

First Sunday of Advent – Year C

Sunday 1 December 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Dr Murdo Macdonald and members of the Society, Religion and Technology Reference Group at the Church of Scotland, for their thoughts on the first Sunday of Advent. Our thanks also go to Carol Finlay for the resources for World AIDS Day.

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

As Advent begins, and we enter a new year in the Church calendar, there is a great sense of anticipation. Of course, if we are honest, for most in society (even for many of us in the Church) a great deal of the excitement in the air has more to do with preparations for the annual frenzy of celebration and consumption that tends to overwhelm this time of year, rather than the true meaning behind the festivities.

The term Advent derives from the Latin word for coming or arrival, and of course as the words of the beautiful hymn by Charles Wesley remind us, in the Church we await the arrival of the “long expected Jesus, born to set his people free”. It is hoped that these readings and reflections can be an aid to bring our focus back to what – or more specifically whom – we are awaiting with such hope and anticipation.

We have the privilege of living in a world which has experienced the first Advent – and for this reason we celebrate and rejoice. However, we are conscious that we live in a world that has been damaged by human activities and greed. We must remember that much of our (over)consumption at this time of year is not only misguided, but is often so excessive as to be harmful. Thus, while we rejoice in the coming of the Word become flesh, we are mindful that we must do so in a way which is responsible and sustainable.

[Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)

As in a lot of Jeremiah’s writings, there is a great deal of doom and gloom in much of this chapter. Known as ‘the weeping prophet’, people who always take a negative view of life might be labelled ‘a proper Jeremiah’.

However, earlier in the same chapter, we read about restoration following desolation – for example, the prophecy refers to recovery and healing (v6), the restoration of fortunes (vv7, 11), and the cleansing of guilt and rebellion (v8).

As we consider the theme of Advent, and the coming of the Christ-child, we remember that He is the one who will ultimately bring about the full redemption and restoration of a right relationship with God, which is required.

The ideas and images of restoration may also be able to be linked to issues such as rewilding – working to bring back the natural environment and to restore damaged habitats, elements of our world that have suffered as a result of human activity.

There are further references later in the text to God's covenant with humanity, and the stability of certain aspects of the natural world, i.e., night and day in verse 20: "If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night...". However inadvertently, we humans have been able to disrupt many aspects of the world around us. Yet despite all the damage we have wrought, night continues to follow day, because God's covenant is unchangeable.

We remember that Advent brings in the new covenant. Advent isn't just about the coming of a baby, but all that has been brought about by Jesus – what He has done in His life, death and resurrection.

At the heart of this passage, and of all things, is the righteousness of our God: "the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness'" (v16).

[Psalm 25:1-10](#)

As intimated in the title of the Psalm, this is a heartfelt prayer for guidance and deliverance; a prayer that ends with a plea for redemption: "Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles" (v22). This again links with the Advent theme, where Christ has been sent to bring redemption to the world.

Isaiah said: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2). Jesus is the light who has shone into the darkness, whose advent has brought about redemption from trouble – who ultimately provides the guidance and deliverance requested in this psalm.

Although using different metaphors, the biblical writers are pointing in the same direction. Unlike Isaiah, rather than talking about darkness causing disorientation, the Psalmist here uses the idea of being unsure of the path and calling on God to provide assistance and guidance: "make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths" (v4). Similarly, in verse 10, the Psalmist talks of "all the paths of the Lord".

For us, there may be times when there are multiple paths to choose from, when it is unclear which of a number of possible directions is the right one to take. Or it may be that the path itself is unclear – that there is no discernible track at all, leaving us unsure of the way forward. In the path to Net Zero, there are multiple choices to be made and discerning the right ways is often challenging.

The great news of Advent is that God, in Jesus, has answered these pleas for discernment, guidance and deliverance.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Again, there is a need to read more than the prescribed few verses, in order to get a bit more context for this passage. A lot of the emphasis in this chapter is about interpersonal relationships. We read in verse 2 that Paul had sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Christians in the church in Thessalonica. These were Christians whom Paul had previously met and taught, and about whom he is now concerned (see v5).

