

30 NOVEMBER 2025

A Reflection

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HURRY UP AND WAIT

Isaiah 2:1–5; Romans 13:11–14; Matthew 24:36–44

‘Hurry up and wait!’ was a saying I heard many times during my time as a Chaplain to the NZ Defence Force.

Training in the army and navy was always about maintaining a state of readiness for war.

As I worked on my physical fitness and survival skills along with the soldiers and sailors who were part of my ‘flock’, I used to think that ‘somewhere around the world, there are other sailors and soldiers training to be better than us! That means we/I have got to train harder to get an edge on my opposite, who is training in another defence force, in another country!’

So, we were training for the ‘possibility’ of war that might never happen in our lifetimes: ‘Hurrying up! And waiting!

As it turned out, the NZ Defence Forces became involved in an increasing number of conflicts during the 1990s and in the first decade of the 2000s – including, the first Gulf War, Bosnia, Timor Leste, the Solomon Islands and Afghanistan. Our involvement lasted for decades.

All that training done by our army, navy and air force was put to the test. I think we did very well. The reputation of the NZDF was right up there with the best - sadly we lost a few much-loved and respected colleagues.

Advent is a bit like that – a ‘hurry up and wait’ period. We are preparing for an event that is still to come. The coming of Christ – and the figurative coming of Christ at every Christmas.

The church Christmas trees have gone up. Our Advent banners are beginning to appear and the stable for our nativity scene has once more been erected in the sanctuary. The characters are slowly making their way to Bethlehem.

Each week, we will be moving closer to Christmas day and closer to Bethlehem.

Today we lit the candle of Hope which is also the common theme of our readings this morning.

The Hopes contained in these three readings have a contemporary feeling about them.

Our first reading from Isaiah offers us a vision of how the world could be.

Isaiah's vision is the prophetic hope that God's reign will transform conflict into harmony. The hope that the weapons of war will be beaten into implements of agriculture to feed communities, instead of destroying them.

Like the people in Isaiah's time, we want to see unity and harmony in our communities and unity in our global community - the kind of unity where no one covets the resources of their neighbours. A unity where no historical grudges are held towards our neighbours. A unity where we can concentrate on helping each other to flourish.

In Aotearoa NZ we want to see unity and harmony between Maori and Pakeha and all other races living in this beautiful country. We will not achieve it by suppressing Maori language, or pretending that the Treaty of Waitangi is an irrelevance.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa and most of the mainline churches in NZ, believe we must continue to walk the bi-cultural journey with Maori. We have already tried the other option of assimilation – and it didn't work. Maori were marginalized in their own land.

How can we create unity and not discord in our country? It will not be by suppressing all things Maori. It will happen through people of goodwill.

Like the people of Isaiah's time, we hope for a time when the trillions of dollars spent on military armaments, will be spent on life-giving things, like the implements for nourishing the world's starving. Beating our swords into ploughshares.

We hope for a time when more resources will be poured into scientific research that might discover the cures for cancer and other diseases. We hope for a time when the desire for peace will outstrip the desire for war and world dominance.

That dream is a long way off, but it is better than the alternative – constant conflict costing too many lives.

Our second reading was from St Paul's Letter to the fledgling Roman Church.

It is quite likely that Paul and many of the early Christians believed that Christ would return in their lifetimes.

Paul's Letter is a call to be alert for the coming of the Lord – a call to wake from sleep, to live honourably, and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” because the moment of their salvation was at hand.

In Paul's day, as in ours, all the human weaknesses were ever-present: sexual temptations, excess alcohol consumption and addictions, people jealous of their neighbours' possessions, people violent towards others - all things they supposedly put behind them, at their conversion.

They were now living lives that were being transformed by the Spirit. Lives that embodied the Christian Hope of becoming more Christlike.

Reading Paul's letter today and knowing that Christ did not return before St Paul died, creates a different kind of hope for us.

