

Advent Reflections



This set of reflections can be used as sermon notes for volunteer speakers and church leaders. These could also be used by home groups as a starter for discussions throughout the season of advent. They are based on the lectionary readings for Advent.

Advent One

Readings - Matthew 24:36-44

The Day and Hour Unknown

³⁶ “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

⁴² “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

Isaiah 2:1-5

The Mountain of the Lord

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

² In the last days
the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

³ Many peoples will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

⁵ Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Reflection

Advent One is the beginning of the Church's liturgical calendar so why does it start with the end times? It seems illogical that this time before Christmas, when we might be preparing to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus that we are talking about the Second Coming and visions of the Kingdom of God.

But in another way, it's clear that these two themes go together. We wait with expectation for the second coming because the work of the incarnation is not complete. We know that. There are wars around us. Swords are not yet beaten into ploughshares. There is not yet justice and equality in many parts of our communities, there are so many places where hunger and poverty are not yet alleviated and this winter the signs of inequality and hardship are more acute than ever.

So how do we live in this in-between time. Why is it so important that we are alert and ready. Do you remember the old mugs and tea towels that said: 'Look busy - Jesus is coming'? I am sure lots of us are busy in lots of different ways - but what are the things we need to focus on to prepare for the coming of Christ and the realm of God, a realm of justice, peace and equality.

To know what to do we must understand what good looks like. You ask any secondary school teacher. They always give their pupils a WAGOLL (What A Good One Looks Like) when they set a new task. That's what we are being shown in the reading in Isaiah - it is a WAGOLL. This is the new age, where machines that are meant to destroy and transformed into tools to grow food and tend the earth.

If you look at the first verse - in my translation it is a 'word' that Isaiah 'saw'. Normally we hear words but this word was more a vision which Isaiah could see in all its detail and beauty. It is full of visual imagery, imagery that we can use to train our imaginations so we can see what will come when we live under the reign of God. When we see what it is that it looks like - we can start working for it - we will start to look around us for glimpses of that reign breaking in. We will see moments where it feels like we are living 'on earth as it in heaven.'

The Trussell Trust strategy is like that - we know what we want to see - the end of the need for food banks, a more just and equal system and we don't know how and when it will come. Meanwhile we must live in the now and the not yet - we still care for those who face hunger while doing all we can to make the new era come, celebrating when we see signs of it, praying for it and doing whatever we can to usher in a rule of justice, equality, joy and peace.

Read

The Kingdom - R S Thomas

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man

Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Advent Two

Readings - Isaiah 11:1-10

The Branch From Jesse

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

² The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
³ and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
⁵ Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling[a] together;
and a little child will lead them.

⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Reflection

These two readings are given to us to move us from the end of time, the second coming, where we began last week, to the foretelling of Jesus’ life and ministry. However, both prophecies again remind us that Jesus’ earthly ministry did not complete the arrival of a new kingdom.

While we recognise the wise, spirit-filled ruler described in Isaiah 11 in part we did not see Jesus killing the wicked nor do we see yet the wolf lying down with the lamb. John’s prophecy in Matthew 3 might leave us with the same issue - Jesus did not seem to come with a winnowing fork in his hand but more with hands that healed, restored and blessed. There are two ways of dealing with this question and it may be that truth can be found in a combination of these two suggestions.

The first, as already mentioned, is to say that this foretelling refers to both Jesus’ incarnation and his second coming and we will see the quite violent judgement when he comes again followed by the beauty of the peaceable kingdom when the whole of creation is in harmony with one another. Or we can perhaps say that these prophecies are informed by a human understanding of a wrathful God - a God who then became fully human and absorbed the violence of humanity by dying on the cross, demonstrated the power of love by the resurrection and leads us all through the Holy Spirit further from death dealing and violence to a new and reordered life.

However, I am certainly not suggesting that we run away from the idea of judgement altogether. But I think we need to look closely at the purpose of judgement and why it is so important. Isaiah looks at this in some detail in 3-5. This messianic figure does not judge from what he see or hears but from righteousness - that is an extraordinary statement - and this special depth of judgement is reserved for the poor and the meek. While in our collective imagination judgement has become associated with punishment it can also be seen as a kind of revelation, a truth-telling that leads to change and this is very much the kind of judgement that Isaiah seems to be talking about in verses 3 and 4a.

