

Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit
Worship at Home: Sunday 28th November 2021

Preparation

As we journey through Advent, create an 'Advent Ring' of 5 candles, and light one each Sunday.

Listen, sing, read or pray

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDmfWoAuWEc>

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free,
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art,
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a king,
born to reign in us for ever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all-sufficient merit
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) Reproduced from Singing the Faith
Electronic Words Edition, number 169

Prayers

As we begin our Advent journey,
may we not be so eager to reach Bethlehem
that we fail to see the fuller picture of God
who has been with us throughout history,
and appears in the people we meet.

So often we fail to see you, gracious God,
in unexpected people and places.

Forgive us when we dismiss those
with whom we don't agree,
those who challenge us to think differently,
or those whose values and lifestyle seem strange.

Forgive us when we fail to see you
in places of deprivation and hopelessness,
in war zones and areas of uneasy peace.

Forgive us when we fail to see you
in boardrooms and on parliamentary benches,
in post office queues, on buses and in shops.

There is nowhere you are not ahead of us,
and nowhere you will not go with us,
so we listen to Jesus' words: 'Don't be afraid.
I love you. I will always be with you'.

Gracious God,
keep us your servants alert and watchful
as we await the coming of Christ your Son,
so that when he comes and knocks at the door,
he may find us vigilant in prayer,
with songs of praise on our lips.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you. Amen.

Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 33.14-16

Gospel reading: Luke 21.25-36

Reflection

The readings for the first Sunday in Advent always leave me feeling disorientated because they seem to have nothing to do with our waiting for the coming of the Christ-child. Instead, they return us to Jesus' last days on earth, the expectation of his return, and the years following his death. Every year I try to remember that God's purposes cannot be summed up in simple, linear thinking, and in Advent, God invites us to hold past, present and future together - to make space for paradox and to take the risk of welcoming the dark.

Luke's description of future events in chapter 21 is a patchwork of phrases from the Hebrew scriptures that he connects with his own time. About 66 AD the temple in Jerusalem was levelled to the ground during the first Jewish revolt – which grew out of increasing tension in the Jewish community. Some wanted to co-operate with the Roman rulers because the uneasy peace allowed life to continue. Others joined revolutionary movements creating disorder and unrest. Jesus' followers were also divided. As some heard of the amazing

happenings in the churches Paul planted, they wanted to embrace the Gentile Christians, while others refused to abandon Jewish customs. Jesus says to them all, hold on, remain alert, pray for strength to meet the future. It might sound as if he's encouraging them to be passive but I think he was encouraging them to face reality because, as Debie Thomas says, *'it's only when we embrace reality that we experience the nearness of God.'*

This is an important insight. 21st century Western society is not very good at reality. It's an inescapable fact that every life will end one day yet we deny death with every fibre of our being and try to avoid aging. We seem to think that our weakening bodies are somehow unnatural and we use euphemisms like 'passing on' to speak about death. I think this is because we don't know how to manage the profound loss of control these – and other - events face us with. When Jesus says that *'people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...'* this is what he's talking about. *'...the days will come'* when the things we cling onto will disappear. Yet most of us live as if 'that day' will miss us and we can, because in the Western democracies most of us have access to health care, shelter, and sufficient food, so we can avoid talking about, or naming the things we'll lose. The Irish poet and theologian, O Tuama, says that *'much of our desire to not-name is because we fear that in naming it we are giving it power... It's a valid fear... to name something can be to call it into being, and we do not wish to call certain things into any kind of being'*. But Luke's witness to the upheaval of the world reminds us that 'that day' will strike at some point - though here, it's more likely to come through illness, loss of a job or a home, the break-down of a relationship or mental health, or through aging and death, than in war, conflict or natural disaster.

Janice Jean Springer is a minister in the United States. After she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease she wrote about her experience of having to slow down because she had less energy, yet

at the same time, needing energy to cope with a new way of living. She lost a lot - confidence that medicine heals; trust that her body would do what she wanted and her brain would perform as it always had. *'Perhaps the most painful loss of all,'* she wrote, *'was that I've lost the illusion that I am exempt from the losses and limits that besiege other people. I've lost the illusion that I am in control.'* We will all lose these illusions. Yet when that happens, many of us don't have the resources we need to negotiate this profound shift in our lives, which is perhaps why Jesus' words have long filled people with fear. But the Advent season offers us many resources to face these events and these are just three of them.

The first is taking the risk of naming the painful stuff that life faces us with. In years gone past we didn't speak of cancer because we feared it. Now it's dementia that we find it hard to name. Wendy Michell developed early onset dementia in 2014. She worked for as long as possible by telling her colleagues about it. When she stopped work, she wrote a book and got involved in campaigning. Her courage in naming what was happening doesn't mean she wasn't terrified by what was happening to her, but talking made it possible to live with thankfulness for the past, allowed her future to be planned for and shared.

The second resource Advent offers is that God is with us. In the midst of the rising tide of confusion and fear, Luke tells us to look for a familiar face, a face we'll recognize - for when we're feeling overwhelmed, the Son of Man appears and we will know the kingdom of God is near. We're invited to look for the kingdom in the ordinary, regular things of life, such as when we see leaves sprout on a tree or take notice of the things that encourage us in the ways of righteousness promised by Jeremiah. Janice Jean Springer's spiritual director suggested that she gave her new regime a *'contemplative shape'* resembling the monastic practice of praying the hours. Some days she'd preferred a Ben and

Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream rather than learn what her illness had to teach her. But on many days, she began to see glimpses of the God she knew, a God of love and grace who walked the road with her as a companion through familiar faces and people.

