

## The Advent Challenge : A People of Hope

My birthday falls on February 9th, which means one thing: on February 10th my Christmas countdown begins (322 days to be precise).



I LOVE Christmas. Today tears fell from my eyes as I listened to Matt Redman's new Christmas album

, I was so excited. It means Home Alone, unlimited board games, Winter Wonderland, Christmas carols, chocolate, Mum's homemade mince pies, mulled wine, GLITTER, tinsel, family, hilarious Christmas jumpers and The Vicar of Dibley Christmas special. What more could you want?

Oh yeah, and the small matter of Jesus being born!

But Advent?

I don't know about you, but Advent always kind of passes me by. I've seen it as a countdown to Christmas day, as a time to decorate the house and a time of having emotional Christmas adverts on the TV. But this year, I want Advent to be different. I really want to try and value these next few weeks, to realise why God is giving us this time to prepare, and most importantly, to discover how this season is relevant to my life right now. As I sat and prayed about all this, I realised what an amazing this time could be, how much it could impact my relationship with God, if I let it.

This Advent, Jesus is inviting us to start again.

Recently, my prayer life hasn't been as frequent as it should be, I haven't been to confession in a while and I really feel like my relationship with God isn't where I'd like it to be. But the beautiful thing about Advent, is that the church gives us a new season. We're acknowledging change and therefore Jesus is inviting us to go into a new season spiritually.



Jesus is reminding me that his mercy is new every morning, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) and that as soon as I decide that I want to get back on track with where I'd like to be in my faith, he'll be there to meet me.

So, this Advent I'm going to start again. I'm going to go to confession and make small acts that will lead me back to God, to increase my prayer life by a few minutes a day, to try and read a bible verse each day or even just to acknowledge him more throughout the day, rather than just before I'm going to sleep. Jesus is giving us this time of Advent to refocus on him, and to have a deeper revelation of his love.

This Advent Jesus is inviting us to be patient and to long for him.

Though our minds may instinctively turn to the gifts we will unwrap on Christmas day, do we ever think of the gifts that God has in store for us in the days of Advent? Advent is a time of waiting. It's here that we can evoke a sense of longing for Jesus. 2000 years ago, when people were waiting for the Messiah, their waiting didn't mean just sitting around doing nothing, but instead they journeyed towards him. They were proactive in their actions, they prayed and they surrender themselves.

Let's be like the wise men. Sure, we're not be going on a psychical journey towards Bethlehem, but we can begin our spiritual journey towards him, through prayer, through being generous and showing acts of mercy. We may be waiting for God to answer that all important prayer, but let us be patient and assured knowing he's already come, he's already with us, and in his perfect time he will answer us.

This Advent, Jesus is inviting us, to renew our hope



To be really honest, at the moment, my life couldn't be further from hopeful. My uni work is never ending, my health is rough to say the least, and at the moment I feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders. But this season calls upon everyone to renew their hopefulness. How?

At the end of Advent, we know that there is hope, light and joy, but sometimes in our lives we can have uncertainty, and we don't know what's around the corner. This Advent, Jesus is inviting us to hold on to his word, and we don't need to look any further than the prophecy of the birth of Christ to begin to grow this hope in ourselves again. Just as the Old Testament was fulfilled, so will God's promises be for you.

“And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes;  
there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying.  
There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”  
(Revelation 21:4)

This Advent, is our calling to hope.

This Advent is our calling to remember that Jesus does not disappoint.

This Advent is our calling to strive to be close to the Emmanuel, as he chose to become so near to us.



I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment,

to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ,  
or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.'

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*

Why not make this your challenge this Advent?

This Advent I'm going to try and live in the present, to not wish this season of waiting away. To do a random act of kindness each day and most importantly to slow down, and prepare. If you let him, God wants to use this Advent to fill you with peace, but also to call you higher: to be a witness to true hope.

Will you let him?

Eleanor Hill - Youth 2000