

Why go to church?

Psalm 122 v1

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

Matthew 24 v 44

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

Advent Sunday.

The start of the new church year. I am surprised how much this means to me. In all the years I went to church as a child I was never aware of the church seasons beyond Christmas and Easter. I am so excited to be starting a year in which I will hopefully be able to go to church every week. Almost everyone is surprised by this. Many seasoned church-goers, long-time believers, don't seem to mind much if life takes them away from church for a week or for several. They are certainly not lesser Christians because of it. And the rest of the world simply finds it extraordinary – why on earth would you do that on a Sunday morning, when you could be having a lie-in, or sitting in a café with a spiced latte and fresh croissants, or even, horrors, going for a run.

We are starting year A of the revised common lectionary, so in 3 years' time I'll have done the whole thing (plus a chunk of year C twice). That I know this is weird. My lovely other half asked me yesterday, not for the first time, why I believe and why even so I want to go to church; a question I have failed to articulate a response to right from the start.

But the beginning of Advent has given me a glimpse of insight into what is it that brings me home to the house of the Lord each week; why I can't just 'believe whatever it is I want to believe' and get on with life without it. It's something to do with readiness. Without church I don't stay awake or alert to God. When I don't go I read the day's gospel anyway, sometimes all the readings, but if I don't hear them out loud I get muddled in the meanings, I lose the thread, or I skate over the tough parts. And I love a good sermon in a way my teenage self could never accept or understand. On weeks I don't go I lose track of my prayer life and find it harder for the rest of the week to make space to listen to God. And I miss the opportunity to sing God's praise, to worship, and to stand side by side with the diverse and welcoming crowd who are, slowly, becoming my 'church family'.

A week that starts with church has shape, a fortitude that comes partly from the Eucharist, yes, but also from just being at the service itself, from starting as I mean to go on. It sets the tone for a week of good balance between being and doing, a perennial struggle for too-busy London-paced-life types like me. Without it my attempts at 'good prayer' all week fall short, my bible study lacks conviction and my focus strays. Without it I won't be ready when my challenge comes.

Postscript: I wrote this thinking not of the second coming, or of death, which I think are the most common ways of interpreting this passage (Matthew 24:36-44) but of the big challenges in life, like illness or bereavement. Since then I've realised that 'my challenge' comes every single day: every time I fail to see Jesus in the need of a homeless person outside the Tube, each time I lack patience or get short-tempered, every opportunity I miss to be generous with my time or resources...