

First Sunday of Advent

First Sunday of Advent – 27 November 2022

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Hannah Fremont-Brown, of the Joint Public Issues Team, for her thoughts on the first 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.

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.

Introduction.....	3
Isaiah 2:1-5	4
Psalm 122	5
Romans 13:11-14	6
Matthew 24:36-44	7
Sermon ideas	7
Prayers	9
Musical suggestions	11
Reflecting on our worship practice	12
Useful links	13

Introduction

This is the first Sunday of Advent, ushering us into a season of watching and waiting as we journey towards Christmas. For many, this Sunday holds a growing sense of anticipation. As the nights get longer and the days darker, we are invited to imagine what the coming of Christ's light means for the transformation of our world, by travelling with those anticipating Jesus' birth thousands of years ago. And yet, we do this carrying with us the experience of living in a world already transformed by Jesus' presence. We know what it means to live in a world where Christ's light has broken into the darkness. We hold anticipation and hope together as we step into the Advent season.

Our services this week offer us the opportunity to open up the challenges of what it means to live in this in-between time. The lectionary readings set for this Sunday aren't the traditional passages of Christmas-tide that bring with them the warmth and familiarity of the season. They do, however, speak closely to this sense of anticipation. Exploring this theme introduces us to the Advent journey with an invitation to think about what it might mean for us to live differently in this season of waiting.

So, as I approached today's readings, I asked: what is the bigger story we hear within these passages today?

Each of these passages share a short snippet of a longer narrative, and looking at how they sit in this context brings insights into what they might mean for us today. As well as looking at the bigger biblical story they sit within, I often find it useful to ask: what's the bigger story of our world this week, as we come into worship and encounter these passages? In the [Politics in the Pulpit podcast](#) of the Joint Public Issues Team, each week we invite the listener to open their bibles *and* their newspapers, and to look at them alongside one another.

This Advent at the Joint Public Issues Team, we are focusing our reflections on poverty, beginning with the Magnificat of Mary and her proclamation that 'God has filled the hungry with good things' (you can find these resources [here on our website](#)). We are particularly conscious that we enter this Advent amidst a narrative of financial challenge and poverty for so many people around the world. The cost of living crisis in the UK means that millions of families are at risk of going cold and hungry this winter. Many churches have been forced to open 'warm banks', spaces where the heating will be on and company will be offered, for those left isolated and without options by the rising price of fuel and food. Around the world, this is a narrative which has been ongoing for so many. Famine in the Horn of Africa has placed as many as 22 million people at risk of starvation. Extreme flooding in

Bangladesh has ravaged communities, and other climate induced disasters in the Pacific Islands, Puerto Rico and many other places have left so many without a sense of future.

The story in our communities this Advent, both local and global may well be one of darkness, and a difficulty to see the light. In this context, how do we usher in Advent with the words of Mary, that God 'has filled the hungry with good things?' How do we anticipate that the coming of Christ's light in the darkness will transform the world?

You're invited to hold all of these challenges with you as we encounter this week's lectionary texts, and consider how today's bigger narrative offers us the chance to be good news in the world today.

[Isaiah 2:1-5](#)

This passage seems like the story of a great coming together, where 'all the nations' gather to travel to God's house. It's a scene set in an imagined future, rather than the present – that 'in the days to come', this vision of togetherness might be fulfilled. This coming together does not seem to mean the absorption of all people into one, but that many groups, each bringing their distinctiveness, might gather as 'many peoples' and 'nations'. Crucially, underpinning all of this is peace. In the often quoted final lines of the passage, the things of war are transformed into tools for prosperity – that the nations may come together to steward creation (their first calling), not to harm one another. When read in isolation, the passage paints an idyllic picture of ascension – that God's people will journey towards God's kingdom, raised up into peace and unity.

All of this is contrasted, however, by what has come before. In the opening chapter of Isaiah, the picture could not be any more different. Instead of prophesying peace, the people of Israel have war, death and destruction cast over them. It is their sinfulness that is blamed – that they have not been faithful to God, and this is the consequence. Whilst devastating, perhaps these apocalyptic scenes didn't feel so distant to the intended reader. For Israel lived in a world where war was a fact of life. Conflict, rather than its absence was the norm.

Whereas perhaps Isaiah 2 doesn't sting with quite such an unrealistic tone to listeners today, to the people of Israel it may have sounded utopian. The prophetic call of Isaiah 2, therefore, becomes a calling of the imagination. In the midst of war and devastation, the people of Israel are called to thinking beyond what surrounds them and believe that there is hope for change in God's kingdom. The message becomes that God promises the genuine

hope of restoration. In God's mercy, the devastation of Isaiah 1 does not have the final word.