We don't feel the urgency about the end-times that Paul and the Early Christians felt.

We do not have the fear factor of Jesus returning and finding us unprepared.

If I'm correct, our Christian hopes are based more around being /becoming a certain kind of person. The best kind of person we can be. An authentic person. Someone who is true to themselves and true to the Christ we know. Our focus is the here and now rather than on a cataclysmic end time.

In Paul's time, as in our time, Christians aspired and still aspire to be more Christlike.

For some of us, that goal of becoming Christlike may seem out of reach, if not impossible, until we break it down to small steps.

I enjoy walking up Te Mata Peak, but I don't keep looking at the top all the time, because that can be discouraging. Instead, I look at the ground beneath my feet and the ground in front of me. Step by step I will eventually reach the summit and know the joy of that achievement.

That is how we become Christlike, step by step, looking at each day and what is in front of us, and trying to follow the way of Christ in our interactions with people and with our environment.

It might surprise you to know that I have never aspired to be the perfect minister. The weight of that huge responsibility of being perfect, would be too great for me to bear.

Being an 'ordinary' Christian suit me fine. Living an 'ordinary' Christian life means knowing who I am. Accepting who I am, before a loving God. Being thankful for all of life's gifts, including the people who are part of my life, and most importantly, responding to God's goodness, in the way that I live.

Being an ordinary Christian means welcoming the transformation the Holy Spirit brings to our lives. And like the Christians of Paul's day, putting behind us the works of darkness (which I've already mentioned).

By living honourably, I don't think Paul meant trying to be as saintly and pious as possible. I think Paul meant being aware that, as Christians, we are set apart for God's purposes, not our own.

Holy living means making choices everyday which mirror the character of God. ‘Love’ being the greatest of God’s attributes.

Finally, in our gospel reading, we heard Jesus’ warning about a cataclysmic end-time event which would signal his return.

Ironically, the cataclysmic vision in today’s gospel reading was never more possible, than it is today.

We can in fact bring about all the destruction described in the gospel and other biblical prophecies ‘by ourselves’ – without any divine help.

Scientists and observant people have been saying this for decades. If we don’t change our behaviours towards the care of creation, we can and will bring about the destruction of the planet. That message continues to fall on deaf ears despite the evidence of climate change and cataclysmic events – including our recent cyclone.

Monetary profit continues to drown out the prophetic voices - both ancient and modern. The Christian hope and the hope of many sensible people is, that we will listen to the scientists and conservationists, and turn back from the path of destruction.

In Isaiah we see the Hope of Unity and Peace where weapons of war are replaced with implements of agriculture and growth.

In Romans, Paul urges the Christian Community to wake up to holy living and to continue to hope in Christ in this life and in the life to come.

Finally, in the gospel lesson we are encouraged to stay alert for Christ’s coming and Christ’s presence in the world.

There is so much more that can be said about the Christian value of Hope, but I’d like to conclude with a true story about Hope.

On September 15, 1987, Pope John Paul II attended a youth rally in Los Angeles during his pastoral visit to the United States. I think in the same year he also visited NZ.

On the day of the Youth Rally, when he was about to give his speech, the Pope noticed that in the band, among the musicians, was a young man who had no arms, who had taught himself to play the guitar, with his feet. Apparently, he was a thalidomide victim.

The moment the musical performance was over, the Pope walked over to the performer, Tony Melendez, embraced him, and kissed him and told him to keep on ‘giving hope through his music’. The song he sang was called ‘Never Be the same’.

The Pope then put aside his prepared speech and said, ‘Everything I was going to say about hope, is in this man!'

What are your hopes this Advent? What are the hopes you have for yourself and for your loved ones this Christmas?

PRAYER

God of Hope

.and promise,
you call us to wake from sleep and walk in your ways.
As we await the coming of Christ,
clothe us with his love,
guide us in the path of peace,
and keep us ready to serve until your kingdom is revealed.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**