

Dear Friends,

Last year, I bought a highly recommended book¹ containing sermons for Advent to use as personal preparation for the season. Opening it at the end of November, I was mortified to discover that the author began her sermons a few weeks before Advent Sunday. There was too much to read to get in step with Advent last year. I put it aside for this year with the plan to start it earlier. A friend who had read the book assured me it would be worth giving it the attention it deserved that way.

And so that's what I did. I began it recently, and from the first page it's a rewarding read. I knew there was a certain lack of unity in Advent practices among the worldwide church, but I didn't realise just how much. I thought that was pretty much limited to arguing over what the themes were for the four Sundays.

But no, it's much more than that. I knew it was a penitential season, much like Lent, and that made sense to me. We place a lot of weight on John the Baptist calling people to repent because the Messiah is about to appear in their midst. (And the current Lectionary goes to town on this, often devoting two Sundays to John and his message.)

But in my ignorance, I never knew that historically Advent had once been celebrated for seven Sundays before Christmas, not four. And I also didn't know that in the past Christians had treated it as the end of the Christian Year, not the beginning. For us, the Christian Year ends on the Last Sunday Before Advent (so-called Stir-Up Sunday), which is the Feast of Christ the King, and I get the logic of that. We end on a note when Christ reigns unchallenged and every enemy, death included, has been defeated.

So why did some Christians celebrate Advent as the conclusion of the Christian Year? Because they recognised something that is present in our observance, but which we often overlook, namely, Advent is not only about preparing for the Incarnation, the first coming of Christ, it is also about preparing for his appearing again in glory, his second coming. If we include that, then it is a fitting climax to the year.

And by holding the first and second comings of Christ together in tension, Advent reminds us that we live in that place of tension between the two comings of Christ, 'the time between the times'. We know that Christ has come, bringing the salvation of his kingdom, but we also live with the stress of

knowing that not all of the kingdom has come yet. It hasn't come in the world, and it certainly hasn't come fully in each of us.

Thus, Advent puts us in the place where humankind is entirely dependent upon the action of God. We were made beautiful but broken, and we have a beautiful destiny, but we cannot heal our brokenness. We cannot depend on simply having a religious disposition, as Israel learned when she was exiled to Babylon and all the old ways were destroyed. As Israel learned at that time to cry out for God to rend the heavens and come down (Isaiah 64:1), so Advent gives us the two markers of God's intervention: his disguised invasion at the Incarnation, and his glorious reappearing still to come.

It is right, then, that we speak of the 'Advent hope', and this would be a good season to fortify that hope. The book I've already footnoted and which has inspired these thoughts retails in the £15-£20 range online and is in any case probably more suited to those who have done some theological study, such as our Local Preachers.

If you want an alternative, a shorter, simpler (and cheaper - £5.99) title looking at the four spontaneous songs in the Christmas stories then try 'They Sang' by Amy Scott Robinson². Amy is a children's worker and a poet, making her language both simple and vivid. Byfleet and St Michael's churches, which are both part of the Byfleet Churches Together group, will be following this each Tuesday evening in Advent on Zoom. If your church isn't running an Advent course, maybe you'd like to join us? Gillaine Holland or I can give you the Zoom details.

But whatever you do, make a decision now to make active preparation for our coming Lord. You still have a couple of weeks – use them!

Christ has come. Christ is coming. Come, Lord Jesus.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Faulkner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dave Faulkner

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*; Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2018.

² Amy Scott Robinson, *They Sang: An Advent course based on the four songs in the Christmas story*; Rattlesden: Kevin Mayhew, 2021.