

Closing the gap

The sermon preached by Rev Dr Michael Paterson
at our Joint Communion Service on 28 November 2021
The readings were Jeremiah 33.14–16 and Luke 21.25–36

Hands up if you use Facebook.
Hands up if you post images.

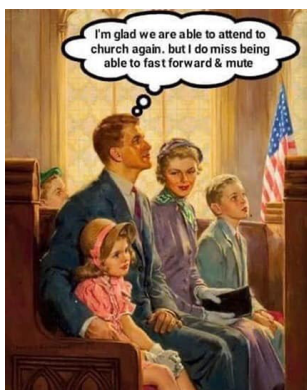


I hadn't used it for years, but during lockdown I went back to it, and quite enjoyed seeing what people were posting to get through those long months of isolation.

In fact during lockdown it was Facebook I turned to for gospel messages of hope, when all the churches were doing were dispensing governance and rules.

Some of the postings were funny, some were quite cheeky, and some were certainly not for sharing in church.

Not surprisingly a number of them had a religious theme like this one, anticipating when we could get back to church:



"I am glad we are able to attend church again, but I do miss being able to fast forward and mute." I guess that was posted by a worried preacher.



Or this one from a Christian with a sense of humour: "I just found £20 in Tesco's car park and thought to myself, what would Jesus do? So I turned it into wine."

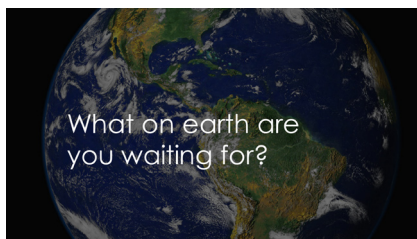
But, of the many posts that really got to me and made me think, this one stands out above all.



"If your **church** closed its doors, would your **community** know the difference?"

Notice it doesn't say: "If your church closed its doors, would the **congregation** know the difference?" but "If your church closed, would your **community** – would **Rosyth** – know the difference?"

It's a question that gets right to the heart of the season we are starting today.





When it comes to Advent, what, on earth, are we waiting for?

Are you waiting for a cutsie baby in a manger lit up by fairy lights?

Are you waiting for snow deeper than today and a log fire to curl up to?

Are you waiting for a silent night and an inner glow?

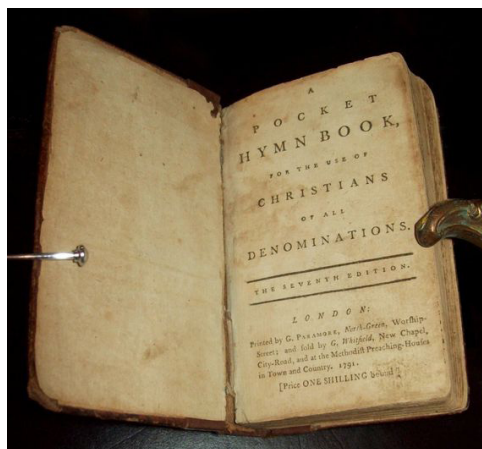
That's the Advent of Black Friday, of retail and of Hollywood.

But for Christians, Advent marks the time of waiting for God to interrupt history with a **divine revolution** that **turns the status quo on its head** and shakes everything up.

Is that what you are waiting for too?

Because that's what's coming and that's why there's *some* truth in the saying that Christmas is for the children, but Advent is very definitely an adult affair.

Rewind the clock 200 hundred years, and the answer to that question "would your community know if you closed your doors" would have been an emphatic YES from both Methodists and Episcopalians.



Any of the Piskies know what this is?
Any of the Methodists?

It's the front page of a 1791 edition of the Pocket Hymnbook which Methodists carried around with them so that at any and every opportunity they could turn to God for help and encouragement in song. But the size of the book – small enough to fit discreetly into your pocket – is very significant.

Why? Because **Methodists were considered dangerous folk** to have around and so had to live out their faith discreetly. Church of England folk could carry their bibles and Books of Common Prayer around openly, but Methodists had to hide their hymn books in their pockets.

Because they were seen to pose a real threat to the established church by offering an alternative form of worship and a real danger to politicians and landowners, because they advocated for social justice and for the education of the poor servant classes.

In 1834 Methodists organised exploited farm labourers into a Union, and for that they had their earliest chapels burned down by landowners who had most to lose by the redistribution of wealth and by equal access to education.

And so, if you were a Methodist in the 1800s and your chapel closed its doors, the community around you would most certainly have noticed and known the difference.





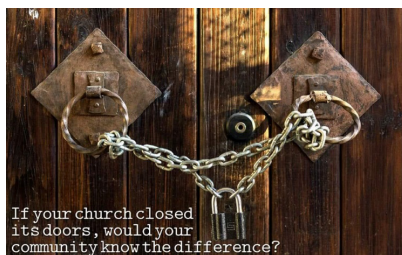
And what about us Piskies? I wonder if any of our Methodist friends know the story behind this painting? Or any of the Piskies?

It's a painting by George Washington Brownlow titled "Baptism from Stonehaven Jail". Like the Methodist Pocket Hymn Book it tells of a time when **Episcopalians were thought to be so dangerous to society** and a real threat to the established Church of Scotland that any minister who conducted public worship and any who attended that worship were imprisoned for their faith.

Why? Because Episcopalians refused to adopt Presbyterianism, refused to accept the authority of English rule in Scotland, and insisted on an alternative way of being church which lives on to this day in St Margaret's and in Piskie congregations across Scotland.

And so this iconic painting depicts how the folk of Stonehaven hid their new born bairns in lobster creels which they carried along the shore and held up outside the Tolbooth – the town jail – for the minister to baptise through the bars.

[My first appointment after ordination was to Stonehaven and this painting hung in the sanctuary looking down on me every day And what's more the people in that congregation proudly traced their ancestry back to the people depicted in the painting. I can tell you it was quite something to be preaching to the great grandchildren of those who had been imprisoned for their faith.]



Re-winding the clock, for Piskies in the early 1800s there was no IF about it. The doors of **Episcopalian churches were** closed, the ministers were in prison and the community certainly knew the difference.



This Advent, I have a deep longing for our community – for the people of Rosyth – to know that the **doors of this church** are *not* closed, that this church is very much open, very much alive and kicking, and not just on a Sunday when they see cars coming and going.



But I want them to know that we are open because we have earned a reputation for doing what Jesus did, for rolling up our sleeves and mucking in with what's going on around us, for supporting all those who are in need, and for doing whatever it takes to know that their lives matter.



This Advent I long for the community around us to know without a shadow of doubt that this church is very much open because we match every hour spent in church with an hour spent in community service, every hymn we sing with some practical expression of our faith, every baptism with some act of radical inclusion, and every act of communion with food for the poor.

Just imagine what difference it could make to our community if that was how we lived for the next year?

And just imagine what difference it would make to each of us as Christians if we closed the gap between what we profess and how we live – between creed and deed.

So how about it friends? This Advent, let's honour the legacy our Methodist and Episcopalian forebears have left us. Let's make them proud of us. But above all let's honour God by doing our little bit, this Advent, to help his kingdom come.

Amen.