John saves his particular brand of judgement for the religious leaders of his time, calling them to repentance and challenging them about their assumptions. Jesus too got angry with sadducees and pharisees but also debated with them. Jewish scholar A J Levine, among others, have suggested that Jesus might have actually been a pharisee.

It is again interesting to wonder why the religious leaders were singled out for such anger? At this time, it is worth asking ourselves how Jesus and the radical prophetic John the Baptist might respond to our worship, our lifestyles and our claims to be disciples of Christ. How we respond to the poor and the meek in our communities may be central to how we are judged - whether that is at the end of our lives, at the end of time or in our times with God as we listen for truth-telling that leads us deeper into discipleship day by day. Our reflections might challenge us to think how we judge others - do we regard some people as more deserving of our support than others? The more we understand what drives people into poverty and destitution, shown in research like the Trussell Trust's State of Hunger report [Research and advocacy – The Trussell Trust](#), the more we realise there is no them and us, only we.

Read

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind - John Greenleaf Whittier

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace;
The beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm;
O still, small voice of calm.

Advent Three

Readings - Isaiah 35:1-10

Joy of the Redeemed

The desert and the parched land will be glad;

the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendour of our God.

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.

The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Reflection

Isaiah 35 speaks to people who are struggling, fearful, broken and sorrowful living in a land which is parched and desolate. This might well resonate with our times when we cannot be unaware of the threats of climate change and many people are struggling with the cost of living, personal heartache and ill health. The Isaiah poem promises a great transformation and redemption brought about by the presence of God among God's people and looks forward to a time when sorrow and sighing shall flee away (verse 10.).

The passage promises such joy, wholeness and restoration that it gives us something to cling on to this winter when the news around us might lead to despair, discouragement or apathy. It is also a helpful reminder of the connections between the state of the earth and personal pain and illness, pointing towards redemption that encompasses individuals, communities and the planet itself. Part of the redemption promised for people with physical disability and illness would have included a restoration to community - this might help us think about how people experiencing destitution are often excluded from community and how part of living in the now and not yet now times that Advent focuses on is to include people who are often not given access to full participation in our communal life.

This connection between those who are poor and destitute and those suffering from disabilities and illnesses is made clear in the Matthew reading (verse 4). It is shocking to remember that 75% of people at food banks have a health issue or live with someone who does so this connection is real and tangible more than 2,000 years after this promise of good news.

Jesus sends this message to John the Baptist to reassure him that the signs of the kingdom are becoming a living reality through his earthly ministry. Some of the promises of Isaiah are being fulfilled. John, in prison, needs this reassurance. His ministry has been thwarted, his truth-telling curtailed by those in power and he is wondering if he just got it all wrong.

Many people this winter are feeling thwarted. Lives are being limited by poverty, wars and uncertainty. We too may wonder if we have got it all wrong, if we have been mistaken in our faith and if our prayers are really being answered. But if we look around our neighbourhoods carefully we can see the glimpses of goodness which Jesus shows John the Baptist in his grief and doubt. We see people caring for one another during times of ill health, we see communities forming where people are liberated from the prison of isolation and injustice being challenged so that the oppression of poverty starts to be broken.

In the words of **Shane Claiborne**; “But we live in a world that has lost its appreciation for small things. We live in a world that wants things bigger and bigger. We want to supersize our fries, sodas, and church buildings. But amid all the supersizing, many of us feel God doing something new, something small and subtle. This thing Jesus called the kingdom of God is emerging across the globe in the most unexpected places, a gentle whisper amid the chaos.”

— **Shane Claiborne, The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical**

Hearing those whispers in the chaos gives us the optimism to believe that one day no-one will face hunger because no-one will let them. Policy changes, community response, income maximisation and prayer will bring the day when food banks are no longer necessary.

