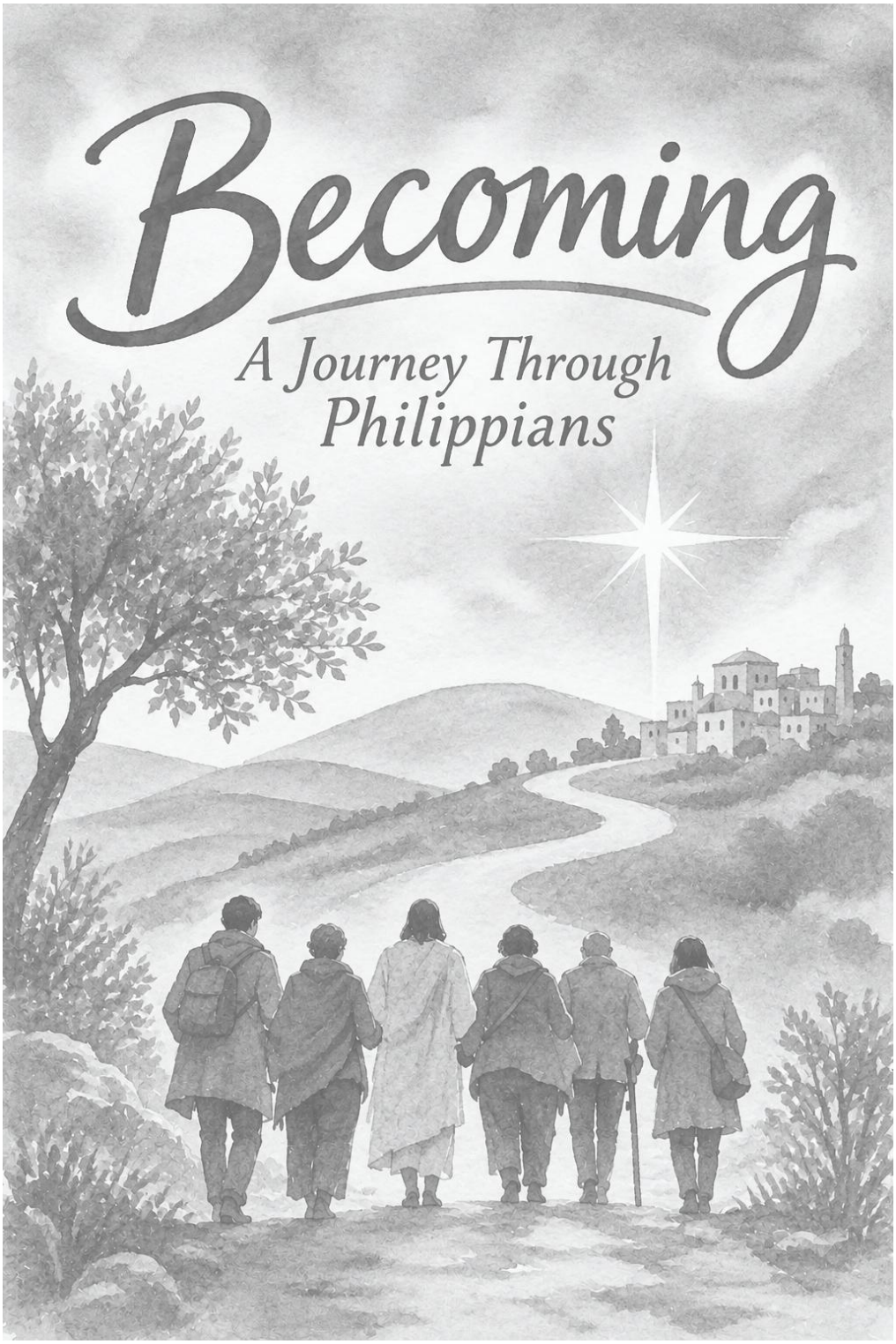
ADVENT 2026



A LIFE WORTH RECEIVING

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BECOMING - A JOURNEY THROUGH PHILIPPIANS

What does it mean to become the people God is calling us to be?

