

An Advent Message from Archbishop Anne

In the year of our Lord 2020



The Visitation of St. Elizabeth to the Virgin Mary by Mariotto Albertinelli (1474-1515)

Dear people of God,

What brings hope in hard times?
Where is peace when hearts are restless?
Where have I experienced joy this year?
Where is Christ visible in my life and in others?
What love can I give away?

These are a few of the questions I've been pondering in a year where the dominant themes have been ones of despair, unrest, loss, grief and suffering. Every now and again we catch a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel but still the pandemic rages on, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Our world has become ever more fragile and many are numbed by fear or dulled by apathy. We mourn for all we have lost, for all we still see around us and know we are powerless to fix.

Like so many of you I imagined a different Christmas season than the one we will be having. Recalling Christmases past many long to gather in garlanded churches for Eucharist with lighted candles in hand, to see the newborn King gently placed in the manger. The familiar words of Christmas carols call out to be sung in community. The festive table at home stretches out before our hungry eyes. Gifts gather under the tree waiting to be distributed among eager children. For those who find this season difficult to begin with because of deep seated grief or poverty, Covid only makes it worse. Home for Christmas for those living in abusive relationships is a terrifying thing.

But memories and nostalgia are only one small part of what Christmas is all about. The other is something far greater and more wonderful but which calls us to look through a very different lens. They are there in the promises of the Christ to come who will bring with him, in his just love, peace and justice for all and the restoration of the whole world in a new creation.

That is the long view.....but what about now.

As we wait for a vaccine and life to return to some semblance of normalcy, we have once again been given this holy season of Advent as we await the coming of Christ. With its perennially powerful symbols of darkness and light, Advent is a time which evokes longing and an expectancy that goes way beyond one Christmas celebration. It is a time that has the power and possibility to awaken in each of us the 'not yet' which is on the other side of the Child who has already come.

In the past our pre-Christmas calendars have been filled with frenzied activities 'preparing' for Christmas leaving little time for silence and stillness or to be nudged by grace. It's difficult to hear Wisdom speak through the noise and clutter of our daily lives.

Maybe this Advent season can be different for us as we prepare our hearts in transformative ways in a year that has been marked by tragedy and death. Perhaps we can make our way through this Advent not simply as a time running running up to Christmas but as a true preparation for the Christ who will make all things new again.

So much has changed, but so much still remains the same. The beauty of this short sweet season can be found in the weekly lighting of candles on the wreath, as we watch the darkness diminish and the Light of the World overcoming it. In some places we are not able to gather together in community and we can't sing together when we do. But we can now go online to any number of worship services and pray with Christians around the world. And at home we can haul out our Christmas CDs and sing along lustily as we decorate, wrap, write cards and bake.

Our Advent journeys will be different as we limit where we go and who we see. So we make the journey inward and through the regular practice of prayer and stillness awaken a spark in our souls as it touches the darkness and moves us towards the light.

Our sacred scriptures have given hope to the weary for thousands of years. This Advent we are invited to hear afresh the powerful voices from the prophets of the Old Testament offering words of consolation and promise and a return from exile.

Advent's foremother, Hannah, becomes our teacher showing us that we are able to pray not only out of pain, lament and anger, but also in words of praise (1. Samuel 2.1-10). Her song of exultation echoing through the centuries will be taken up in Mary's prayer following her magnificent 'Yes' to God: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." (Luke 1.46) May we raise our voices high this Advent praying that the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled, and then do something to make that happen.

Finally, there is the gift of surprising joy from God, which is my hope for all of you this Covid-Adventime and Christmas. We find it in the beautifully poignant encounter between two pregnant women, told to us by the Good news writer and physician Luke.

Mary's cousin Elizabeth knew only disgrace and shame at not having borne a child. A shame she carried into old age deep within her heart. But the Lord looked favourably upon her and she and her old man Zechariah conceived a child. She, having received the grace of a pregnancy rejoiced that 'disgrace' had been taken away from her.

At the same time, Mary must have been concerned that her pregnancy would be a cause for shame. Her anxiety is unvoiced in Luke's account, but Elizabeth 'reads' the situation and calls her 'blessed' and blesses the fruit of her womb. And the child within her own womb leaps for joy. And in that moment fears and doubts are dispelled and the good news is made known.

The painting of the Visitation of St. Elizabeth to the Blessed Virgin Mary above depicts the tender moment of meeting between the two women revealing the gift of surprising joy.

It is in Elizabeth's home and not a temple (church); in a safe protective 'bubble' of two and not a crowded restaurant that the joy is manifest. It's at home that grace is named, that songs are sung and that a child in a womb leaps for joy. Home becomes the sacred space of meeting and blessing for Mary and Elizabeth.

As we remain home in our bubbles this Advent and Christmas may we too experience the gift of surprising joy in tender moments given to us by our gracious and loving God.

With love to you and yours this Advent and Christmas,

+Anne

What Do I Want for Christmas?

What do I want for Christmas?

I want to kneel in Bethlehem,

The air thick with alleluias,

The angels singing

That God is born among us.

In the light of the Star,

I want to see them come,

The wise ones and the humble.

I want to see them come

Bearing whatever they treasure to lay at the feet of him who gives life.

What do I want for Christmas?

To see in that stable

the whole world kneeling in thanks for a promise kept;

new life.

For in his nativity, we find ours.

(Ann Weems: Kneeling in Bethlehem)