

# ADVENT 1.

## Are We Expecting a Return? Or Is It Just That Time of Year?

Good morning on this first week of Advent. What a year 2020 has been for us all. With the lockdown, isolation, away from our family and friends, social media has played a big part in our communication. Who would have thought that being in lockdown could be so exhausting, with anxiety rising to an all time high, an urgency to react to the latest post on FB, Twitter or whatever format you use. But also, an increased anxiety if we feel that we've missed something!

Life in the world today!

There are so many factors driving our sense of anxiety, distraction, and urgency. Even when we turn on the news, everything is "BREAKING NEWS!" there is no such thing as "regular old news" anymore. Try to have a conversation with anyone these days and you are constantly interrupted by the text sound or the tweet noise or something else coming from someone's phone in their pocket.

"So, how are you (DING) doing today? I'm (TWEET) fine, thanks, how are (buzzzzzzzz) you?" This part of our lives distracts us.

But do you feel an increase in anxiety like you need to blurt out your next sentence before the next (DING) cuts into my train of thought. On the other hand, if you are an enthusiast on social media, and you like to watch the cute videos about puppies and babies playing together, before you know it, you are pulled into the vortex of "fake news," "click bait," and a wide variety of other noise. Everyone encourages you to "click this" and "take a look at this," "Like that", "emoji that"; but whatever you do, don't get sucked into reading the comments when the topic is controversial! It is a no-win situation in this world. Everywhere we turn, it feels that we are being pushed and pulled with a growing sense of anxiety about our future. We are asked to address every aspect of our lives with a sense of urgency, and it can be exhausting! even in a lockdown situation.

Let me tell you a story.

The Head teacher of a School was concerned about the rubbish he found in so many of the classrooms he visited. Papers were often strewn on the floor and the Student's desks were surrounded by clutter. Feeling strongly, that learning could not take place in such an untidy environment, he decided take action. He chose one classroom for an experiment. He introduced himself to the students and with a smile made this proposition. 'Your teachers and I provide a well-equipped classroom for you to enjoy but, we need your help in keeping your desks in the classroom tidy. Many of you have crumpled papers inside your desks, with books left open, and the pages bent. Often there are pencils on the floor under your desks, along with other rubbish. I would like each of you to clean out your desk today and begin the school year resolving to keep it clean. One day I will return and inspect your desks, and the person with the cleanest desk will be given £100 as a prize. I will not tell you which day I will return, it will be a surprise, not even your teacher will know the time or the day'.

The children squealed with excitement and began immediately pulling things from their desks filling the rubbish bin with crumpled papers, stacking their books neatly in their desks and lining up their pencils and pens in straight rows. Every morning for the first week, every student checked their desk to make sure it was in perfect condition. Confident that today, would be the day, the Head teacher would return. The next week, a few boys grew weary of the exercise and returned to their old habits. By the third week, several students remarked "I doubt if he'll come back at all, he just said that to make us keep our desk clean". After two months, no one in the classroom bothered to inspect their desks and took their eye off the prize and forgot the Head teacher's promise. Except for one girl. Dutifully, she inspected her desk every morning making sure things were in proper order. For months she was teased by the other students. "He's not coming back! why do you keep looking for him? you look stupid believing that promise. Still, she remained quiet, kept her desk in perfect condition and waited. Near the end of the school year, there was a knock on the door and the Head teacher walked in. Quickly the students flung open their desks and began frantically to clean them. But he held up his hand for them to stop. All the students were asked to stand beside their desk while he went around the class and inspected each one. One after another, he rejected them for being untidy.

One boy tried to give excuses, but it was no good. Another blamed the teacher for not reminding them. Still another blamed the Head teacher for making them wait so long. Finally, he arrived at the desk of the little girl who confidently displayed her tidy desk while giving him a beaming smile. After inspecting her desk, he took her by the hand to the front of the classroom and awarded her the £100 prize. "Boys and girls" he said, this young lady never stopped believing that I would return so she kept her desk in perfect order. She didn't need to worry about what day or even what hour of the day I would return because she was always ready, always. Good story, sound familiar??

