

Expectation



The butcherbirds pictured above are waiting on our door mat in expectation for some crumbs from me—crumbs, which are not really good for them! They know that it is time for morning tea when their hope may be fulfilled.

As we draw closer to the end of the year, we are confronted earlier and earlier by advertisements on the television and elsewhere, telling us that Christmas is coming in 6 weeks, 5 weeks, 4 weeks and so on. We can feel almost pressured to get ready for Christmas by buying our meat, puddings and gifts to celebrate this holiday.

I find it somewhat puzzling, when less people are attending Church services and the average age of our Church congregation is rising, that everyone is being urged to prepare for the Christian festival of Christmas. What are non-Christians actually preparing for or expecting? Is it just a yearly ritual in the heat of summer when people gather with family and friends to eat meals,

exchange presents, and have Santa bring toys for children? I do not know.

As members of the Church, we are urged to prepare for Christmas during the preceding four weeks of Advent. We believe that God, incredibly, over 2,000 years ago entered our world as a vulnerable baby needing complete care from his mother and father. What do we prepare for and expect at Christmas in our world today?

The season of Advent is more than just a time to remember the birth of Jesus, because Jesus is with us and comes to us all the time if we are ready to receive him. Advent is a time of expectation when we can reflect on the four Sunday gospel readings and apply them to our lives.

In the gospel reading for Advent 1, (Matthew 24:36-44) we are told to be ready for the second coming of Christ at a date unknown to us. It is when Jesus Christ will come as judge to bring the world completely under God's reign. We are expected to live with the uncertainty of what will happen in the future, and we know how stressful this can be at times. I suggest that such a situation directs us to strengthen our trust in God who is in control of all things. Whatever happens, we are to faithfully live out our lives each day loving God and one another. It is not always easy, but here on earth we can be encouraged by seeing glimpses of God's love and reign in our world.

The reading for Advent 2, (Matthew 3:1-12) concerns John the Baptist who instructs the people to prepare for the coming of the Lord and the kingdom of heaven by repenting of their sins. We may apply this message to our lives by thinking of it as involving a sort of spring-cleaning of our minds and hearts in order to better accept and reveal God's love. In preparation for Christmas, we may review some things in our lives that we try to hide, and may be rather ashamed of or angry about, and open them up to God for forgiveness, cleansing and healing.

The Advent 3 reading, (Matthew 11:2-11) also concerns John the Baptist. He has been imprisoned by King Herod, and is having doubts about Jesus' identity. John sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he really is the expected Messiah. Jesus replies by reminding John what he has heard and seen, how he, Jesus, has brought healing to people, raised the dead and given hope to the poor. We might like to ask ourselves, how we identify Jesus the Christ? Is he the one we

read about in the Bible and whom we believe heals and cares about *all* people? Or do we have doubts? Is he also the one we try to follow, love and trust each day?

Finally, in the reading for Advent 4, (Matthew 1:18-25) we have a brief account of the birth of Jesus. It certainly does not sound like an ideal time for Joseph and Mary. Mary's conceiving of Jesus was suspect, and his birth takes place away from home and family, in a shelter for animals. Everything seemed to go horribly wrong with God's plan for this entry of God into our world as a helpless baby. You would think God could do better. And yet, this baby is called 'Immanuel', 'God with us'. We are shown that our God is a God who will be with us wherever we are and in whatever messes we find ourselves. Further, in those places amazing things may happen. This baby is to be called Jesus, Saviour.

God's actions are definitely not always what we expect, nor is God's presence always where or when we expect it, but if we open ourselves to God's love we can be assured that Christ is present with us, healing and loving us not just on Christmas day but every day. When we are depressed, in pain, or feel alone, deserted or useless we can confidently turn to God and find comfort.

As the butcherbirds in the picture come in hope and expectation at morning tea time, so we too can live each day in hope and expectation, (but with more certainty than they have!) and trust in a God who is ultimately in control everywhere of all things, all the time, and loves each of us.

*Sister Helen CSC
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