Paul's Letter to the Philippians is one I have returned to many times over the years. Although relatively short, it is remarkably rich in its reflections on faith, friendship, community, joy, generosity and the way of Christ. Each time I read it, I find something that speaks afresh to the journey of faith.

It is also a deeply personal letter, written to a community Paul knew and loved. The church in Philippi had begun in rather unexpected circumstances. As we read in Acts 16, finding no synagogue in the city, Paul went to a place of prayer beside the river, where he met a group of women, including Lydia. From that encounter, a new Christian community began. It is a lovely reminder that the Church often takes shape through ordinary encounters, hospitality and a willingness to discover God in one another.

Over Advent and Lent, we will journey through this letter, exploring some of the questions at the heart of Christian discipleship: Who are we? What is our life for? What kind of people are we becoming? How do we live with joy, generosity, courage and hope?

The study is offered in two parts:

ADVENT — A LIFE WORTH RECEIVING
Four sessions exploring identity, belonging, purpose and the mystery of Christ among us.

LENT — A LIFE WORTH GIVING
Six sessions exploring community, transformation, joy, generosity and what it means to offer our lives for the good of the world.

You are welcome to work through the reflections on your own, join a group at St Paul's, or gather a few friends and explore them together. There is no need to have all the answers. Simply bring your questions, your experiences and your willingness to reflect.

This is not about becoming a better version of ourselves or reaching some imagined point of perfection. It is about allowing the life and teaching of Christ to shape us, individually and together.

Becoming is not about having arrived. It is about learning to live into who we are becoming.

I hope you enjoy the journey.

Vernon

Advent 1 – A New Way of Seeing

Read **Philippians 1:1–11**

“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.”
— Philippians 1:6

Becoming
We spend much of our lives becoming something. A child becomes an adult. A student becomes a graduate. We become friends, partners, parents, grandparents, neighbours and colleagues. We become shaped by the places we have lived and the people we have loved. We become, sometimes without even noticing it, the people our experiences have made us.

Christian faith begins with a different kind of becoming. Paul writes to the Christians at Philippi with remarkable affection. He doesn't tell them that they have finally arrived. Instead, he gives thanks for the work God has already begun among them — and trusts that God will continue that work.

Perhaps that is one of the things Advent invites us to remember.

We are not finished.

God's work in us is not a project we have to complete by our own effort. Faith is not about becoming a perfect person. It is about becoming increasingly open to God's love and allowing that love to shape the people we are becoming.

Paul also speaks of the Philippians as his **partners**. Their faith isn't simply a private matter between each person and God. They belong to one another. They are becoming together.

That may be one of the most important things we can recover about Christian discipleship: **we become who we are in relationship with others.**

Reflect

Take some time with these questions:

- What people, places and experiences have helped make me the person I am?
- Where do I find my deepest sense of belonging?
- What does it mean to me to hear that God is not finished with me?
- Who are the people with whom I am becoming?

This week

Pay attention to the things that shape you. Notice the conversations you have, the people you spend time with, the things you read and watch, the places where you feel most yourself.

At the end of the week, ask:

What is shaping the person I am becoming?

A prayer for the journey

God of beginnings,
thank you for the people and experiences
through which you have shaped my life.
Help me to trust that I am still becoming,
and that your work in me is not finished.
Give me grace to receive your love
and courage to allow that love
to shape the person I become.
Amen.

Advent 2 – A Life with Purpose

Read **Philippians 1:12–30**

“For me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”
— Philippians 1:21

What is my life for?
We are often encouraged to find our purpose. We are told to discover our gifts, follow our dreams, find meaningful work and make a difference. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. But they can leave us with a difficult question:

What happens when our plans don't work out?

Paul's circumstances are hardly what he might have chosen. He is writing to the Philippians from prison. His freedom has been taken away, and his future is uncertain. And yet Paul refuses to believe that his life has lost its purpose. Instead, he discovers that even here, in circumstances he did not choose, his life can still be lived in a way that reflects Christ.

