


MODERATOR'S 2021 ADVENT MESSAGE



The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' (John 1: 4-5)

Advent in a time of Covid:

As I prepare this message, the Scripture that resonates with me is Isaiah 9:2,

*'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death,
a light has dawned.'*

We approach this Christmas season under the long and dark shadow of COVID and an intense focus on the growing threat of climate change. And, Pope Francis, reminds us that these dark clouds, these shadows of death, are but the tip of the iceberg. The following quote is from his book "Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future" - surely a great title for an Advent series this year:

"The Covid crisis may seem special because it affects most of humankind. But it is only special in how visible it is. There are a thousand other crises that are just as dire but are just far enough from some of us that we can act as if they don't exist. Think, for example, of the wars scattered across different parts of the world; of the production and trade in weapons; of the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing poverty, hunger, and lack of opportunity; of climate change. These tragedies may seem distant from us, as part of the daily news that, sadly, fails to move us to change our agendas and priorities. But like the Covid crisis, they affect the whole of humanity."

In terms of the Isaiah passage, what is it that lights the pathway to a better future? We Christians believe that light comes to us in the Christ child. And we light the four-fold wreath of love, peace, joy and hope to remind us of this.

This year the lighting of these candles is particularly loaded with meaning and relevance for us.

As we light the love candle, we ask ourselves hard questions about what does Jesus-like love mean at this time? What does it mean to die to self and follow Christ in this situation? Do we care for our neighbours with agape-like self-giving and sacrificial love?

As we light the peace candle, we ask ourselves searching questions about how we maintain unity and a welcoming posture to all when there are deep divisions in society and our churches between the vast majority of vaccinated and the small minority of unvaccinated. May we avoid the labelling, demonising and summary dismissal of those we disagree with and instead find creative ways to live together in peace. In this, I am reminded of a passage similar to the one in Isaiah where Zechariah talks of his son John the Baptist in terms of:

*'Shining light on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.'* (Luke 1: 79)

As we light the joy candle, we ask ourselves where is the joy in times of such weeping and anxiety? This is a difficult one indeed! There are superficial answers, for example, the joy some have found in the slowing down and appreciating of beauty and relationship-building that has come from the lockdowns. But there is also the deeper resilient joy in the Lord, regardless of circumstance, that is so profoundly modeled for us in the writings of Paul.

And perhaps lighting the hope candle is the most powerful and significant of all. We light it with the conviction that not only is there a God, but the birth of Jesus speaks of a God who cares to the point of sacrificial engagement with our broken human condition. As we recall the powerful biblical theme of remembering, we remember that again and again, when all seems darkness and loss, God did not abandon us, and we can confidently say with John ...

'In Jesus was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' (John 1: 4-5)

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