Paul's overriding concern is that he might find that they are no longer continuing in their faith in Jesus. In fact, what he finds is not only that they are firm in their faith, but that this is being expressed (as it should be) in love (v6). This illustrates that their faith isn't just an intellectual assent – simply saying that they believe in Jesus – theirs is a faith that is being practically worked out in love.

One of the challenges that we sometimes find when talking about issues relating to the climate is that people are willing to agree that it is an issue, but struggle to agree on what we are prepared to do about it, in a practical sense. How is our love for God (and for the created world) being expressed in practical ways?

The author talks about restoration in verse 10, although it is not a strong theme. It is talking about the restoration of what is lacking: in the Advent, Jesus came to restore what we have lost through the interruption of our relationship with God, through sinfulness. Our relationship with creation has been similarly interrupted by sin, and needs to be restored.

Luke 21:25-36

Much of what Jesus has to say in this section has a distinctly apocalyptic sense to it, but it also sometimes feels like He could be reading headlines from today's newspapers!

He talks, for example, of the distress that will be caused to many people by the "roaring and tossing of sea" (v25). As I write, Florida is being battered by yet another hurricane (which has already wrought havoc in the Caribbean), causing storm surges. Much of England is also currently experiencing flooding. No doubt by the time these notes are being used, there will be more current examples to refer to.

We also know that climate anxiety is a significant issue, especially among younger people, so we shouldn't be surprised to read in verse 26 that "Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world". The urgency of the climate crisis – and the need to respond – is writ large.

However, we are reassured through our faith that this isn't the end of the story, that it's not all bad news, and that God ultimately knows the end from the beginning.

We read in verse 33 that Jesus says: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away", and so we are able to give thanks to God that the baby whose Advent we anticipate will be the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14).

Sermon ideas

Some of the themes that come through are related to Advent, and the anticipation which is associated with that. Perhaps most clearly in the Old Testament passages, there is also the linked ideas of deliverance, and also of guidance through challenging times. These are ideas that most of us can relate to, and there may be local examples which can be drawn on – there are certainly national examples, as the Church faces challenging times. We can also link to the climate crisis, and the challenges presented by moving to a fairer, greener future.

None of this is straightforward, and it's easy to become disheartened. However, it is clear that God is ultimately in authority. We, as God's people, can and should put our trust and hope in the God who has proved faithful in the past, and who, we are assured, will be faithful in the times to come. The birth of the Christ-child, whose coming we anticipate in Advent, is the hope and the promise.

Prayers

Gathering prayer / Call to worship (*from Psalm 25*)

To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in You I trust.

Make me to know Your ways, O Lord;
teach me Your paths.

Lead me in Your truth, and teach me.

Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore, God instructs sinners in the way
and leads the humble in what is right,

teaching the humble God's way.

Confession / Repentance

Sovereign Lord

we come before You now,
a congregation of Your people who have gathered in this place
to offer our praise and our thanks to You.

We humbly confess that we are unworthy of any of the many blessings You shower upon us, day by day.

We confess that our efforts to remain faithful to You
are often weak and stumbling.

We confess that our vision of what You are able to achieve
is often smaller and more limited than it should be.

We confess that too often we fail to let Your light shine brightly,
to let Your love show clearly.

Give us wisdom, we pray, give us humility of heart and mind.

Show us right paths,

so that Your name would be glorified, Your Son honoured
and that all Your creation would praise You.

For this we ask, in the precious name of Your son, Jesus Christ

Amen

Thanksgiving / Gratitude

This prayer focuses on the wonder and beauty of creation that we are all called to tend and keep. At this time of year when it's easy to huddle indoors, it's good to look outwards, even just in our imaginations, as we give praise for what God has made and look towards the changing seasons. If you can show some pictures or encourage people to look out of a window, and maybe modify the prayer to include things visible to the congregation or in the surrounding area, that would be even better.

Lord of Creation,
thank You for everything You have made.

For evergreens and bright berries,
and trees getting ready for Spring,
we give You thanks.

For hibernating hedgehogs

and white mountain hares,
we give You thanks.

For geese flying home to roost,
and robins at the bird feeder,
we give You thanks.

For winter crops,
and fields prepared for planting,
we give You thanks.

For sunshine on a frosty day,
and the hope of the turning season,
we give You thanks.

For the joy of living things
and the privilege of caring for them,
we give You thanks and praise.

