

ADVENT REFLECTION 2020

Week 1: Be still and listen

We were all like men unclean, all that integrity of ours like filthy clothing. We have all withered like leaves and our sins blew us away like the wind.
Isaiah 64:6

LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL

Isaiah's words are harsh and challenging. The season of Advent is a time of spiritual cleansing, offering the opportunity to take stock of our lives, re-examine our priorities and renew our commitment to our faith.

November has come to a close and the winter nights draw in. The golden leaves of Autumn have all been blown away – a stark reminder of the transitory nature of our fragile existence. This is more apparent than ever in these dark Covid days. The future seems bleak and uncertain. We are all too aware that nothing can be taken for granted. Whatever happens next, we know that life will never be the same as before.

This Christmas many families will be separated due to lockdown restrictions. For our family, it will be an especially sad time. Our beloved elder daughter Annie, who would normally be celebrating with the rest of us, died suddenly of natural causes in June this year.

We found a small notebook on Annie's desk with just one entry which, given the circumstances, seemed prophetic: *'Don't just live the length of life; live the breadth of it as well.'*

Annie certainly did that. She achieved more in 41 short years than many who live more than twice that length. She was a scripture scholar, Samaritan, RE and Philosophy teacher and evangelist, working since 2016 for Church Army to serve those who live on the margins.

Selected extracts from her writings and blogs inspire this year's series of Advent reflections.

FINDING STILLNESS AND PRESENCE

In 2019 Annie wrote: "I walked some of the Camino to Santiago de Compostela a few years ago. I found it to be such a powerfully moving and spiritually beneficial experience that I have undertaken a long pilgrimage walk every year since then.

One of the things I love about walking long distances is that it forces me to slow down. It helps me to be still and to practice being fully present to each particular moment.

When I walked to Santiago, I covered up to 18 miles (30 km) each day. That's about six hours of walking each day, with additional time spent stopping, looking and being – in local villages, in churches, in nature, in conversation, in sharing meals and in sitting and being still.

In our busy, stressful world, we have to seek out silence and stillness consciously. God speaks in all sorts of ways – through scripture, through nature, through other people.

However, unless we slow down and listen, we miss his promptings and his voice. Only then can we truly appreciate:

- the value of the journey, as well as the destination
- the value of slowing down, looking and listening
- learning from the rhythms of nature
- learning from the movement of one's own body, from the formation of community along the way, and from times of stillness and rest

So often we rush through life at breakneck speed, never pausing to reflect and be still. It is only when we slow down and look that we really see. By slowing down, and being more present to each moment, all sorts of lessons are learned.

For some people, this might involve the healing of painful memories. For others, it could be time to discern the next stage in life. For many, it is a chance to really get away and listen to God.

For me, it is an invitation to a whole way of being – one that recognises that God is not 'out there' to be sought, but already 'in here' to be found."

You guide those who act with integrity and keep your ways in mind. Isaiah 64:5