

Advent is marching along.

Back in the day,when I was a kid advent calendars were simple colour printed pictures with numbered small openings – or windows, which revealed another picture on the countdown to Christmas.

Do you remember those?

Each morning at school we would sit in a circle around the teacher and someone would take a turn in opening the window and each day we could see us getting closer to Christmas.

It might be a picture of a candle, angel, robin or similar.

When my kids were little, advent calendars were a bit more “up market” and contained a chocolate.

This created tension in our house hold as to whose “turn” it was to eat the chocolate..

In the end I think we ended up buying 4 advent calendars so they had one each.

A good way to increase demand and sales~

Over the past few weeks I have been amazed at the vast array of Advent calendars on the market today.

It seems just revealing a little picture is not enough – even a chocolate isn't enough.

Lego have marketed advent calendars with 25 lego toys.

And for adults there is the beer variety... or here you can buy a wine version - a bottle each day.

There are "luxury Advent Calendars" with a beauty product or make up item each day worth hundreds of dollars.

It doesn't take much reflection to see how far we have drifted from the meaning of Advent and the message of John the Baptist.

No longer is there the anticipation of receiving gifts, ...rather Advent has become a season of consumerism - for 24 days Advent treats is the lead up to Christmas

Christmas day becomes the day where people then provide bigger, better and more expensive gifts to their child ... the huge Lego set, or for those financially challenged, piles of plastic from the dollar store....consumerism is the god of our times.

Perhaps you remember as a child, the waiting, anticipation and really hoping and wanting that new bike or game. I know I did.

It seems that most children, at least in our culture, already have everything they could possibly want – and even more.

They are so hard to buy for, because they already have everything – and they too miss the magic, because they are robbed from the longing and anticipation.

Perhaps Advent is a time to get in touch with our longing...I don't mean longing for material goods – but our spiritual longing. What is it, deep in our hearts that we yearn for?

John the Baptist calls us to repentance, repent – mentanoia – in the greek -meaning to “turn around” to look at ourselves, our lives and to brush away the cobwebs of our complacency – rather than to spend Advent immersing ourselves in consumerism and sentimentality.

How do we turn our lives around? How do we bring our focus to the things that are most important – in the world where marketing and consumerism drowns out the voice of the one calling in the wilderness?

In its most simple definition, sin is something that gets in the way of our relationship with God. It can be an action or an attitude, it can be something that hurts both us and others.

When we are reconnected and reconciled with God, we are free to be ourselves.

The mundaneness and struggle of daily life can easily distract us from following the way of Jesus and we can make choices that are not healthy for us or others.

We act selfishly or refuse to do anything at all.

We all sin, we all fall short of our ideals and miss the target.

Being self-aware and reflective each day can help us to stay on track.

The founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola, gifted the church with the spiritual practice of the Examin.

There are a variety of approaches to the Examin -but basically at the end of each day we take time to reflect on where we have encountered God that day, and where we need to improve our lives, the interaction with others or things that didn't go so well.

We identify those things that were a barrier to our Christian life. Then we pray for a desire and will to do things differently the next day, asking God's forgiveness.

The church also provides us with two main ways of making our confession and helping us to repent, to turn our lives around.

Each Sunday in our Liturgy, we have a General Confession. It comes after the Prayers of the People. We confess our sins -what we have done, our thoughts, words and deeds, and those things that we have left undone, that we should have attended to. We receive absolution, the words of God's forgiveness "-may almighty God have mercy upon you, pardon and strengthen you in All goodness and keep you in eternal life."

Another very helpful spiritual practice is the private confession.

Now many people think of private as something mysterious that Roman Catholics do.

We see it in the movies, dark little confessional boxes, a screen or curtain where a person kneels down in front of a creepy priest.

I have never had an experience of private confession like that. Most confessions are heard face to face in a comfortable, private place and is more of a dialogue where the priest offers some counsel and proclaims God's forgiveness. It can be a very powerful experience.

There are Anglicans who do partake in private confession and it has always been part of our practice, though often not talked about much. People find private confession to be very restorative, healing and life-giving. A time of grace.

The language has also changed – it's also called reconciliation, which is more than just speaking out our sins, but a restoring of relationship between two parties, between us and God.

