

If you look at the front of your service booklet – you'll see it *doesn't* say "Christmas".

It says: "Nine Lessons and Carols" – but not "Christmas".

That's because we're still waiting for Christmas.

We're still in a time – which the Church calls "Advent".

It's a season of *waiting*.

It makes me think of all the waiting *we* do.

We wait to be picked for the first team – or for *any* team to in my case!

We wait for exam results.

We wait to hear if we've got that university place.

We wait for England to win the World Cup.

And bad news, I'm afraid.

This waiting is going to go on for your whole adult lives, as well.

There's also a lot of waiting in the Bible.

And we've heard about some of that in our readings today.

As I think of all this waiting ... I remember someone else – who waited ...

Admiral Jim Stockdale.

To those who knew him – Admiral Stockdale was a remarkable man.

He was one of the great military heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – and a future US presidential candidate –

He was the highest-ranking United States military officer –

to have been held as a prisoner-of-war –

during the conflict in Vietnam.

His imprisonment – in the so-called "Hanoi Hilton" – lasted over *eight* years.

Because of his high rank – he was given "special treatment" ... by his captors.

Despite the torture – and unimaginable hardship – he helped maintain the morale of the other prisoners – enabling many of them to survive.

After his release, Stockdale was asked:

"Who *didn't* make it? Who *didn't* survive?"

"Oh, that's easy," he said, "the optimists."

The *optimists*? – you may wonder.

"You see," he said, "the optimists would say: '*We're going be out by Christmas.*'"

And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. And they'd still be held prisoner.

Then, they'd say: '*We're going be out by Easter.*' – And Easter would come, and Easter would go.

And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

Imagine if Admiral Jim Stockdale had met the people from our two Bible readings – from the book of Isaiah!

They’d ’ve found they actually had a lot in common.

That’s because the people in Isaiah’s time were also suffering – and also waiting.

They were waiting for God to do something.

And *their* situation was looking pretty dire.

An ancient military superpower – the Babylonians – had sent their brutal army rampaging through the Middle East ...

conquering all the peoples that lay in their path.

They destroyed the holy Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

They captured the people – and carted them off into exile in Babylon – about a thousand miles from home.

So, the people waited.

And being religious believers ...

they waited for God to do something – something new and different –

to bring about a world ...

of peace – not war –

of justice – not evil –

of harmony – not hatred.

The world which Isaiah talked about – would be a world so unlike their present existence – you might even describe it as a world in which –

wolves live with lambs – and

cows and bears graze together – and

lions eat straw like an ox.

But for decades there’s nothing.

Then finally – the prophet announces that God *is* coming – and that God is bringing salvation.

The exiles will return.

The ruins will be rebuilt.

Everything will be put right.

So, what happens?

I can imagine the optimists.

*“We’ll be home for Passover.”*

But Passover comes and Passover goes – and *still* they’re still in captivity.

*“We’ll be home for new year.”*

And new year arrives. And nothing.

*“Next year? — The year after?”*

So, what happens?

To find out – we have to pick it up the story again in two fairly obscure books of the Bible –  
Ezra and Nehemiah.

There – we find – the people ...

*do* return –

*do* rebuild the ruined city –

*do* start work on a new Temple.

But ... *But* ...

All this happens a *century* later.

They have to wait a *hundred years*.

Isaiah spoke these words of prophecy in around 530 BCE ... and the people didn't return until  
nearly 430 BCE.

And – it's *half a millennium* – before Isaiah's words about the birth of Jesus –

For unto a child is born,

unto us a son given.

It's *half a millennium* – before these words come true ...!

That first generation of optimists –

who heard Isaiah's message –

wouldn't have seen *any* of this.

They'd have long since departed this life.

Optimism is no rock on which to build.

In which case – how do we cope with the waiting?

So how can we carry on – when everything just seems to stay the same?

It's a really important question.

After all, so much of life seems to be about waiting.

And – of course – we're not *just* waiting for –

exam results – and a university place – and Christmas – and a World Cup win.

Some of us are waiting for a better world –

the end of racial injustice –

a world of equal opportunities –

the end of the climate emergency –

a world of prosperity and growth.

And some of us – are waiting for God to show up today – to bring hope and healing to our  
broken world.

So, how *do* we cope with the waiting?

After his release, Admiral Stockdale was asked:

"Who *didn't* make it?"

"The optimists" he replied.

“So, who *did* make it?”

“Those,” he said, “who faced the brutal facts of the situation without losing hope that one day everything would be all right.”

Optimism is no rock on which to build.

It's not *optimism* that gets us through.

It's *hope*.

Optimism and hope are quite different.

Optimism depends on *our* attitude ...

It's about us – summoning up a bright, cheerful, sunny outlook.

Optimism says it's up to *us* – to stay positive.

Hope – on the other hand – depends on something *outside* us –

something – concrete and tangible to cling onto as we wait.

For people of *faith* ... hope says:

It's not up to *us*.

It's all up to *God*.

And God *didn't* abandon his people.

The prophet's words *did* come true.

Just *not* as everyone was expecting.

They came true ...

in a baby called Jesus – lying in a manger –

in a tortured figure nailed to a cross –

in an astonishing tale of a man raised by God from death to life.

So, how do we carry on while we're waiting – often, seemingly, forever?

We do so through hope.

And – for the person of faith – that means hope in God.

God – who's character of *love* never changes.

God – who's mighty *power* is never in doubt.

God – who's steadfast *promises* remain true forever.

So – this Advent – and in this world of waiting – let me encourage you:

Don't worry if you're not an optimist.

Optimists often end up disappointed.

Instead, be a person of hope.

For with God, hope wins.