When I was a child, a year felt like a long time. The spring term was always exciting as the days got longer and it was once again possible to play out after school. The long six-week holidays in the summer seemed like an eternity to play, go on holiday, and have fun. Of course, Advent seemed interminable as I opened each door on my Advent calendar and the days seemed to pass by so very slowly until finally, the magical day arrived, and it was Christmas. Now I am an adult a year seems hardly any time at all. In fact, I often find myself wishing that a year would last longer. As I look back on the events of this time last year - the services in church, or time with family and friends, I wonder how it could really have been a whole year since they happened.

We are very adept at marking the passage of time. Whether it's with calendars, watches, diaries or something else, we find often ingenious ways to mark the progress of the year. For Christians this is often done through the changing seasons of the Chruch's year. We have now moved into the season of Advent, when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas. At home we may well have Advent calendars or Advent candles to mark the passage of time in this special month; in church we have our Advent Wreath. Each of the four candles around the outer ring of the wreath symbolise something important from the story of our faith. Each Sunday in Advent we light another of these candles in church so that, when Christmas arrives, we have lit all four. The candles each have a special meaning, they represent:

- The Patriarchs from the Bible (people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses), who laid the foundations for what would eventually become our faith.
- The Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and others), who were chosen by God to have a special message for His people, often about changing their ways and renewing their relationship with Him.
- John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus and prepared the people for Jesus' message by encouraging them to repent and get ready for the arrival of the Kingdom of God.
- The Virgin Mary, Jesus' mother, who willingly accepted God's role for her and gave care and devotion to Jesus as he grew up, and even stayed with him during the agony of the Cross.

In the centre of the wreath is a fifth candle, lit on Christmas Eve and then in every service of the Christmas season afterwards. This candle represents Jesus, the light of the world, coming into the world at his birth.

In many churches, the outer four candles are red and the central one is white. In our church, and many other traditional churches, three of the outer candles are purple, one is pink (to symbolise joy) and the central one is white, symbolising the purity of Jesus.

As Advent progresses and we light each of these candles, we can see our progress towards the wonderful celebration of Jesus' birth, and of the ancient roots of our faith and the many different people who have each played their part in shaping and informing the traditions of the Church. Yet we are also invited to remember the ways in which this story has been made manifest in our own lives. As we think about the Patriarchs, we may think about those whose example has been so foundational in shaping who we are, our values and our worldviews. As we think about the Prophets, we can remember those people who have had a special message for us, perhaps about changing our attitudes or warning us from straying too far from the path which leads to health and safety.

While considering John the Baptist, and how he prepared the way for Jesus, we can think about our roles in preparing he way for Him in our lives and the lives of those around us. And finally, as we give thanks for Mary, who gave such tender care to Jesus from the moment of his birth, we can thank God for all those who have given care to us.

In this way, Advent becomes more than simply a way of marking time until Christmas. It becomes the season when the whole Christian story becomes present in our own lives. What a wonderful realisation as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus!

I pray that this Advent may be a time of blessing for you all. Amen.