

Second Sunday of Advent – Year B

Sunday 10 December 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Prof John Drane, practical theologian and mission consultant, for his thoughts on the second 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

As I've reflected on how I'm approaching worship for this second week of Advent, the answer is along the lines of a statement attributed to Swiss theologian Karl Barth and repeated by many others since; having "the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other". If I was crafting my own version it would be "my phone and computer alongside the Bible", as those are the places where I get news, not just the big picture of whatever is going on in the world today, but who is saying what in my own community – then that is filtered through and supplemented by my own experience of it all. So it's not just an arm's-length, detached exercise for me: I'm self-consciously bringing something personal to the Bible as well as getting something from it – or to put it another way I'm interrogating the Bible through what I encounter in everyday life, both my own and the bigger cultural picture, and seeking to apply whatever I find not just to my reflections on scripture but to other liturgical elements as well.

The immediate experience through which I'm doing all this right now is one that I imagine many of you will identify with as I'm currently working to inspire a congregation in Glasgow in a location that offers some outstanding missional opportunities, while at the same time we are navigating all the current uncertainties surrounding the future of the church itself.

Your own context will likely be both different and similar. But there are two themes running through this week's Bible readings that I think will have resonances in most places as they speak into the insecurity and fear that many of us are experiencing as we reflect on the future of the Church in Scotland today.

The first and perhaps the most obvious theme here is faithfulness and in the case of the two Old Testament readings the focus is clearly on God's faithfulness to the people of Judah in sustaining them through their 50-year exile in Babylon. As we talk and plan for the future it's easy to focus on what we think we can do, and almost by accident leaving God out of the picture.

The second theme is the story of the exile itself. It has long provided some key Advent imagery, featuring in many traditional hymns as well as scripture passages – and today it is often used as a way of understanding the Church and its present predicament. Are we perhaps in exile? And if so, what might that mean? I have chosen to adopt that theme for my sermon notes, partly because it is being widely applied as a metaphor for where we find ourselves right now, but also because it doesn't feature in the lectionary very often so I felt it was important to seize the moment – though my reflections on it come with a twist that may surprise (or alarm!) you.

[Isaiah 40:1-11](#)

Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Old Testament and is generally reckoned to fall into at least three distinct sections.

The first 39 chapters are the work of a prophet called Isaiah, whose calling is described in 6:1-8. He was active during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah in the mid-8th century BC, when the neighbouring nation of Israel was invaded by the Assyrians and most of its citizens were deported to other parts of their empire. The messages in these chapters consist of reflections on the international politics of the day, along with opinions on the policies adopted by Judah's rulers as they attempted to preserve the independence of their nation at the same time as they needed to come to some sort of accommodation with the powerful kings of Assyria. In a world where political allegiance and religious faith were inextricably bound up with one another, Ahaz and Hezekiah were never going to please the prophet, and though he sympathised with their dilemma, Isaiah had no doubt that – even if there seemed to be no other practical alternative – what he regarded as their apostasy was bound to end in disaster.

But then chapter 40 transports us to another world. The relationship of politics and religion is still there but the emphasis has shifted from the kings to the people, who have now lived through the national tragedy that Isaiah feared and the prophet is encouraging them with the prospect of a new phase of the nation's life that might even be as significant as their deliverance, centuries earlier, from slavery in Egypt (read this passage with the ancient story of the exodus in mind and see how many similarities there are between the two). This change of context is accompanied by an abrupt change of style throughout chapters 40-55. Short (and often angry) messages about national policy and the disobedience of the kings give way to a more lyrical style that might be more at home in the book of Psalms, not just in style but also their content, as they often highlight the same themes, celebrating God's control of the events of history as well as the workings of the natural world.

