

Advent 1

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John 1¹⁻¹⁸, Romans 5⁶⁻¹¹

A train rumbles into the station with warning bell clanging. The doors open, the uniformed conductor steps out, and you climb on board and find your way to a seat. When you look around the car, you see tickets clipped on the top of occupied seats, paid for with hard-earned money. Those tickets displayed at each seat are the special concern of the conductor, who walks through the car to punch tickets and confirm that you paid for the right to take this ride. If the conductor finds you without a ticket, you will either pay on the spot or be escorted off the train at the next stop. To ride this train, what matters is the paid ticket. This is righteousness by works.

Righteousness by grace, on the other hand, works in a very different way. God's train pulls into the station, warning bell clanging. The doors open and the conductor steps out. Masses of people crowd on board and find their seats, for most everyone wants to ride this train to the city where people never die. Eventually the conductor walks through the train to see if everyone belongs on board. But on this train the conductor is not looking for tickets clipped to the top of seats. In fact, anyone who tries to pay for the right to be on the train will be escorted promptly from the train at the very next stop. That's right; no one can earn the right to be on this train. What the conductor looks for as he walks seat by seat through the car is the penniless people he knows by name, the people who are his friends and who completely lack the means to pay. These poverty stricken people climb on board with only one hope: they believe in the generosity of their conductor friend. This is righteousness by grace. A ride on God's train is a gift. By our standards, it's unfair. It's scandalous. But like it or not, it's heaven's way.

Jesus comes... not because we are ready... not because we are aware... nor because of our obedience.

Jesus comes... because God loves the world and acts in accordance with that love. The question is, can we believe that Jesus comes to us for precisely the same reason?

We enter today into what is called the 'season of advent' which simply means the time of Jesus' coming. To a greater or lesser degree we are all here today because Jesus came to us. Yes, we might hark back to a time when we responded to a call to believe and receive Christ and this is always important in a relationship because it provides a certain proof that we acknowledge the other. I have responded to God in this manner on a number of occasions. What I am convinced of, however, is that I stand before you this morning believing in the God of the Bible and expressing my faith and hope in that God not because I came to Him but because He first came to me; not because I deserved to be in God's Kingdom but because He wanted me in the Kingdom; not because I was clever or willing or strong enough to respond to God but because God loved me and came to me in all my need and sin and offered Himself again and again. That is why I can stand before you this morning and preach the Gospel. This is the primary theme of the advent (coming) of Christ.

It's interesting to me that over the years I've been around the Church it is more often than not people who've been brought up in Church who have the greatest problem believing in God's love for them. A researcher interviewed a group of Christian students in a university in the States found that the most consistent underlying belief in this group of high performing students was the notion that God was **disappointed in them**. I wonder if you believe God is disappointed in you today? I wonder if you really struggle when it comes to faith to focus on anything other than your own inability to come up to **'the mark?'** I wonder if faith for you is synonymous with guilt? If it is – you haven't discovered yet the true nature of God's love and neither have you understood the basis of the Gospel. In the advent we see this basis laid bare.

It is not found in us, in the knowledge, faith and love of we who are believers. Knowledge of God, faith in Him and love are good things but they can never replace the grace of God. In John we read that when Jesus came He came to a people who did not recognize Him and, indeed, who rejected Him...

**¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.
(John 1)**

All the knowledge of the Jews – for they knew the prophecies about Jesus and were expecting a Messiah – was for nothing. When He came they did not recognize Him and refused to believe Him. What **we** know, **our** gift of faith and even **our** love cannot replace or, indeed, truly comprehend the Christ Child. They might well reflect it but they cannot stand in place of it. And yet, our guilt around Jesus so often betrays the fact that in our heart of hearts we expect it to.

During his years at Oxford George Whitfield became associated with the “Holy Club,” a group of serious churchmen committed to a methodically rigorous regimen of religious observance with the brothers John and Charles Wesley as the leading spirits. Their remarkable earnestness manifested itself in ascetic living, regular devotions, charitable works, and solemn discussion, but it was unenlightened by the Gospel. “I began to fast twice a week for thirty-six hours together,” Whitefield wrote in later years, “prayed many times a day and received the sacrament every Lord’s Day. I fasted myself almost to death all the forty days of Lent, during which I made it a point of duty never to go less than three times a day to public worship, besides seven times a day to my private prayers. Yet I knew no more that I was to be born a new creature in Christ Jesus than if I had never been born at all.” Deeply dissatisfied at heart, the reading of a book with the title *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* by Henry Scougal made plain to him the necessity of personal commitment to and union with Christ as Saviour and Lord. Desperately seeking this relationship, he increased his self-affliction to such an extent that his weakness brought him near to death. At last, however, the grace of God enabled him to trust solely in Christ instead of in his own religious exercises: “God was pleased to remove the heavy load,” he testified, “to enable me to lay hold of His dear Son by a living faith, and by giving me the Spirit of adoption, to seal me even to the day of everlasting redemption.”

