

Third Sunday of Advent – Year B

Sunday 17 December 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Nathan McConnell, Minister of Downfield Mains Church, for his thoughts on the third Sunday of Advent.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

There is something unique and powerful about Advent. It is a season when many earnestly reflect on their lives, relationships, and their proximity to the message of Christmas. It is also a time in which themes of the Lord's grace, favour and redemption seem to pop out at us from everywhere. Simple messages of hope, forgiveness and love emanate from carols heard in the shop or over the radio, given with every present, or sung by primary school pupils during their Christmas services. The message of God's presence and proximity has prophetic power.

[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)

We often think of Jesus' proclamation in the synagogue when reading Isaiah 61, but rarely do we ponder the promises. A proclamation of "good news" towards people (v1), binding up hurt places (v1b), freedom for those caught in sin and captivity (v1c), gladness and praise instead of mourning (v3), a time when Adonai's favour rests upon God's people (v2), and the promise to build up the spaces and places of the past (v4). Each promise is empowered by the truth that the Messiah is able to "cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (v11).

[Psalm 126](#) and [1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#)

When I was a young, my family didn't attend church, but my friends from school did. For them, there was a wholehearted anticipation of Christmas. And to be honest, I was quite jealous, as if they 'knew' something that someone hidden from me. Sure, I sang in choirs about the story, I heard the songs on the radio, and I too anticipated the presents under the Christmas tree. Yet, there was something still missing. No presents or gifts ever satisfied, the Christmas movies were a bit fake, the packing up of the ornaments was tedious and the nativity that we hastily put out on our sideboard had no meaning.

As time went on, I realised that my friends did know the story and that I was going through the motions. They knew a God was able to restore, bring laughter and joy and do "great things for them" (Psalm 126:3). I now know that my story was waiting. Waiting to have a relationship with God, to understand the true reason for the season, and it makes me ponder what it was like to for the people of Israel to wait for their restoration and the coming of the Messiah?

Advent contemplates the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem; it gives us a chance to once again be “like those who dream,” who consider all that Jesus has done in His advent (Psalm 126:1).

That may seem easy to some and hard for others. The early church in Thessalonica was told by the Apostle Paul to “give thanks in all circumstances because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thess 5:18) But why did he say this? The Greek word for “quench,” is deceiving because it could be more literally translated “to suppress.” “Do not suppress the Holy Spirit.” (v16). The advent of the Messiah and the promise of salvation, restoration, and rescue as well as the subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit (at Pentecost) enables God’s people an opportunity to overcome their weakness of smothering God as well as God’s presence in their lives. Paul gives them the power to dream again in the presence of God.

[John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

Are you crying out for the Spirit of the Lord? Do you, like so many from past ages, have a desire for an encounter with God?

No prophetic story better illuminates the coming of God’s presence than that of John the Baptist. A man who stood as a witness, not as Elijah for the religious (Levites), but a man “crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (John 1:23). Have you ever pondered how much God really loves you and what Jesus’ coming really means for your life? Have you truly accepted the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ? As a minister, I am convinced that each of the Advent readings wants us to pursue Jesus and His presence. What better time to do this than Christmas and Advent, when we remember that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17)?

Sermon ideas

There are points within each passage of exegesis that you can consider as you prepare your sermon. Not all gatherings include a sermon; people engage with scripture in different ways so these questions could also be used to frame a conversation in groups, Q&As, or other ways to approach scripture and share learning.

Prayers

Gathering prayer – Call to worship

In Advent, heaven came to earth.

Now let us come and worship the New King in all His majesty.

When we sing, heaven comes close.

Let us draw close to God prayer.

Father in heaven, we gather in Your presence and for Your glory.

We ask that we might have Your heart and passion for those around us this season.

That we might experience You in a new and living way,

and that our hearts will ponder the deep truth

that Advent brings freedom, joy and peace.

God of Advent, thank You for inviting us into Your family and story,

so that we might take part in Your coming to earth.

May my heart, like Mary's, long for You,

for Your presence this Advent,

and may I, in Your power,

take forth care for others during this season of wonder.

Amen

Prayer of confession

O Lord, from the depths I cry out to You.

Lord, hear my voice. Let Your ear be attentive to my plea.

Lord Jesus, You judge inequity and free Your people Israel when caught in sin.

Your advent is the good news we need.

I ask for Your forgiveness and for Your mercy in Jesus name,

that I might be righteous and Your praise may be on my lips

as I remember Your forgiveness.

Amen

Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and reveal any areas of unconfessed sin.

Acknowledge these to the Lord and thank God for it.

[Keep a time of silence]

A few lines of assurance can be found in Common Order, e.g.:

**Merciful God,
forgive us our sins
and bring us to everlasting life,
through Jesus Christ
your Son, our Saviour. Amen**

God of mercy,
you have promised to forgive those
who truly repent.
Help us to accept your forgiveness,
and dwell in us by your Spirit;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Intercession / Prayers for others

God of all nations,
Your love is without limit and without end.
Enlarge our vision
of Your redeeming purpose for all people.
By the example of Your Son,
make us ready to serve the needs of the whole world.
May neither pride of race nor hardness of heart
make us despise any
for whom Christ died
or injure any in whom he lives;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Book of Common Order, p478

Mighty and merciful God,
may Your kindness be known to all.

Hear the prayers of all who cry to You;
open the eyes of those who never pray for themselves;
have mercy on those who are in misery;
deal gently with those who sit in darkness;
increase the number of those who love and serve You daily.

Preserve our land from all things hurtful,

preserve our Church from all dangerous error,
preserve our people from forgetting
that you are their Lord and Saviour.

Be gracious to those countries that are made desolate
by war, famine, disease, or persecution,
and grant that the course of the world
may be so ordered in obedience to Your will
that the people may live in security
and freedom from want,
and their children grow up to be makers of peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Book of Common Order, p502

Loving and Holy Spirit of God, we pray:
that we and all people may increasingly work together
to establish on earth the rule of the kingdom of heaven;

that the resources of the world may be gathered,
distributed, and used
with unselfish motives and scientific skill
for the greatest benefit of all;

that beauty may be given to our towns and cities,
and left untarnished in the countryside;
that children may grow up strong in body,
sound in mind, and trained in spirit;

that there may be open ways,
and peace, and freedom,
from end to end of the earth;

and that people everywhere
may learn to live in love
through keeping the company of Jesus Christ our Lord,
in whose great name we pray.

Amen

Book of Common Order, p503

Blessing and closing prayer

Father, we end this time remembering that You are God
and You sent Your son at advent to restore and ransom us.
We pray that You would make us like those who dream.
That our lives would reflect Your heart to others in this season.
That we would remember those less fortunate
and, God, that You would make us Your hands and feet for service.

The Lord bless you and keep this Christmas,
The Lord make His face to shine upon you in this season of hope,
The Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Amen

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

A suggested playlist of [songs throughout Advent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

- CH4 273 – “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”
- “My soul sings to you” – Jonathan David and Melissa Helser. Suitable for opening hymn/call to worship. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7sV9JA4eWg>
- “Spirit of God” – Andrew Ehrenzeller, my old music minister, wrote this song during the Covid lockdown. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwludxNBgTc>

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?

Did it function well as a whole?

How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?

- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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