

Advent, the start of the new church year. The liturgical colour changes from red to purple – symbolising penitence and forgiveness, hope and promise. During this time we, the church, are encouraged to think about the big searching questions, life and death, good and evil. The first Sunday of Advent has as its focus watching and waiting – a mood of expectancy, a time when we think of the prophets and patriarchs who waited for the coming of the Messiah.

**Hymn 117:**

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.*

*Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;  
dear desire of ev'ry nation, joy of ev'ry longing heart.*

*Born thy people to deliver; born a child and yet a king;  
born to reign in us for ever; now thy gracious kingdom bring.*

*By thine own eternal Spirit, rule in all our hearts alone:  
by thine all-sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.*

In the words of Charles Wesley's hymn (**words above**) "Come, thou long expected Jesus" we are linked to both past and future. The coming of the Messiah has been promised by many prophets of the Old Testament, and in the first verse of this hymn we are reminded of what this birth will mean: "**Born to set thy people free.**"

The birth of Christ was the ratification of God's covenant with his people. Jesus would be the atonement that paid the price for all our sins – past, present and future. Not only this but in paying that price He didn't only redeem our sins but also freed us from our fears, and as the hymn says: "**Let us find our rest in Thee.**" That gift of freedom from sin and fear allows us to relax into his safekeeping, secure in the knowledge of His love.

**The second verse** reminds us that although Israel had been the expectant nation in fact the gift was for the whole earth – for everyone who wished to know Him. This is one of the ways in which the real Christ differed from the expected Christ. The hymn tells of the characteristics, shown by Christ, that strengthened Israel and can strengthen anyone who turns to him: strength, joy and hope with compassion.

**In the third verse** we recall the way in which Christ came and his purpose: "**Born a child and yet a king**" – born to deliver all people and to live in each of us bringing the gift of God's kingdom to earth. By the fact of His human birth we know that He enters fully into our human condition, his experience is of life as we live it, both good and bad. It is that experience of life that speaks clearly to those who turn to Christ.

**In the final verse** we have the reminder that through Jesus the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to us, and will, through his goodness, offer us the opportunity to be raised to be alongside His glorious throne. His mercy is sufficient, we don't have to deserve it or work for it, all we need to do is ask for it.

So Advent is a time for us to be still, to be willing to confront our fears in the darkness and to find God's presence there. As we ask for His redeeming light to make us aware and as we recognise the darkness of the world in its violence and pain and our own darkness, in our own personal struggles, we remember that although we may not feel it, God is there with us. We are given the opportunity to welcome Christ's light into our lives and the words of Charles Wesley remind us that Jesus will fulfill that promise and we can indeed call on him and welcome him into our hearts at this time. **Amen.**