



Archbishop Stephen leads the Church of England national online service for the first Sunday of Advent.

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Archbishop Stephen's homily for Advent Sunday:

Advent isn't just about getting ready to celebrate the birth of Christ, it is about getting ready for our own death. Getting ready for that day when Christ will come again; when we will see Christ face to face.

And we don't know when this will be.

That's why the phrases that we find in today's reading from Mark's gospel ring out in all the themes, readings, carols and prayers of the Advent season.

Be on your guard...

Stay awake...

Watch...

You don't know at what hour the master of the house will return.

Which leads me to consider how we measure our lives.

Usually, it is in years. We all expect to get our three score years and ten, but, of course, we hope for more. And, generally speaking, life expectancy nowadays delivers more - though please be aware that much of this is directly connected to wealth and privilege and that in other parts of the world life expectancy is still shockingly short, and even in our own country one of the biggest indicators of a growing gap between the 'very rich' and the increasingly 'left behind poor', is that the life expectancy of people in, say, Blackpool is much less than those in Belgravia.

Nevertheless, it is still time that matters; time that we measure; and more time that we are after.

But, Jesus reminds us, we do not know at what hour the master will return. And that we do know that what really matters in life can't be measured by a quantity of hours but by a quality of love.

My life matters and finds its meaning in giving and receiving love - within my family and among my friends and, supremely, because, of course human love can and does let us down, the unfailing, unconditional, inexhaustible, ever-replenishing love of God, which is given me in Jesus Christ, whose own life was only 33 years, and whose impact reverberates throughout history and is there for every human heart to know and receive.

Advent is about acknowledging this. That the birth of Christ is the turning point of history where we, in fact, stop measuring things chronologically, and see how this life, whether it be, in our terms, short or long, is leading somewhere: home to God; and it is how we live our lives here, and the quality of our loving, that matters.

In Christ, God comes among us, to show us the way. Advent is the dawning of this. Preparing to receive Christ now. And preparing to see him forever.

Hence, when a few years ago, as part of a national campaign called *Prayers on the Move*, that was encouraging people of all faiths and none to think about and engage in prayer, I was invited to contribute a prayer to go on tube trains in London and Newcastle, I wrote this, which feels, today, like an Advent prayer –

“My heart, it still keeps beating. But what for? Show me how to measure my life in something other than years.”

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