These messages reflect a much later time than the days of Ahaz and his successors. By now Judah and its capital city had been invaded by the Babylonians, who replaced the Assyrians as the regional superpower, and the leading citizens of Jerusalem had been taken off into exile on the orders of the cruel king Nebuchadnezzar. About 50 years later, the Babylonians themselves had been displaced by the Persian king, Cyrus, who took a more generous view of empire building and announced an amnesty for political refugees that meant they could return home if they wished. That seems to be the situation reflected in Isaiah 40-55, and because of the time lag as well as the different style of expression, the prophet who brought this message of hope to the exiles is generally believed to be a different individual

from the one of chapters 1-39, and referred to as 'Isaiah of Babylon' or 'Second Isaiah'. The remaining chapters of the book (51-66) come from a different context again.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Many of the psalms have an initial statement intended to provide some social background or musical direction, and this is no exception, with the opening reference to the "sons of Korah". Little is known of them apart from a mention in 2 Chronicles 20:19, which suggests they provided a choir for temple worship. While we can never be certain, this psalm has every appearance of originating after the return of the exiles from Babylon. Its opening words certainly fit that context, with their mention of God being "favourable to the land" by "restoring the fortunes of Jacob" (v1). But the second verse strikes a darker note with the mention of the people's "iniquity" and "sin" needing to be forgiven – a theme that was never far away from efforts to make sense of the experience of the exile. It goes back at least to the time of Jeremiah, who observed at first hand the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's armies, before himself being taken off to join the exiles in Babylon. Though he maintained a strong faith in the future of his people, he had no doubt that the exile was never inevitable, and was a consequence of the unfaithfulness, not just of the nation's leaders, but of the people themselves who were worshipping all manner of local deities alongside the authorised worship at the temple in Jerusalem. The notion that there was a cause and effect relationship between religious apostasy and political ruin came to be widely accepted after the exile, and is certainly reflected in this psalm with its mention in the opening verses of sin being forgiven and then the later insistence that "salvation is at hand *for those who fear [God]*" (v9) – a theme that became a strategic policy when Ezra joined the returned exiles and set in train a thoroughgoing programme of religious and cultural reformation aimed at the elimination of what he regarded as illegitimate lifestyles and spiritual practices.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

From an entirely different era (sometime towards the end of the 1st century AD) and context (the Roman Empire), this passage reflects some of the same themes as we see in the two Old Testament readings – namely that whatever blessings we might experience, they are in the end all down to the goodness and generosity of God ("the patience of our Lord", v15), though we have our part to play by "leading lives of holiness and godliness" (v11). Alongside that reassurance, this passage presents today's readers with any number of challenges and ambiguities.

There is the apocalyptic language relating to “the day of the Lord” (v10) – is that the same as “the day of God” (v12a)? How does either phrase relate to what looks like the end of the world (v12b), or the “new heavens and new earth” (v13), not to mention the significance of a day being equivalent to a thousand years (v8)?

And underlying all that is a question about how these things relate to one another; for example the connection between holy behaviour on our part and divine generosity and patience. Do these two things relate as cause and effect, and if not then what is the connection between them? How can we best understand verse 9, where God’s promise and patience seem to be contingent on human “repentance” (see the comment on Mark, below, as the Greek word is the same)? What is meant by “new heavens and a new earth” (v13)? And alongside such questions is some uncertainty about the origins of 2 Peter, its original context and author and its relationship to the book of Jude. These are all good questions, but probably not ones to be explored in the context of Sunday worship!

[Mark 1:1-8](#)

Within the first two sentences, Mark’s gospel quotes from the passage in Isaiah 40 and suggests that John the Baptist is the new “voice in the wilderness” (v3) announcing something akin to a new exodus, a time of rescue and redemption that will be fully revealed by “the one who is more powerful” (v7) – someone who, for those who know the rest of the story, is clearly intended to be Jesus.

John’s message strikes a distinctive note, inviting people to “repent for the forgiveness of sins” (v4). Translating the Greek word *metanoia* as “repentance” has a long history among western Bible translators, but it misses something significant. In common use today the word often carries the negative connotation that we’ve got it wrong and are to blame for all the mess, but its original implication was more like “there’s a better way to live, so come and be a part of it”. In other words, a recognition of the brokenness that is all around us but with an understanding that, while we all have the capacity to choose to be intentional wrongdoers, we are caught up in something much bigger than our own small lives, entangled in a web of sinful structures (‘fallenness’) – a theme that is more fully spelled out in the rest of the gospel as Jesus invites us to join Him in the new way of being. The people I meet today don’t need to be told they are sinners – they regularly admit that their lives are in a mess, as is much of the rest of the world. Good news for today’s struggling people is going to be about a different vision that can be lifegiving because it takes us back to God’s original design which (to quote the late great Ian Fraser) is “God’s way of doing things” or, more prosaically, life in the Kingdom of God.