The third resource we need when we are facing a loss of control is prayer. This is at the root of the preparation, the waiting, the alertness Jesus calls us to in Advent. For prayer in the midst of chaos – whether it's personal or corporate - is a sign of hope. After the bombing of Afghanistan began in 2001 I felt completely powerless. The next day, I phoned the church secretary and said I'd be in church at 5.30 for 30 minutes to pray in silence. If anyone else wanted to come they'd be welcome. We met every weekday for 2 years. Our silence expressed our powerlessness. We didn't know what we thought about it all so we didn't know what to pray. But in the silence, we recognised the paradox of God's kingdom as we held our discomfort with the war along with our prayers for the people involved in it. It demanded *'both/and'* rather than *'either/or'* thinking. That's often difficult in our time when it's often said, 'if you're not with us, you're against us.' But Luke's Gospel is full of such paradoxes. Jesus is a helpless baby born in a manger and he's also *'a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord'* who will come in glory. He teaches that, *'Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it'*. He brings division *and* peace. His crucifixion leads to death and new life. The same is true of the 21st chapter of Luke's Gospel. Destruction, death, and betrayal are coming but there is hope in the midst of it all. Because there's always more reality than we see at first glance, we must watch and stay awake.

Jesus calls his followers to be prepared and alert because Advent is a time for learning to live with the unknown, the unsettled, and the helplessness of present-day suffering and pain. This isn't easy in today's world. Yet God invites us to hold past, present and future together by naming what is -

and taking the risk of welcoming reality; to look for God's familiar face in the people accompanying us on our journey and all around us and, as we watch and wait in prayer, to make space for the paradox of God coming among us in power and glory, and in the humility and helplessness of a child in a dark time and place.

Listen, sing, read or pray

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP_BUHwweS4

Great is the darkness that covers the earth,
oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
though many have come in your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
touched by the madness and lies.

*Come, Lord Jesus, come, Lord Jesus,
pour out your Spirit we pray,
come, Lord Jesus, come, Lord Jesus,
pour out your Spirit on us today.*

May now your Church rise with power and love,
this glorious gospel proclaim.
In every nation salvation will come
to those who believe in your name.
Help us bring light to this world
that we might speed your return.

Great celebrations on that final day
when out of the heavens you come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end,
and rulers will bow at your throne.
Our great commission complete,
then face to face we shall meet.

Gerald Coates (b. 1944) and Noel Richards (b. 1955) Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic Words Edition, number 405 Words and Music: (c) 1992, Thankyou Music. Administered by worshiptogether.com Used by permission.

Prayers for God's people and world

Lord, your kingdom is near.
The signs are all around us,
in the beauty of creation,
in the fallen leaves of autumn;
and the diversity of life.
The signs are all around us
in the joy and sorrow of human relationships.

In those who delight in summertime joy
and sit with us in the darkness of our wintertime.
Lord, your kingdom is near.
We thank you for the signs.

You entered the world at a difficult time.
We pray for those in difficult circumstances,
those for whom the picture is bleak:
those waiting in hope for justice,
those in the darkness of poverty.
Give us courage to challenge those in power.
Lord, make us signs of your kingdom.

We pray for those who live in fear and foreboding
under the tyranny of modern-day Herods,
for those who are weighed down with
the worries and challenges of this life.
Give us the courage to support them
through protest and prayer.
Lord, make us signs of your kingdom.

We pray for those who show us where God is.
Those who offer friendship
at bus stops and in the playgrounds,
in the counselling rooms
and on telephone help lines,
those who work to bring peace and restore hope.
And we pray for those known to us who need to
know your presence ...
Lord, make us signs of your kingdom. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer of Dedication

Offer your regular giving to God.
As we bring these gifts to you,
and offer you our lives,
we thank you for all your good gifts
and especially for your coming kingdom.

Listen, sing, read or pray

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYi6pKL4i5o>

Hills of the north, rejoice,
river and mountain-spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland, sing.
Christ comes in righteousness and love,
he brings salvation from above.

Isles of the southern seas,
sing to the listening earth;
carry on every breeze
hope of a world's new birth:
in Christ shall all be made anew;
his word is sure, his promise true.

Lands of the east, arise!
He is your brightest morn;
greet him with joyous eyes,
let praise his path adorn:
your seers have longed to know their Lord;
to you he comes, the final Word.

Shores of the utmost west,
lands of the setting sun,
welcome the heavenly guest
in whom the dawn has come:
he brings a never-ending light,
who triumphed o'er our darkest night.

Shout, as you journey on;
songs be in every mouth!
Lo, from the north they come,
from east and west and south:
in Jesus all shall find their rest,
in him the universe be blest.

Charles Ernest Oakley (1832-1865) and Editors of English
Praise, 1975 Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic Words
Edition, number 172 Words: (c)

Closing Prayer and Blessing

Advent God,
your creation inspires our journey;
your Son is the life-map we follow;
your Spirit the light we travel by.
May the Trinity of all three surround
and protect us.
And may the blessing of God,
Creator, Son and Spirit,
be with us and all God's people
today and everyday. Amen.

Service prepared by Rev Sue Keegan von Allmen.