How many times have you been asked, or in fact, asked the question 'are you ready for Christmas?? And how many times have you been given the answer No! We are all called to be ready, be awake, be alert, for our Lord is coming. How many of us are ready? Today is the start of Advent, the run up to Christmas. We know Christmas is coming it happens every year whether we want it to or not, it happens. Many times, when I was younger, I would hear one or other of my parents say to us kids, when we asked for something for

Christmas, 'Christmas is cancelled this year! How many times have you used that phrase???

In Derek Stringer's book **'The Gospel of Isaiah'**, he explains there is a shift in God's plan from Judgment to Salvation. Up until chapter 40, the people were in exile because they had not done what God asked them to do. God told the people that the land they were in was Holy, and that He wanted Holy things to happen in that land, and they did not listen to Him. So, God removed them from the land and put them in exile, that was the Judgment part. Now the Salvation part. **Read Isaiah 40:3-5**

**A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground will become level, and the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken"**

The book of Isaiah has big chunks of bad news in it, a bit like our 'Breaking News' today. But these verses are the start of some good news, Israel is coming to the end of her exile. Israel was still broken; they had no emotional radar to hear what God was saying to them at that point. God spoke to Isaiah, comfort, comfort my people. God was motivating His people to go back to Jerusalem. In these verses we read that tall things will be made flat, rough things will be made smooth; the order of things was going to change. God was taking away the obstacles and making the way straight, basically rolling out the red carpet in preparation for Jesus.

2020 will be a year that will go down in history probably for all the wrong reasons. A time of change for the world as we know it. Overnight, the Brexit word has been replaced by the Covid word, and our world has changed. I suspect that more changes to come in 2021.

A big leap forward in time of about 685 years, to the time of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was unique, he wore strange clothes and ate strange food, but he had 3 things in common with Isaiah. He may have had more but I am telling you about three.

1. They were both prophets, God's appointed men to do a particular job for a particular time.
2. They both announced the arrival of Jesus, 685 years apart, and John used the same verse from Isaiah. **In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. This is He who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah. A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.**
3. Both prophets taught that the message of Repentance is 'Good News' for those who listen and seek forgiveness. John, like Isaiah prepared the way for Jesus.

This Christmas the message will be the same as every other year, one of Hope and Love, a Saviour is born. We need this message more than ever at this time, don't we??? But like the story at the beginning, are we like the little girl, hearing the message acting on it, and being expectant; or have we heard the Christmas story so many times that we don't believe

it anymore especially in the last year we have all been through. The Christmas message is Christ gives lives hope and meaning. **'For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.** John 3:16. We, like Isaiah and John the Baptist, can make a path of someone we know someone we have been praying for. We can make their paths straight by telling them about the Saviour this Christmas.

For both these guys, standing for the truth was more important than life itself. This Christmas let us stand up for the truth and let us be expectant. If we wait at a bus stop, we are expecting a bus to come along, when it does not, we feel frustrated even angry. We have all the information on the bus timetable, and we wait patiently. Until the bus does not turn up. Hang on, that is not in the plan, it says here in the timetable there should be a bus at this time.

We exercise our faith every time we want to catch a bus. In fact, we almost take it for granted and get angry when it does not happen! We do not go home again expecting that the Bus will pull up outside our house to pick us up do we?? If we exercise our faith when we need to catch a bus, how much more should we focus on our Lord's return? Isaiah and John the Baptist living years apart, are saying the same thing, they both announce the arrival of Christ. Like the little girl in the story, we too need to be expectant on His return. You could say 'Mike we don't know when Christ will return' well guess what, neither does HE! only the Father knows the time.

Matthew 24:36

**But about that day or hour no one knows not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.**

Be expectant this Christmas.

Blessings  
Mike