Does that also explain why the opening sentence is not, as we might expect, “the good news of Jesus Christ” (v1), but “*the beginning* of the good news” – because the rest of the story is one that readers are invited to be a part of as they then follow Jesus, not as a one-off event in baptism, but as lifelong participants in what God is doing through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit? Recent scholarship has suggested that this gospel originated not as a written document but as performance and interactive storytelling, and that this explains some of its unique features. If that is the case then it does indeed invite us not merely to be observers of the story, but to be participants in the ongoing telling of it.

Sermon ideas

The Old Testament theme of the exile in Babylon has long been applied to the time of Advent, as we wait through successive weeks for the coming again of the Christ child who will deliver us afresh into a new experience of life and liberty. This is also in some ways the reclaiming of a focus that was lost as a consequence of the dominance of cultural and spiritual forces that refuse to recognise the values of the gospel. The terms in which the theme has been celebrated has occasionally owed more to traditional understandings of the cycle of the seasons, but in recent years it has become popular not just as an Advent theme but as a metaphor through which to understand the situation of the Church today in western culture. The American Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, proposed this idea in 1997, and since then the exile has been widely adopted as a way of explaining our predicament of declining numbers of worshippers in our congregations and the general marginalisation of the Church as a part of everyday life for most of the population.

I’ve been wondering about this one for a while now, and I understand its attraction. At a time of great insecurity in our churches it can be a comforting narrative – because we’ve also read the story of Nehemiah so we know what happened next, and that makes our present predicament seem not too bad! To be sure, those who returned had a tough life, and the temple they rebuilt wasn’t a patch on the one they’d lost, but they managed to survive in a diminished form for a few more centuries. So maybe the outlook for us isn’t so bad after all?

There are a few things that make me wonder about the usefulness of this picture:

- The exiles from Judah were the victims of geopolitical forces: Nebuchadnezzar needed them out of the way to fulfil his ambitions. I’m not sure there is a Nebuchadnezzar coming after us today – almost the opposite in many ways, as civic society generally recognises the value we add to the wellbeing of the nation, though not quite knowing

how to affirm that without seeming to exclude others.

- The exile was almost universally explained in terms of spiritual disobedience. Jeremiah wasn't an outlier. His understanding of cause and effect is reflected in today's readings and many others besides: disobedience leads to disaster. Of course, life teaches us that things are rarely that simple, and I'm not sure we can make that equation today. Church life as we have inherited it has been left high and dry because culture has changed, and changed so rapidly and unpredictably that not just our congregations, but all our traditional institutions have been left struggling. It's easy to blame the perceived faithlessness of church leaders (and some do), but the reality is that we would have nothing at all left were it not for the faithful generations who have gone before us.
- I can't help noting that in the end the future of Judaism lay not with those who returned from exile to re-establish the old ways, but with those who stayed on the margins and learned to live and celebrate their faith in the new culture to which the exile exposed them. They soon moved out well beyond Babylon and eventually spread throughout the entire world that they knew. A key element in their survival was the development of the synagogue as a new worship experience that combined what was in effect a community centre with a sanctuary – a pattern that made their faith accessible to nations and people groups who otherwise would never have been reached. Many of the new forms of church emerging around the world today find their inspiration not from Nehemiah and Ezra, but from this other side of the story of the exile and its aftermath.

Perhaps our default position will always be to try and preserve what we know? As we reflect on our own future, the story of the exile might well be one to encourage us with the reassurance of God's continuing care and presence. But I wonder how we will see ourselves in this story: will we be Nehemiah and Ezra, who returned to patch up what was left, or those who stayed in the Badlands of Babylon then out into the rest of their world?

“A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling... We must play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, live by improvisation and experiment.” [Hans Küng, *The Church* (1967), pages 130-131]

Prayers

Gathering prayer / Call to worship

The voice of God summons us to worship.

Prepare the way of the Lord.

The paths before us may be rocky and dangerous but God goes before us.
There are new places to visit, fresh angles on familiar places.
Wherever the path may lead us, God is always there –
and here among us today.

Confession / Repentance

This prayer is from the Church of England's Common Worship. It can helpfully be followed by the Lord's Prayer in whatever version is familiar in your congregation. Never underestimate the power of praying the Lord's Prayer together!

