get to eat like good food that's not from Iceland that costs a pound and is covered in salt. And I don't have to cook it for once. I don't have to do my washing either.
[4 : 38] I get to sleep in a nice comfy bed and my house is warm. Which is, in uni, my house has no heating and my bed is very much hard. Being together. Just having a nice time.

And thinking of people less fortunate, I suppose. I think it means family. I think the religious aspect is one thing, but I think it's more about family getting together.
For me, anyway. I live in the United States, so I come over for Christmas to be with my family and it's important. Well, really, it's meeting the grandchildren, I suppose, really, you know, and they're all being together.

They all sing little songs and we all have a good time, you know, I mean. And it'll be lovely, you know, there, yeah. To me, Christmas means spending time with your family and friends and having a good old drink.

All good things, isn't it? All good things, yeah. Particularly spending time with family, the joy of celebrating, giving and receiving.

[5 : 43] Yes, pretty much what you'd expect to hear, isn't it? And I'm guessing you'd get that, a similar response, if you went to any shopping centre around the UK.

If you had time to talk to people, all those good things that were shared in that video, all the good things that we look forward to in Christmas, okay, you might, if you spent time with people, you might actually, if they were honest, get a different answer.

People that feel that Christmas can be quite a stressful time of year, you know, with unrealistic expectations.

And to be oh so cheerful and merry. Not that that's wrong. And for some, rushing around shopping to buy all the things that go to make for the perfect Christmas.

Only really they don't. Or maybe watching everyone else do all those things, but when there's just not enough money to go around to do that.

[6 : 54] Or even worse, getting into debt to make that special day happen. And whilst Christmas Day, you know, with family and friends can be a time of real celebration and joy, it can also be a very lonely time for some.

And confrontational for others. Every year, reported cases of domestic violence to the police spike by well over 20% during the Christmas period.

Tis the season to be jolly. Fa la la la la, la la la la. It's complicated, isn't it? My guess is there's quite a few people that have mixed feelings about Christmas.

I know I do. So what then are these next four weeks of leading up to Christmas Day all about then? Well, as these days get shorter and the light starts to fade, it can feel like everything is closing in on us.

You know, it's kind of like long, dark nights, isn't it? And Advent has been part of the liturgy, I think, of the church since its introduction in the 4th century.

[8 : 17] It's always been intended to speak of something into our deep-rooted fear of the dark and the cold. You know, just to make it through winter.

It was a big thing in medieval times and unfortunately still is for some people today. And so Advent then is a time to kind of strip things down, I think.

A time to spend in prayer, a time in fasting and to act with generosity. To let our kind of bared souls, if you like, recall what we know beyond the dark.

The light is fading, but there is an Advent coming. Divine coming, the one who is the source of all life, one who comes to be with us and in us, even, well especially, in darkness.

One who brings a new beginning. And so in this dark season, alongside the rest of all creation, this time of waiting expectantly, these are the nights before Christmas.

[9 : 33] And to be honest, right now, these nights are feeling pretty long. The shadows are pretty deep, aren't they? War in Ukraine, in Israel, in Lebanon, and Gaza, and now Syria, and on and on.

The planet's climate continues to warm as global fossil fuel pollution continues to rise. The hottest nine years recorded in human history are the last nine years.

2016 to 2024, with 2025 on track to be the hottest year of them all. And then there's the political climate.

The arena in which we're supposed to be able to sort all these problems out. Issues with war and peace and climate crisis. And in that arena, things seem to be more polarised and dysfunctional

than they have ever before.

So yeah, these nights are feeling pretty long. And I guess the easy thing to do is to go click and turn off the news, isn't it? Yeah, I get that.

[10:44] Don't watch it. It just feels too depressing, too overwhelming. And maybe, you know, maybe for our mental well-being, that's actually good advice. But of course, looking the other way doesn't mean all this stuff goes away.

And yes, yes, there are real signs of encouragement. Okay? God's kingdom breaking through the darkness.

Stories of compassion and kindness and generosity. Even in the midst of all this stuff. But it can still feel like we're a long way from where we should be.

A long way from home. And I don't think we're the first to feel this way. This first candle on the Advent wreath is often called the prophet's candle.

Some of the oldest written scrolls that make up the Bible are found in the book of Isaiah. It's got 66 chapters in total.

[11:55] The first 39 are often called First Isaiah. They're written something like 2,800 years ago by a Judean prophet. The next 15 chapters are called Second Isaiah.

