

Advent and Christmas message 2020

Bishop Rob Hardwick

God of the Advent promise,

We come on our journey to the place where the promise is renewed.

Even in the darkness, we look for the light of your presence to be revealed.

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

The above prayer is one of five collects being prayed during this season of Advent by the Scottish Episcopal Church. They are a collection of prayers which speak to their season of pilgrimage through the coming year. Prayers that have also been a particular source of comfort and strength for me personally.

Recently, many of our family members and close friends have experienced a particular period of darkness. The death of my mother, Barbara; the death one week later of my uncle, Arthur; the life threatening Covid infection and severe chest infection and hospitalization of my sister, Linda; the Covid infection to 4 other family members and friends, and suspected cancers to three other family members, all contributed to my sudden visit to England.

Returning to the diocese where I was ordained, I recalled words shared at my ordination retreat. In one of the addresses to the ordinands, the retreat leader declared that in 40 years of his priestly ministry there had been no situation that dark into which Christ's light could not shine. I must admit, whilst at 38,000 feet, in mid Atlantic, I wondered if, in this particular dark crisis which our family was so suddenly enveloped in, if it would be true for us?

Even in the darkness, we look for the light of your presence to be revealed.

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

The key phrase in this collect prayer is the reminder to 'look' for the light of God's presence. Furthermore, that this light in the darkness was an Advent promise, not simply a hope.

Where is God at such times as these? Is it possible for Christ's light to shine in every darkness? It is hard to see or even perceive God when our eyes are filled with tears and our heads are bowed low in grief and worry. Even so, the collect prayer beckons us to 'look'.

If I learned anything on the bike ride across Canada it was the importance of being attentive in the moment and to look for signs of God's presence everywhere, even when experiencing mechanical breakdowns, injury, bad weather or a severe accident. That was then, in the compilation and the continual compounding of bad news after bad news, this seemed overwhelming. Mom succumbed quickly to her Covid infection. From one day being told she might be sent home from the hospital, just 24 hours later, the infection had taken all her major organs. The same was true for my Uncle. The worry was that Linda, an extreme risk category person, would likely experience a similar fate.

Sadly, our family experience is not uncommon. With over 63,000 Covid related deaths in the UK; over 300,000 in the USA; 1.62 million worldwide, many families and friends, in every country of the world, have found themselves plunged into the darkness of these times; reeling from not being able to gather as they would like, or be at the bedside of those who are dying, or hug those who are bereaved, or be present at a funeral to pay their final respects.

Where is God at such times as these? Where is God when we cannot even go to church, to pray and fellowship together and be sustained by Word and Sacrament?

Psalms 42 and 43 bid those whose tears have been their food day and night; those disquieted; those whose souls are so full of heaviness to yet, put their trust in God, and (Psalm 43:3) to ask God, the God of our joy and gladness, to send out His light and His truth, that they might lead them to God's holy hill, to God's dwelling place. To the place where they will, once again, give thanks.

As a testament to these urgings of Scripture, I have just returned home and, together with my family, we thank you all most sincerely for your prayers. We thank the diocese of Qu'Appelle for granting me, at a moment's notice, the compassionate leave to be with my family and friends in our time of need. We thank the diocesan leadership for bridging the gap so well in my absence. And we thank the Lord, for the way His light has shone in our darkness.

My sister, Linda miraculously survived, just a week later she returned home from hospital to continue her healing journey. Furthermore, three out of the four other Covid patients have recovered. Also, cancers were removed or, on later investigation, not diagnosed. The light of Christ began to shine.

Looking for the light of Christ in the living is one thing but through many signs we also began to see the light of Christ in the dying and the deceased as well. That light that comforts and sustains and assures us of the eternal promises of God, and of God's everlasting salvific love. The most pronounced signs of God's assurances for me were as follows: In a dream I remember vividly saying Goodbye to my Mom and saying to her that it was okay for her to go and that we, her family, would be okay. It was a dream that caused me to wake up and check my watch. 30 minutes later I received a telephone call from the UK to say that 30 minutes ago my Mom had died.

One cannot explain such occurrences. Some say they are just coincidences. However, in my experience these types of occurrences happen over and over again, especially if we are attentive in the moment and recognize the signs. God incidences that cause us to ponder and wonder at the timeless, and in time, moments that Christ's light shines through to us.

Similar signs of assurance and light were given to us at Mom's funeral. Though it was November 27, as shafts of sunlight shone through the windows of the 13th century church, 2 colourful butterflies danced in the sunbeams during the 23rd Psalm. One of them even came to the casket during the commendation and flapped its wings as the priest prayed and then said the Nunc Dimitis. Mom loved her butterflies. After the service of committal at the crematorium, a heart shaped cloud was even seen in the sky on the journey home. These and other occurrences were gifts; signs of the light of Christ piercing our darkness; light that brought much comfort and assurance to us all; light and truth that led us to God's holy hill, to God's dwelling place where we could give thanks.

During Advent and again in the Christmas Gospel we are reminded that (John 1:5 NIV) ⁵ ***The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*** The promise of Advent and Christmas is in the hearts of each of us. The light that shines in the darkness has come, and the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

We celebrate this Advent and Christmas promise every year. We are not just to remember something that happened but to re-affirm it in our hearts and minds, this thing which is still happening. Darkness has not, and will not, overcome.

So, when we switch on tree lights or burn our advent candles, it is the Christ light we should remember. The light which came as a tiny baby in the harshness of winter, into a time of great darkness, a time of murderous tyrants and oppressive occupation, to poor shepherds and a homeless family, this is the light which came to give us all hope, to shine into our darkness. To be a shining beacon of our salvation in whose light the darkness around us loses its grip as we remember whose we are, where we are going, and who is returning to meet us. That all these things which hurt and haunt us are now being made new. To assure us that we are not alone, that we are loved by God, and that His eternal promises are true.

Yes, though these have been dark times for our family, together with the ordination retreat leader, I too can attest that in nearly 28 years of ordained ministry; in nearly 39 years of being a Christian, there has been no situation that dark into which Christ's light cannot shine. For Christ's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:5.

Have a hope filled Advent full of peace, joy and love and may your Christmas be blessed with the light and hope of Christ's presence.

Bishop Rob Hardwick

Perhaps you might like to pray with the Scottish Episcopal Church, and me, these daily Advent collect prayers in this continued season of pilgrimage for us all.....

*God of the Advent promise,
We come on our journey to the place where the promise is renewed.
Even in the darkness,
We look for the light of your presence to be revealed.
Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.*

*God of the Advent promise,
We come on our journey to the place where we resolve to journey on. .
Even though we have travelled through hard times,
We go forward, trusting in the promise: Immanuel, shall come to us.
Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.*

*God of the Advent promise,
We come on our journey to the place where hope is renewed.
Even in the midst of all that we have faced in times past,
We trust in the hope that does not disappoint.
Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.*

*God of the Advent promise,
We come on our journey to the place where we must wait for a time.
Even though we have waited in times past,
We gladly do so again trusting that our waiting shall yield the coming of God.
Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.*

*God of the Advent promise,
We come on our journey to the place of anticipation.
Even though we do not yet see,
We anticipate the good gift that you will offer.
Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer.*

Amen