**Lord God,
we have sinned against You;
we have done evil in Your sight.
We are sorry and repent.
Have mercy on us according to Your love.
Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us from our sin.
Renew a right spirit within us
and restore us to the joy of Your salvation,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen**

Our Father

Thanksgiving/Gratitude – A prayer for our church and its future

Generous God,
You are the one who gave the vision that brought this church to birth long ago,
placing it as a visible beacon of hope and new life within this community.

Faithful God,
We give You thanks for the generations before us –
for their sacrifice and resilience over many years
in the face of social change,
the tragedy of warfare,
and a falling away of Christian commitment.

Creative God,
Inspire us to reimagine a worshipping community
that can share the good news of Your love in fresh ways for today's people.
Give us wisdom and courage to grasp new opportunities wholeheartedly.

Inspire us by Your Holy Spirit
to see the people around us with a renewed vision.
Infuse us with a holy boldness
as we invite others to come and follow the way of Jesus.
And may everything we do reflect the values of the gospel,
transforming not only ourselves but the wider life of this parish.

Loving God,
In Your mercy, hear our prayer.

Amen

Prayer for others

Prayers for others always need to be contextualised, first of all in whatever might be going on in the world at the time they are used, and then also in relation to local circumstances. If you are a congregation that appreciates engagement through responses, the various sections can easily be ended in that way. They could also be used interactively with different voices and/or congregational groups saying different sections.

Creator God,

You have entrusted us with the fragile beauty of the earth.
Break open our hearts to the lives and lands laid waste by human action,
the tide of storm and tempest, fire and flood.
Be beside all in the midst of climate disaster –
losing homes and loved ones through famine, fire, flood, and desolation.
Enable those who cherish the earth,
and encourage all calling for climate justice.
Change the hearts of people polluting lands and sea for profits –
to act justly, wisely, quickly, that together we may heal the earth.

Transforming God,

whose Spirit brooded over the face of the waters before the world began,
we hold before You the wounded places of this world.
Naming before You Israel and Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, the Middle East
and all places affected by violence.
Hear the cries of our hearts.
Bring peace in war.
Restore hope in despair.
Loosen bonds of oppression, injustice, and fear.
Inspire all who bear burdens of leadership to love mercy

and use their power for good.
Enable us to pray for our enemies
that Your ways may be known upon earth,
Your saving power among all nations.

Abiding God,

be beside all who are far from home
and any who have no home to go to.
Protect those fleeing violence, disaster or poverty.
Cherish all who've left loved ones behind
or have lost themselves on the journey.
Encourage those coming to marginal places
seeking refuge, opportunity or belonging.
Open our hearts and minds,
transform fear of stranger into welcome of brother and sister
that all may find a home.

Loving God,

comfort all who mourn.
Give peace in despair,
restore lives laid down by regret or longing for purpose.
Be alongside any who feel anxious, lonely, or abandoned.
Encourage all in mental distress,
those living with trauma or addiction,
those who hear voices
or who cannot see Your light within their darkness.
Uphold all in pain or fear
and those facing violence or living with injustice or death:
may they know themselves safe in Your love,
their story enfolded in Your eternal story.

God of many names,

send Your Holy Spirit to pray in our hearts with sighs too deep for words.
Accept these prayers for the sake of Your son, our saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen

Blessing

Go from this place full of hope,
knowing that the way may not be smooth but God is already there.

Go as people of expectation,
looking for that new thing God is doing.
Go as people bearing good news
for the disadvantaged, the oppressed – and the successful.
Live as gospel people in this Advent season
as the world once again looks for peace, joy and community.
Share the hope, expectation, and good news with all those you meet.

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 from CH4 throughout Advent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

What to sing in worship is a matter of local preferences. While I appreciate different styles, Advent always strikes me as a time for sticking with tradition, which doesn't necessarily mean ancient hymns – but definitely not a time for trying completely new things. I'm sure that many more opinions are available!

- CH4 191 – “Do not be afraid” – I have a feeling that fearfulness is going to be one of the key issues this year, personal fear, fear for the future of our churches, fear for what is happening in the world
- CH4 241 – “Isaiah the prophet” – another hymn on Isaiah 40
- CH4 273 – “O come, O come, Emmanuel” – a classic for this week
- CH4 274 – “Comfort, comfort now my people” – a direct reference to Isaiah 40

- CH4 286 – “Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord” – not referencing particular scriptures, but reflecting one of the key themes for this week
- CH4 334 – “On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry” – this one relates directly to the gospel reading

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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