They're written around 200 or so years later in a totally different situation. And by someone else. The Babylonian armies have invaded.

Many Israelites have been forced to live in exile in Babylon. And now a new prophet is assuring them that a return home is imminent.

And then the last 10 chapters, what's called Third Isaiah are written after the return from the exile. And as the Israelites struggle is starting all over again after being away for something like 50 or 60 years.

So, you get invaded. You lose your family. You lose your home. You're forced to live in exile. And then you're allowed to return back to start all over again in a war-torn place after years of corruption, economic disparity, oppression, corruption and struggle.

[13:03] Sound familiar? Hmm. And then right at the end of the book of Isaiah, in chapter 64, the prophet cries out, Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

And Lord, don't be angry with us. Yeah, we know we're complicit. Our religion is part of the problem. Our economy is part of the problem. Our hearts are part of the problem.

But you, Lord, you are our only hope. And that's the longing. That's the wish. That's the want. That's the ask to which Christmas is the answer.

Isaiah calls on God to be with us. God with us. Emmanuel. I think what Isaiah is giving voice to here is an ancient practice that kind of runs, if you know your Bible, runs throughout the whole of the Bible.

Not so much now as a practice. It's the practice of lament, of calling on God, pleading with God, arguing with God, wrestling, demanding that God make good on his promises.

[14:24] You find it in the prophets. You find it in Psalms. And you find it in the Gospels. Right down there to Jesus on the cross.

Crying out words of lament from Psalm 22. To my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I wonder if sometimes we just want to make things right.

You know, our gut reaction is to rush in and to alleviate the hurt and the negative emotions we and others feel in different situations.

Because it makes us feel so uncomfortable. And lament challenges us to linger a while longer in all the mess.

Our natural inclination is to, I think, to clean up the broken things. But in lament, we learn to just sit like Job in the ashes.

[15:27] Or to sit compassionately with others. And for now, for now, not try to make things whole again.

Just to grieve over the reality of the broken places and the broken people in them. How easy is that? Lament is not despair.

Despair. It's not whining. It's not a cry into the void. It's a heartfelt cry to God. To be in our silent prayers.

Maybe out loud when you're on your own. Okay? On a long walk and you just want to cry out. It's the honest prayer of the heavy hearted.

Trying to put a name to the truth of loss. So that we might heal. That we might recover joy and remember God's goodness.

[16:31] Now I know that's all a bit heavy. And maybe the nights before Christmas are probably not the place we would choose to be.

Tempting as it might be, Advent is not a time to kind of simply fill up the waiting with distractions and busyness. That's a very easy thing to do.

Or to ignore or to run away from the darkness. It's a time, I think, for honest reflection. An opportunity to be real with God.

And to ready our hearts. You see, the darkness has always been here. But the light shines in the darkness.

And the darkness has not overcome it. Advent calls us to wait and work with hope inside the darkness. And yeah, the light is fading.

[17:38] But there is an Advent. A divine light coming. One who is the source of all life. One who comes to be with us.

And in us in the darkness. One who brings a new beginning. In the beginning was the Word.

And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through Him all things were made. Without Him, nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life.

And that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it.

[19:07] There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light. So that through Him all might believe.

He Himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world. And though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own. But His own did not receive Him.

Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, nor a husband's will, but born of God.

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.

[20:19] In the beginning was the word. It's not so much that Advent is about waiting for the little baby Jesus to be born.

That happened 2,000 years ago. What we really celebrate, and the way that the message puts it, is the word, God, became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.

God with us. That is good news. And the most commonly used word for hope in the New Testament is *elpis*.

There's no sense of doubt attached to this word. It's a confident expectation or an assurance based upon a solid foundation.

And maybe for some of us, as we approach this Christmas, in this season of Advent, you know, things aren't great. Stuff we're struggling with. Maybe situations that haven't worked out the way that we'd hoped for.

[21:39] And maybe just to try to kind of make it out as anything different kind of feels disingenuous. But know this, God is always working for our good.

But we don't always see immediate change in our circumstances. Rather, I think he changes us slowly, drawing us into a new way of being, of seeing and thinking.

And in that place, we discover an inner peace and a strength to endure kind of what life throws at us. So we choose faith instead of fear.

And it's not that life is necessarily any easier or that we no longer have to deal with those circumstances. But now we come with a steadfast hope.

A living hope. Deep within us. So this Advent, may we know that we are and have always been with God.

[22:49] That he is for us. And that he is with us. Emmanuel. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.