This is important because Christian purpose is not necessarily about having a grand plan for our lives. It is about discovering **how we might live faithfully within the life we have been given.**

Paul's purpose is not simply a task he has to accomplish. It is a way of being: living with courage, generosity, hope and love, in whatever circumstances he finds himself.

That doesn't mean pretending that difficult things are good. Paul doesn't romanticise his imprisonment. He knows that suffering is suffering. But he refuses to allow his circumstances to have the final word about the meaning of his life. Perhaps that is something Advent has to teach us too.

We often imagine that God comes into our lives when everything is ready — when we have figured things out, when we know where we're going, when we have become the person we hoped to be. But Advent tells another story.

God comes into the midst of ordinary, unfinished and complicated human lives.

The question is therefore not simply: *What am I meant to accomplish?*

The more important question is: **How am I being invited to live?**
With courage?
With compassion?
With curiosity?

With generosity?
With hope?
Purpose may be less about finding the one thing we were put on earth to do, and more about learning to bring our whole selves to the life that is already before us.

Reflect

- When have your plans for life changed in ways you didn't expect?
- What gives your life a sense of meaning or purpose now?
- Do you tend to think of purpose as something you **achieve**, or something you **live**?
- What would it mean to live your present circumstances with greater courage, love or hope?

This week

Each morning, before beginning your day, ask:
"How can I bring love to the life that is in front of me today?"

Don't look for something extraordinary.
It might be listening carefully to someone.
It might be offering encouragement.
It might be being patient.
It might be noticing someone who is easily overlooked.
At the end of the day, pause and ask:

Where did I notice life and love today?

A prayer for the journey

God of our lives,
we do not always know where we are going.
When our plans change
and our paths become uncertain,
remind us that our lives still have meaning.
Help us to live faithfully
in the circumstances we have been given,
bringing courage, compassion and hope
wherever we find ourselves.
And as we wait for Christ to come among us,
teach us to recognise your presence
in the life that is already ours.
Amen.

Advent 3 – The Mind of Christ

Read **Philippians 2:1–11**

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”
— Philippians 2:5

What kind of people are we becoming?

We all carry ideas about what makes a good life. We may value independence, achievement, strength, success or being recognised for what we contribute. These aren't necessarily bad things. But the Christian story asks us to imagine a different way of being in the world.

Paul points the Philippians towards Jesus. He describes Christ not as someone grasping for power or status, but as one who gives himself away in love.

This is the heart of Paul's appeal:
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

The word *mind* here means more than what we think. It is about our attitude, our orientation towards life, and the way we choose to live with other people.

To have the mind of Christ is therefore not simply to think the right things about Jesus. It is to allow the way of Jesus to shape the way we live. And Paul's emphasis is surprisingly practical. He begins by talking about relationships: looking not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.

This doesn't mean ignoring ourselves or believing that our needs don't matter. It means refusing to make ourselves the centre of everything.

The life of Christ is a life turned outward. This is one of the great challenges of discipleship. We live in a culture that constantly asks us to promote ourselves, protect ourselves, improve ourselves and make sure that we get what we deserve.

Jesus offers another possibility:
What if life becomes richer when it is shared?

The passage from Philippians is often called the “Christ hymn,” and Christians have spent centuries reflecting on its profound claims about Jesus. But Paul is not writing a theology textbook. He is inviting a community to become different because of what they see in Christ.

Humility isn't thinking less of ourselves. It is becoming less preoccupied with ourselves. Love isn't simply a feeling. It is a way of being present to others. And, power isn't only something to possess. It can also be something we choose to use for the sake of others.

Advent brings this into even sharper focus. We celebrate a God who does not remain distant from human life but comes among us. **God comes close.**

The Christ we meet in Philippians is not a God of domination or distance, but a God whose love is revealed through self-giving. And so the question of Advent becomes a question for us:
What would it mean for our lives to become a little more like that?

