

# What are we up for?

Rev Dr Michael Paterson's homily on Advent Sunday, 1 December 2019

If you were going to a gym or a keep fit class, and weren't getting any fitter, how long would you keep going before giving up because it wasn't working?

And if you were on a diet, and avoiding all the delicious foods you really enjoy, how long would you keep going before abandoning it because it wasn't doing what it said on the tin?

And if you were going to church Sunday after Sunday, year after year, how long would you keep going if you realised that you weren't being transformed?

I have a friend who goes to the gym for two hours every day, but he's no fitter than when he started, because he spends 20 minutes on the treadmill and the rest of the time in the bar rewarding himself with the pints he has earned by all that sweaty work.

And I have another friend who has been going to Slimmers' World for years. Her class meets on a Monday, so she starves herself over the weekend in preparation for the big weigh-in, and then treats herself to a Big Mac, a tub of Häagen-Dazs icecream and diet Coke on the way home.

And I think coming to Church can be like that. We come Sunday by Sunday for our spiritual top up. We hear the scriptures, we share bread and wine, and then go home unchanged. A bit like the half-hearted gym goer or the ambivalent dieter.

And that's what I love about Advent. At one level it's all about getting ready for Christmas, and that's right. But it's also the day the Church presses the restart button and says: Let's make a new beginning.

And so today is the church's annual invitation to holiness to transformation and to plain old-fashioned godliness.



Every Advent, God poses the question to people like you and me who have been coming to church all our lives, and have been through the Advent and Christmas cycle so many times:

And the question is this: As the church presses reset, and begins all over again, are we up for religion? Or are we up for grace?

Religion is about the basics: keeping the commandments; honouring God and the Sabbath; loving our neighbour as ourselves. Religion is about the minimal entrance requirements for heaven.

But the life of grace is a quite different affair.

Grace is about going beyond tinkering with religion, and saying to God: "I vote for you. I sign up to your deal. I back you 100%."

Grace is about saying: "The time for dabbling in dieting and getting fit are over. The time for playing games and messing about with religion is over. I am in it for real, Lord."

Grace is about turning our lives completely over to God, and praying for God to finish what he has started in us, to bring it to completion and to change us from glory into glory.



And all it takes is one simple YES to turn a lifetime of religion into an eternity of grace.

And when we find that YES, then we can sing with Charles Wesley:

Finish, then, thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be;  
let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee:  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise!

Let's pray for the grace this Advent to start out all over again, and to set our goal on nothing as tame as religion when transformation is on offer. Amen.