



Advent Sunday  
3 December 2023

*'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope.'* Psalm 130.5

Dear friends,

What picture comes to mind when you think of Advent? Candles, calendars, great carols and choirs? Wonderful though these things may be, they rarely touch the depths of the desperateness of waiting we encounter in the Psalms, prophets and the New Testament readings which accompany us through the season. In November 1943, whilst imprisoned in Tegel Prison by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents recalling an Advent card he had once seen depicting a Nativity by the German painter Albrecht Altdorfer, '...in which one sees the holy family with the manger amidst the rubble of a broken down house.' That seems an apt image for our time as we remember the brokenness of our world and multiple conflicts including those in the Holy Land and the Ukraine.

Bonhoeffer in another of his letters from prison famously described Advent as being like a prison cell in which the door is locked and can only be opened from the outside. This may seem an unusual description. But a closer look at Bonhoeffer's writings on Advent indicate that he is pointing to the tension within which we live the Christian life: we are both delivered and waiting for our deliverance. Because of this we live as those who have already made a radical break with the world of sin and death and yet live towards the redeemed future which God is preparing and has not yet appeared.

I wonder if this has something to tell us as we live through a difficult period of time in world history. You may be aware that the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem will this year, throughout Advent and Christmas, remain unlit in memory of all those who have been killed in the current conflict in the Holy Land. Like the picture of the Holy Family, many families will experience Christmas in the midst of the rubble. Many Methodist churches will be leaving the second Advent candle unlit throughout Advent as a sign of solidarity with the Christians of Bethlehem. Some Methodist churches will find other ways of expressing this solidarity. In themselves, these may seem small acts of little consequence in comparison to the gravity of events and the fear and uncertainty they generate. But small acts of this kind are a form of Advent testimony which remind us that this season is not just about the birth of peace, hope, joy and love, '...but the call to nurture and to nourish it', (Rebecca Wilson). In every small act of hope and solidarity we are testifying to the future that God is preparing

in which sin, death and conflict has been overcome. Of course, small acts can sometimes lead to greater ones and in themselves nurture within us greater compassion, conscience and awareness.

As we travel through the season of Advent I pray that we might hold the brokenness of our world in the light of Christ and hope and work for a world in which peace, joy and love might flourish.

Yours in Christ,

Richard

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