In city and village,
hill and field,
land and sea,
we give thanks for Your creation,
seen and unseen,
Lord, our Creator,
Amen

Prayer for others / Intercession

In the week or two leading up to today's worship, there may be particular issues in the national and international news headlines that weigh heavily on our hearts: this is an opportunity to "take it to the Lord in prayer".

There may also be issues in our local area, our community, or our church community, which can be raised here – though care may need to be taken to ensure that the privacy of those involved is protected. Avoid using people's names, especially if the service is being recorded or broadcast on the internet.

Blessing / Closing prayer

Lord of all

we give You thanks for this time together.

As we part, may we go, knowing Your blessing

in order that we might be a blessing to all.

To Your eternal glory we pray.

Amen

Reflection and Prayers for World AIDS Day 2024

Written by Carol Finlay, Church of Scotland HIV Programme.

“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you” (1 Thessalonians 3:12)

Today is World AIDS Day – the day we remember the lives of the over 40 million people worldwide who have died from AIDS and AIDS-related conditions. It is a time when we can give thanks for the memory of a relative or friend who we loved, or to pray for those who are not remembered. In the early days of the AIDS pandemic, stigma and discrimination at all levels meant many people lived and died alone and unloved.

- *With me, remember the father of Anisa in India, who died of AIDS in 1990 – emaciated with tuberculosis and struggling to breathe; he died knowing his family would not be able to ensure education for his daughter. He died unaware he was HIV positive and unaware his wife would die and Anisa would become an orphan.*

But it is also a day to give thanks for the 39 million people who today can live a long and fulfilled life with HIV, thanks to medical science and to education about the condition.

- *With me, remember Mary, who is HIV positive and now 62 years old. She was devastated on receiving her diagnosis over 30 years ago. Her life was over, or so she thought. Thanks to antiretroviral drugs she is healthy and her virus is undetectable. She wishes she had had faith in scientific research and had put more money into her pension!*

Finally give thanks for those who cared enough to support the many orphaned and vulnerable children – the grandparents, the aunts and uncles, the older siblings – and for those who cared enough to support the carers. For the educators who continually sought to keep young people AIDS-free. For the campaigners who continue to fight for access to antiretroviral medication for all.

- *With me, hear from William, orphaned as a child and supported by Ekwendeni Hospital AIDS Programme through school and into adulthood. “My life changed after I was lucky enough to be supported through my education. I am now a successful farmer and I can stand on my own feet. And can you believe it – I even have my own car! From being a child with no one to care for me I am now a married man with children.”*

[The Church Of Scotland HIV Programme](#) has for 23 years supported people infected and affected by the virus both in Scotland and around the world. World AIDS Day is a day for us to remember. Please wear a red ribbon to signify this. HIV remains the number one cause of death in many countries around the world. Much has been learned and acted on but much more remains to be done. Although the landscape of the pandemic has changed, the need for love, care and compassion remains. Today, on World AIDS Day, we can remind ourselves that God’s love is for all.

Prayer

God of all, Your love abounds.

Your love shapes our lives.

Help us pour out that love to those in our world,

known and unknown –

those who live with memories of loved ones who have died from AIDS,

those who live because they are cared for by family and friends,

those who live because of continuing scientific breakthrough,

those who live because others speak out for them,

those who live because we are praying for them and You hold them in the palm of Your hand.

Amen

Musical suggestions

“*God Welcomes All*” (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music version is now available; and the words-only book, digital resources including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

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.

- GWA 90 – “We are a people of hope”
- GWA 93 – “Take heart, dear sisters, fear not, dear brothers”
- GWA 97 – “The daylight dims as the sun sinks low”
- GWA 153 – “God, the maker of the heavens” – new words to a familiar tune
- CH4 232 – “Pears and apples, wheat and grapes” – this is a good modern hymn that refers to the resources of the Earth. People might question giving thanks for gas, oil, and coal, although they have brought us to where we are, at the cost of climate change. That could perhaps be spoken of, before or after singing the hymn, and could be used a discussion starter.
- CH4 181 – “For the beauty of the earth”
- CH4 201 – “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”
- CH4 555 – “Amazing Grace”
- A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4 throughout Advent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

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

God Welcomes All can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

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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