There has been some research done that suggests practicing RCs have fewer mental health issues than the general population. Private confession is thought to be a significant factor in this phenomenon.

Confession allows a person to pull out their dirty linen, to deal with it honestly, hear the words of forgiveness and then move forward in their lives without holding on to guilt and a damaged sense of self.

Even in AA, individuals are encouraged to make a confession as part of the 12 step program. "Admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."

It says that "the purpose of Step 5 helps ease the anxiety, depression and irritability of hiding the worst parts of you. You are able to rid yourself of isolation and loneliness."

Step 5 of Alcoholics Anonymous teaches you that you can be forgiven for your shortcomings and also forgive others who have hurt you.

In the RC church, all people are directed to make their confession regularly. This gets people used to confronting the darker side of themselves and taking action to improve their lives.

Forgiveness goes hand in hand with contrition – a willingness and promise to amend our life and make better choices.

The thought of making a private confession may have us feel awkward or uncomfortable.

By making our confession demonstrates that we are serious about repentance and wish to deepen our life with God in Christ.

The bishop who ordained me would say that everyone should make a private confession *at least twice a year*- in Advent and Lent and at other significant times in their life- such as before Confirmation, marriage or Ordination.

Private Confession helps us to have a fresh start, brings us peace of mind, and can renew and energize us to continue our Christian pilgrimage of life.

I realize that private confession isn't something that many Anglicans are familiar with.

The official Anglican stance on confession is All May, none must, some should (repeat)

Perhaps you have never had an opportunity to experience a private confession.

All Anglican priests are able to hear private confessions, although many do not do it regularly.

What you say is between you and God, totally confidential - the priest is there to help facilitate the process and pronounce the words of forgiveness and sometimes offer some counsel.

So this is how it usually works:

You make an appointment with a priest, at your own parish or another if you prefer.

Before you arrive, prayerfully prepare yourself.

Reflect and examine your conscience and discern what you need to let go of, what you need to confess, the places in your life where you need God's healing, mercy and forgiveness.

When you arrive, the priest will invite you into a private space, maybe their office or a quiet spot in the church.

They will usually wear a purple stole. There is a formula on Page 167 of the BAS (the green prayerbook) but sometimes a less formal format is used depending on the pastoral situation.

I have heard confessions outside in the forest, in a car and by a hospital bed with no books.

It begins with a prayer and then you may tell the priest how long it's been since your last confession, or maybe that this is your first. The priest will be non judgemental and help guide you in the process.

Then speak what is on your conscience. What are the things troubling you? What do you need to release and seek forgiveness and healing for?

I have had people unburden their souls with things they have hidden away in shame for decades. Releasing it brings such healing and inner peace.

Although confession is not counselling or psychotherapy, some advice or counsel may be offered by the priest.

The priest may suggest an action or practical step to help us get back on track -reading Scripture, certain prayers or other spiritual reading or practice.

Often the process of confession encourages a person to then seek out professional counselling or spiritual direction.

After saying the Lord's Prayer together, the priest will pronounce the words of absolution

Ending with "The Lord has put away all your sins...go in peace, and pray for me a sinner "

It is very powerful to hear these words -liberating and life changing.

I am always willing to hear private confessions so please make an appointment if this is something you feel drawn to do.

Such acts of reconciliation can really improve our lives and our relationships.

We become people more willing to forgive others..

...they restore our relationship with God and demonstrate that we are serious in our commitment to discipleship.

We will find healing and deep peace.

We are set free from the burden of past guilt.

One of my childhood friends described his experience of confession like this.

"I imagined I went in with a big round medal around my neck that was tarnished and heavy, that pulled me down. After confession I left feeling lighter and the medal was so shiny and clean and I felt I could start again and be proud of who I was"

Whether we choose private confession or not, the important thing is to take time to make peace with ourselves and with God.

In Advent We are called to repent and prepare.

To clean out the cobwebs of our souls and to dump the rubbish that clutters us spiritually –to tear down and remove things that obstruct our path –to make straight the path.

We are to repent, to turn around and to embrace those things which enable our soul to receive the Christ....and we are transformed and are able to play our part in transforming our relationships and healing the world.

This is where we find true Peace.