

**May I speak in the name of the living God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

I expect many of you saw the film “Back to the Future” when it came out a number of years ago – followed by its sequels – “Back the Future 2 and 3”.

In the film, a youngster meets a professor who has discovered a way to travel backwards and forwards in time. By travelling back in time – the time travellers are able to reshape their future – hence the title of the film – back to the future.

Has time travel ever appealed to you?

There is a very real sense in which during Advent, each one of us is making a “Back to the Future Journey.”

There are a number of different ways in which we take part in this journey.

Firstly, week by week here in church, in our readings – we look both to the past and towards the future.

We recall the writings of the Old Testament prophets foretelling of the coming of a Messiah promised by God.

We recall the events leading up to the birth of Christ, and his ministry.

We also look to the future – reflecting on the promise of a Second Coming, when God's kingdom shall be inaugurated in all its power and glory – and the world as we know it now transformed by God's love.

Many of our traditions during Advent enable us to become part of this “back to the future” journey.

One tradition, which helps us to do this in a very practical way, is the Advent Calendar. A different door to open for each of the 24 days during December. Each one, revealing a picture, often with a Bible quote reminding us of the events that led up to the birth of Christ. (unless of course it is Simpsons, Harry Potter, or other chocolate advent calendar.

Another tradition, is of course the sending of Christmas cards. They have already started coming through my letter box – as I am sure they have through yours. I am gradually writing and sending mine to family, friends and colleagues.

There is of course, a huge range of cards available. Some with Father Christmas, trees, or other decorations on them. Winter scenes, and other things we associate with the Christmas Season.

I would like us to dwell, for a short while on some of the things which we see on the religious Christmas cards.

I am certainly never going to circumvent to the level of political correctness that says such things are offensive to people who do not share our religious views. My experience has always been that people of faith, or no faith have respect for those who do. When I was Rector of two parishes on the IOW, I was very touched not long after moving into the Rectory, to receive a Christmas card from a Muslim neighbour.

Many of our Christmas cards give a prominent place to the shape or image of a star.

The star plays an important part in the Christmas events. It was the star which led the wise men through strange lands and across deserts to the birthplace of the Christ child.

In more general terms, the star is a universal symbol of hope.

A star with its brilliancy, points us beyond where we are – points us towards the maker of the universe. Perhaps this is why the star of David, is such an important symbol in Jewish tradition.

As we make our Advent Journey – the star draws us on, and stands as a symbol of our hope that as we celebrate Christmas, in just 7 days time, our lives and indeed the life of the world will be touched afresh by God's deep love.

The second picture that we often find on cards, is that of an angel. *(How wonderful to be surrounded by so many angels during our Festival of Angels)!*

Angels – messengers of God – had a vital role in the events of the first Christmas. It was Gabriel who told Mary she was to be the bearer of God’s Son. It was an angel in a dream which reassured Joseph of God’s plan. It was an angel in a dream which warned the wise men to return home by a different route.

But angels are not just the things of dreams and visions. God conveys his messages in many different ways

The Old Testament prophets, and John the Baptist, who we heard about in our Gospel reading today, were certainly messengers of God pointing people beyond their every day situations, to see the deeper purpose of God at work.

But perhaps the most unexpected thing about messengers of God – is that often God will choose you and me to bear his message –

it might be a word of comfort or encouragement to a friend.

It might be a challenge to see things in a new way.

In our Advent journey – there are plenty of times when God calls us to be his messengers – to share the message of his love with those amongst whom we live.

Many of us in the next few days will be involved with Carol singing – here in church, in residential homes, or around our streets. In a very real sense, we continue the song of the angels, in heralding the birth of Christ, calling others to come and see the wonder of God's love.

The third picture on many cards – whether they are specifically religious or not, is that of a lighted candle. Our advent journey is a journey from darkness to light. For, Christmas is all about celebrating the birth of the one who came amongst us, as the light of the world – the one who brings light into the darkness of our world

Every year, at Christmas, many Churches, like us hold a Christingle Service. For many it is the real start of Christmas.

In return for money given towards the work of the Children's Society, every child is given an orange with a candle in the centre, and four cocktail sticks laden with fruit and sweets. It is a symbolic reminder of the light of Christ's love shining in every corner of our world.

The Christingle is also a reminder of our calling as Christians to follow Christ's example in caring for the vulnerable and needy in our society.

Christ began his own ministry by recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah:

**“He has sent me to bring good news to the  
oppressed,  
To bind up the broken hearted  
To proclaim liberty to the captives; and release  
to the prisoners;  
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”**

Powerful words recorded by the prophet Isaiah –  
which Jesus adopted as a manifesto for his ministry.

They are words which we too need to take seriously  
– not just in Advent, but in our whole Christian  
journey.

There are sadly many in our world who are oppressed by persecution or war and so are forced to seek refuge in countries other than their own.

There are many in our world today, who are imprisoned by poverty, or disease,

many who are broken, by acts of terrorism, by unemployment, the breakdown of a relationship, or the loss of a loved one.

This Christmas time will be a hard one for many, as economic pressures continue to affect people around the world and within our own community.

Christ calls us to take their needs seriously, and in whatever way we can, share his love and compassion.

During these weeks of Advent, we each have different opportunities to do this in a practical way – sharing in the Christingle Service; giving alternative gifts as presents, which benefit people in Africa and other parts of the world, or making donations to the work of Shelter or Crisis at Christmas, and supporting the work of the Homeless shelter and Foodbank in Maidstone.

Reshaping the future doesn't have to be restricted to films.

In the ways, we have just been thinking about our "Back to the future journey" can begin to reshape our future too.

By recalling the past, and making Christ's love real and tangible now, we can bring hope of a very different future into the life of our world.

We can be part of bringing light into the darkness, by reflecting the light of Christ, the light of the world.

Many of you will be familiar with Holman Hunt's picture of Christ the Light of the world, which depicts Christ standing with a lantern knocking at a door. When he first showed the picture to a friend – he commented that he had forgotten to put a handle on the door. Holman Hunt replied that it had deliberately left out the handle, because the door needs to be opened from the inside. It is for us to open our hearts to God, so that his light of healing, love and hope can flood in.

I would like to end with a short reflection by a New Guinea Christian:

**“At Advent we should try the key to our heart's door. It may have gathered rust. If so, this is the time to oil it, in order that the heart's door may open more easily when the Lord Jesus wants to enter at Christmas time.”**

**Amen.**