



St Mark's Church, Reigate

December 2024

Letter from the Vicar, Father Martin Colton

Dear Friends,

When I was a child, I was given a brightly coloured Advent calendar at the beginning of December, and every morning, I would excitedly fold back one of the little windows to reveal the picture of a robin, a star or a shiny bauble. On Christmas Eve I opened a double-sized window and was delighted to find either a nativity scene or a jolly reindeer with a red nose. Amazingly, the idea that finding a piece of chocolate each day would enhance my festive existence and support me through the ordeal of waiting for Christmas Day had not yet (at that dark and unenlightened time) occurred to Cadburys or anyone else.

The reason I believe that we feel the need to receive daily treats to help us live through that interminable dark month before the gifts and feasting of Christmas is, of course, that the process of waiting requires something we humans are really terrible at: patience. The Bible reminds us that patience is one of the most precious of human characteristics. In that famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13, much used at weddings, St Paul starts his list of the wonderful things about love by stating "love is patient". It is also pretty near to the top when he lists the "fruits" which grow in our lives when we are filled with God's Holy Spirit, coming close behind love, joy and peace. In fact, Paul seems to be firmly of the opinion that patience is a virtue which is almost completely unattainable without divine help.

The truth is, of course, that God is very good at being patient, and there are lots of verses in both the Old and New Testaments to remind us of that. Being prepared to wait thousands of years hoping that humankind would follow your commandments before eventually sending your very own Son is certainly being patient. God shows us that patience has two equally important aspects: enduring through the hard times, whilst waiting for an opportunity to bring good into the world.

The Christian season of Advent (which this year happily begins on 1st December) reminds us that, whether or not we are sustained by daily doses of chocolate, the four weeks before celebrating Jesus' birth should be a time of preparation ... and patience. With every advertisement telling at us that it is supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year", any problems we have, especially health issues or loneliness, can seem even more difficult to deal with than usual. That's where the endurance side of patience comes in. However, Advent also offers us wonderful opportunities to show love to others; not just our family and friends, but the homeless who find themselves welcomed into night shelters, or through the Women's Refuge, gifts for children who otherwise would not be receiving any Christmas presents at all.

Maybe, this Advent, rather than counting down our sleeps until the Big Day, we could switch the focus: ask for strength to be patient with whatever problems we might be struggling with, as well as taking every chance which comes along to share blessings. Maybe that could even be more satisfying than daily treats....

With every blessing,