His life continued to be one of zeal and self-discipline and was carefully planned from day to day; but from now on his overruling desire was to proclaim Christ and his grace to the world.

Jesus’ own people rejected Him. Yet He spent His whole ministry on them, in their country working with their people. He worked with them till they killed Him. Yet the NT assures us that God has not rejected the Jews. Nor, friends, will he reject us because the basis of God’s love is found in God’s choice to love – not in how much we deserve that love.

Jesus comes despite the darkness... The advent of Christ does not depend on the state of our world. Jesus comes at a time of national crisis for Israel. Defeated, enslaved, tyrannized, abused and despised the nation is barely surviving. Internally it is divided by prejudice and class violence and its theology has been captured by several groups of politically motivated and highly competitive schools of priests. Into this environment comes Jesus, small, weak, vulnerable – a baby. I find it fascinating that He doesn’t choose to come when things are good in Israel but when things are dark.

So much talk within the Christian community today is about how bad things are, how little respect Christianity gets these days and how much disillusionment and lack of faith there is. Yet in this darkness this Church has grown, perhaps more than in any other age.(Murray’s graph)

Darkness isn’t a problem to the light. Indeed, the very thing that light changes most... **is darkness**. One of the greatest producers of fear is darkness and one the greatest relievers of that fear is light and it’s amazing how little light one needs to confound the darkness... A few years ago in a large church in America the electricity failed and all the lighting including the emergency lighting went off. The church was full of three thousand worshippers and a thousand children in various classrooms underneath the sanctuary and at that moment everyone was plunged into deep and impenetrable darkness. The pastor began to stumble towards the door which he knew was somewhere behind him but without any light he struggled to find the way even though he’d been in and out of that door hundreds of times. However, just as he was getting near a young mother with a

tiny key-ring flashlight boldly walked to the door and headed down towards the children's classrooms. Even though her light was miniscule she led the way for parents to be reunited with their children and to bring calmness again to a rapidly panic stricken congregation. One light my friends. One small light – can make such a difference and yet what I hear so often is – 'I couldn't – I'm not strong enough, my belief isn't good enough, my faith isn't strong enough... **my light isn't bright enough!**

Nonsense! Wherever you choose to shine will bring safety and joy and release to someone. Darkness no matter how dark has no answer to the light.

Jesus comes despite the uncertainty of His reception.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Jesus came into a world of uncertainty. Just because He was God didn't change that for love does not come to conquer but to console, it does not look to dominate but to relieve distress, it does not look so much to **be right** as to **make right**.

I often wonder whether we imagine that when Jesus came to earth He had everything figured out so that nothing was a surprise or a disappointment and that therefore there was really little risk. It's interesting because right at the beginning of the Church a powerful heresy arose that thought just like this. This heresy was called Docetism. Docetism held that Jesus didn't have a real human body and that He only appeared to suffer and die. In other words, **that God took no risks with us...**

But that is not what John teaches. John teaches us that the advent, the coming of Christ was a huge risk. He took a risk with a world that did not know Him and a

people who would not accept him. He took a risk with a mother who wasn't married and a father who was too righteous for his own good. He took a risk with a religion which had become corrupt and severe, loveless and legalistic and a group of disciples who were often faithless and always slow. And He takes that risk with you and I and the funny thing is He loves to take it.

Advent is the great sign that God is willing to take risks with us again and again. The question is, are we willing to follow Him. What was the last real risk we took for God? When was the last time we went beyond the slight discomfort of Sunday worship and the sacrifice of giving up another night of the week to doing something that was quite out of our comfort zone? When was the last time we gave, we served, we loved beyond our human ability to predict whether that giving, that serving, that loving was sustainable?

Last week I read that prayer from Peter Marshall which reminded us that it is often harder to wait than it is to work. This week we need to know that it is also often harder to risk trusting God than it is to work. We would almost always rather work than take the risk of obedience. The great adventurer Indiana Jones knew this intimately. He we find him at the end of his quest faced with the greatest risk of his life. The book says 'Take a step of faith' but every fibre of his body says... 'Don't!' [Play video]

In the advent of Christ we find God refusing to be turned away from love by the rejection of His own people, the darkness of the hour and the risk of not being in control. In advent we find the eternal truth that God comes to you and I first.