Read

Psalm 42 - The Message

¹⁻³ A white-tailed deer drinks
from the creek;
I want to drink God,
deep drafts of God.
I'm thirsty for God-alive.
I wonder, “Will I ever make it—
arrive and drink in God's presence?”
I'm on a diet of tears—
tears for breakfast, tears for supper.
All day long
people knock at my door,
Pestering,
“Where is this God of yours?”
These are the things I go over and over,
emptying out the pockets of my life.
I was always at the head of the worshiping crowd,
right out in front,
Leading them all,
eager to arrive and worship,
Shouting praises, singing thanksgiving—
celebrating, all of us, God's feast!
⁵ Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?
Why are you crying the blues?
Fix my eyes on God—
soon I'll be praising again.
He puts a smile on my face.
He's my God.
⁶⁻⁸ When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse
everything I know of you,
From Jordan depths to Hermon heights,
including Mount Mizar.
Chaos calls to chaos,
to the tune of white-water rapids.
Your breaking surf, your thundering breakers

crash and crush me.
Then GOD promises to love me all day,
sing songs all through the night!
My life is God's prayer.
⁹⁻¹⁰ Sometimes I ask God, my rock-solid God,
"Why did you let me down?
Why am I walking around in tears,
harassed by enemies?"
They're out for the kill, these
tormentors with their obscenities,
Taunting day after day,
"Where is this God of yours?"
¹¹ Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul?
Why are you crying the blues?
Fix my eyes on God—
soon I'll be praising again.
He puts a smile on my face.
He's my God.

Advent Four

Readings - Isaiah 7:10-16

¹⁰ Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. ¹⁵ He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, ¹⁶ for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Reflection

In the final week of Advent we are invited to look ahead to the birth of Jesus, the sign of God’s presence with humanity in all time and in all places. Matthew takes the perspective of Joseph and his role in the nativity story, telling us how he moves from a place of despair and heartbreak to trust and obedience to God. Joseph, described as a righteous man, responds to a difficult situation in a measured way, in keeping with the laws and customs of the times and plans to dismiss Mary quietly, probably to avoid her being shamed or punished. But in a dream, he is told not to be afraid, just as Mary was told not to be afraid when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her she was to have a child. Joseph’s angel tells him that the child should be named Jesus, that he will save people from their sins and that he fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah. Joseph wakes up and does exactly what the angel has told him. He took Mary as his wife and he names the child, Jesus. Joseph is a model of the trusting obedience for all who want to follow the ways of God. He is prepared to rethink his plan, refute the customs and culture of his time and take a risk - all on the basis of a dream.

King Ahaz is quite a different man. In verse 2 of Isaiah we hear that his heart and the heart of the people shook ‘as the trees of the forest shake before the wind’ when they heard that two neighbouring kings had allied against them. God sent a messenger to him, this time not an angel but the prophet Isaiah. Having reassured Ahaz and urged him to stand in faith, God then offers him a sign which he declines. Why he says no we don’t know, but Isaiah tells us that this wearied God who then nonetheless gives the sign of Immanuel - God with us - a child born of a young woman.

These stories ask us whether we are open to be changed and challenged by an encounter, however fleeting or unreal and unexpected it might seem. They ask us whether we are going to stick to all our own plans or will we be open to new times, new ways and take risks when God speaks to us.

They also remind us that God reaches out in grace without favour. God reaches out to the engaged carpenter from Nazareth who thinks his wife-to-be has betrayed him and to the king who is threatened and scared. God gives us signs and keeps promises and is with us - in the chaos of war between nations and in the difficulties of family relationships.

Emmanuel means God is with us, and we are with God. It also calls us to be signs of God’s presence in our communities, living lives which bring hope in troubled times, reaching out with the promise of peace and helping to reconcile division and fractured relationships. God is with us in the encounters when we least expect it, we may well hear God’s words from the person we thought needed our help and support. It reminds us that we don’t have all the answers, we meet others expecting to learn, open to listen and change always aware that God can use the most unlikely people to be God’s messengers.

Advent is about being watchful for the signs of the kingdom, for the coming of God into our broken world. It calls us to listen to the voice of God, from wherever it is coming and it asks us to be signs to others that the fears, uncertainties of this world, the poverty and inequality of our times, the private heartache and grief we all carry are known by a God who cares so much for us that God gave us his son to bring new life, life in all its fullness. It reminds us that this love encompasses all of us, all the people we meet and especially those who face financial hardship at this time.

Read

Touched by an Angel - Maya Angelou

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.
Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.
We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.