Not perfectly. Not all at once. But gradually, as we become people who make room for others, who let go of the need to be at the centre, and who discover that love grows when it is given away.

Reflect

- What qualities do you associate with a “successful” life?
- Which of those qualities does Jesus affirm? Which might Jesus challenge?
- What do you think Paul means by having “the mind of Christ”?
- Where might you be invited to make a little more room for someone else?

This week

Notice the moments when you have a choice between **being right and being generous**, between **being noticed and noticing someone else**, or between **protecting your own position and making room for another**.

You don't have to get it right every time. Simply notice the choice.

Then ask:

“What would the mind of Christ look like here?”

A prayer for the journey

Christ Jesus,
you show us a way of living
that is shaped by love rather than power,
by generosity rather than grasping,
and by connection rather than self-interest.
Shape our minds and hearts
so that we may see others more clearly,
make room for those around us,
and discover the freedom of a life given in love.
As we prepare to celebrate your coming among us,
help us to become more like you.
Amen.

Advent 4 – God With Us

Read **Philippians 2:5–18**

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”
— Philippians 2:5

How does faith take flesh?

Advent begins with waiting. We wait for Christmas. We wait for light in the darkness. We wait for the celebration of Christ's birth. But Christian faith says that God is not simply waiting for us at the end of our journey.

God comes to us.

This is the mystery at the heart of Christmas: that the God whom we might imagine as distant or beyond our reach chooses to enter human life. The story of Jesus begins not with humanity climbing up towards God, but with God coming down among us.

Philippians gives us a glimpse of this mystery in its beautiful description of Christ. Jesus does not cling to status or privilege. Instead, he empties himself and takes the form of a servant. God is revealed not through power and grandeur, but through presence.

God with us.

That changes the way we might understand our own lives. If God is willing to enter fully into the reality of human life, then ordinary human life matters.
Our bodies matter.
Our relationships matter.
Our communities matter.
The places where we live matter.
The joys and sorrows of our lives matter.

God does not wait for the world to become perfect before coming among us. God enters the world as it is. That is good news for us, because our lives are rarely perfect either. We can spend a great deal of energy imagining that we will become better people *once everything is sorted out*. Once we have more time. Once a relationship is repaired. Once we have found our purpose. Once we have overcome whatever is holding us back.

Advent tells us something different. **God meets us here.**

Not in the imaginary life we think we ought to have, but in the life we actually have. And if God is present here, then perhaps our calling is not to escape ordinary life but to learn to see it differently.

To notice God's presence in the people around us.
To recognise love when it appears in ordinary places.
To become people through whom God's presence can become visible to others.

This is what it means for faith to take flesh. Faith is not only something we believe. It becomes something we **do**.

It becomes patience.
It becomes welcome.
It becomes forgiveness.
It becomes generosity.
It becomes justice.
It becomes the courage to stand alongside someone who is vulnerable or alone.

The Christ we celebrate at Christmas is not simply an idea to admire. **Christ is a life to be lived.**

And so, as Advent draws to a close, we return to where we began. We are becoming. We are learning to receive the life God gives us, to discover purpose within it, and to allow the way of Christ to shape how we live. We don't do this alone. God is already here.

Reflect

- Where do you most readily notice God's presence?
- What does it mean to you that God meets us in ordinary human life?
- Where might you need to stop waiting for your life to become "perfect" before fully living it?
- What might it look like for God's love to become visible through your life?

This week

As Christmas approaches, choose one ordinary moment each day — a conversation, a meal, a walk, a familiar place, a moment of silence — and pause for a few seconds.

Ask: **"Where is God here?"**

Don't worry about finding an answer. Simply become attentive.

A prayer for the journey

God who comes among us,
open our eyes to your presence
in the ordinary places of our lives.
Help us to receive the gift of Christ
and to allow that gift to take flesh
in the way we live.
Where there is loneliness,
make us companions.
Where there is fear,
make us people of hope.
Where there is need,
make us generous.
May the love we celebrate at Christmas
become visible in our lives.
Amen.