

What are you expecting?

ISAIAH 2:1-5; MATTHEW 24:36-44

INTRODUCTION

This week, for some fun and also to be a bit creative with my sermon I sent out an invitation to those whose emails I have from both congregations. I invited people to do a short online survey that I had set up about Advent and looking forward to Christmas. There were only five questions and I am pleased how many people took part.

Usually for surveys like this I think a quarter of people approached take part – I am delighted that 50% did this survey. Perhaps it's because folks know me and wanted to co-operate. There are always problems with doing surveys such as the quality of questions and how they are asked. In a sense you only get out of surveys what you ask. I'm also grateful to have had it pointed out to me that the survey was a bit Anglican biased in that I asked about midnight mass rather than Christmas worship more generally.

Also, to the first question, 100% say they like Advent. Perhaps that was a silly question to ask church people!

ASSOCIATIONS

Today we begin the season of Advent. Many of us feel that this short but important season is completely engulfed by the way that Christmas has been commercialised. Rather than being a period that leads up to a further season of Christmas, December is a month of frenzied activity focussed on Christmas and it all ends the day when Christians begin their Christmas celebration. But we are caught in a difficult place because we don't want to have a "Bah-humbug" attitude either.

We get along as best we can trying to find ways in which we can observe Advent quietly whilst not protesting too loudly about it already being Christmas in the eyes of our society. My survey asked about how much people were looking forward to Christmas. Half said they were very much looking forward to it, but the other half were not quite so eager about it: 40% said moderately looking forward and 10% were indifferent.

A weakness of the survey was that it didn't ask why people felt that way – but then it was just a simple fun exercise. But it was interesting to me that half of our church congregations are less than enthusiastic about the prospect of Christmas. I suspect that there might be understandable reasons for that which may be to do with things other than celebrating the birth of Jesus. After all, when asked to rank what they might like the most about Christmas, carol singing and Christmas services were second and third after time spent with family.

Again, maybe no surprises since I was asking church people about their attitudes, but I am pleased to find out how thoroughly spiritual you are!

WHAT DOES ADVENT MEAN?

I wanted to find out what Advent might mean to members and asked for a word or phrase that people might associate with Advent. The top two were anticipation and preparation. Half of the people taking the survey said either of those words. These were completely unprompted – I didn't suggest any words or phrases.

That also seems to suggest that Christian folks try to take Advent seriously as a time to savour, a time for anticipation or preparation, rather than to dive straight into Christmas. Jesus told his disciples to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man.

Advent in the church's calendar is meant to be a reminder not just of the first coming of Christ as a baby, but also his second coming in glory. We may not know how that might be, but it is a belief deeply embedded in the Christian heart. One day Christ will come again. It is easy for it to be so deep that it gets forgotten. That is why Jesus reminded his disciples about the story of Noah.

In the days before the flood people didn't expect anything other than that their happy lives would carry on as normal. In other words, they had no expectation of anything different.

EXPECTATIONS

The difference between what you expect and what you actually get can be very revealing, either as a happy surprise or as a nasty shock. For instance, the adverts and our culture suggest that Christmas should be a lovely time for the family, spending time all together, no-one having to go out to work, all cosily at home enjoying presents, festive food and each other's company.

The reality is that Christmas can be an extremely stressful time for families where the underlying tensions and rifts in family life can break out. Sometimes families split up as a result of trying too hard to be together at Christmas. I don't meant to spoil anyone's fun, and for many families it *is* a lovely time. But we can be driven to expect too much by outside forces which blind us to the way things really are.

I said that half of the people who responded in the survey indicated that they were not looking forward to Christmas with the highest sense of anticipation. Interestingly enough, 60% felt that Christmas was tinged with a sense of sadness.

Perhaps they were the same people who were less than enthusiastic about the prospect of Christmas. Perhaps the expectation of these folks is that there will be some personal sadness for them – that they will be missing someone dear to them.

Maybe there are other things that will cause some sadness like the fate of the homeless or suffering elsewhere in the world. Or perhaps those who are not looking forward to Christmas are having to work hard or go to stay with relatives they don't like!

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

You could say that Jesus' message to his disciples was "expect the unexpected!" If the householder knew what time the burglar was going to come he would have been ready for him when he broke in. These days when we have house alarms maybe that parable loses its impact a bit. But it is just a parable, a short little story that makes a point: the Lord will come again, but because you don't know when it will be, you need to be ready at all times.

It goes along with a number of other parables all about the need to be prepared, to live in readiness. The people in the days of Noah had no higher view of life than those things that filled their everyday existence – a bit like our culture now.

What is your be-all and end-all?

What do you exist for?

Where is your far horizon?

I want to conclude with something which may seem trivial but I hope it makes the point I'm trying to get across.

GIVE ME OIL

The song "Give me oil in my lamp" is very popular and well-known even by those who don't come to church much. It's often chosen for weddings and I've noticed that when it is printed out the last words of the chorus read: "Keep me singing till the end of day". Even if you look in our hymn books it's printed like that. The original said "Keep me praising till the *break* of day."

The reason for that is an allusion to the reading from Romans for today. "The night is nearly over, the day is nearly here." To sing "till the *end* of day" is a complete misunderstanding of the Bible's perspective and what the original song writer meant.

For Christians the present age is night and the day is when the Lord comes again. Our singing, praising, serving and the whole of our Christian living is being carried out until the dawn of Christ's coming brings the daylight. Hence "keep me singing 'till the *break* of day!"

Is that the Advent that you long for?

Is that what you are expecting?

Is that your outlook on life?