What is beyond the imaginable for us in today's world? Perhaps the war in Ukraine resonates with the scenes of devastation in Isaiah 1. Often, the conflict between nations in the Middle East, leaving so many without food, shelter and safety, feels like a battle between peoples that will never cease. How are we invited to think beyond the imaginable, and trust in the hope of restoration?

[Psalm 122](#)

Psalm 122 offers another vision of the coming of God's kingdom. Similarly to Isaiah 2, the writer imagines a journey to the 'house of the Lord', where they see a vision of the new Jerusalem. Again, peace is a key quality which underpins the city. Here, we get more of a sense of what this peace looks like. In verse 6, the Psalmist prays for the peace of Jerusalem, praying for it to prosper, to have security, and for the relationships between people. Peace is about more than just the absence of war – it is about the flourishing welfare of the city community. The writer moves between praying for peace for the structure of the town – its walls and towers – and the people – 'those who love you', and their relatives and friends. It is both of these things that will be affected by the flourishing of peace.

We see more elsewhere in the passage about what the flourishing of peace will look like – once again, we see multiple 'tribes' gathering together to go up to the house of the Lord, not absorbed into one people but 'bound firmly together' in the midst of their difference. There is a tone of collaboration, a sense of collective. This unity is a quality of the redeemed kingdom. These relationships between people are the life that runs through the city – in the final verse, the writer says: 'For the sake of the house of Lord our God, I will seek your good'. This stands out – the writer is appealing to the other, recognising that their flourishing is mutual. To seek the good of the other is a calling of the redeemed kingdom. Together we live, and together we thrive.

The sense of collaboration and unity in this psalm feels like its distinctive quality. Read alongside Isaiah's vision of the house of the Lord, we get a deeper sense of what the redeemed kingdom means for God's people. The psalm takes a step forward from Isaiah's prophesy to suggest that not only is the safety and security of the people changed by the presence of peace, but so are their relationships. We too are affected by the transformation of God's kingdom, to be people who practice peace.

What does a vision of restored relationships look like today? The climate crisis binds us into relationship with people thousands of miles away, as our choices affect their livelihoods. In our local communities, what would it mean this winter to acknowledge that our neighbours might not be able to turn on the heating, whilst we sit warm at home?

Romans 13:11-14

This passage from Romans comes in the middle of a section explaining what ‘new life in Christ’ might look like for Jesus’ followers in the early Church. Instead of anticipating the arrival of salvation – as the Old Testament passages do – here we find God’s people living in a world where salvation has come, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The writer reminds them of this: ‘you know what time it is’. Instead, these verses are particularly concerned with what it means to live differently in the knowledge of salvation, and anticipation of Jesus’ coming again.

The early Church is called to ‘wake from sleep’, to be alert to what is going on in the world around them. The writer uses the motif of light and dark to depict the contrast between how we have lived, and how we should live in anticipation of the coming kingdom. The Church is positioned on the threshold of night and day – the time in between times. Even in the midst of the night, they know that the dawn is coming. In response, they are called to ‘put on the armour of light’ – that even in the darkness, their lives might reflect the knowledge of the coming day. Similarly, they are called to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’, an invitation reminiscent of baptism (Galatians 3:27). In this, the life of Christ is posited as the armour of light – the tools we need to live differently in anticipation of the coming kingdom can be found in Jesus’ actions, choices and priorities. Looking to Christ will equip us to live ‘honourably as in the day’.

This passage deals with eschatological themes, but it is not an invitation to leave the world behind as we do so. Its sight is not fixed on the world to come, but the one we are in now – the in-between times, where we anticipate the light, but stand on the threshold of night turning to day. It calls Jesus’ followers to live differently, to bear the light even in the darkness.

What does it look like for us today to bear the light of God’s kingdom? How might we live differently, that we might reflect the life on offer to all? In a winter where many are too scared of sky-rocketing energy bills to turn on the lights in their home, many still live in the darkness. How might we put on the armour of light, reflecting Jesus’ life, and stand in the midst of the challenges this presents?

[Matthew 24:36-44](#)

In the Gospel reading for today, once again it is the coming kingdom which is called into focus. This time, the key theme is preparedness. In the passage, Jesus says that the coming of the Son of Man will be unexpected and sudden, so we should be prepared. The passage is set in the wider context of Jesus speaking about 'the end of the age', and the signs that the kingdom is coming once again.

The invitation is once again to live differently in light of the coming kingdom. Much as the passage from Romans urges, Jesus' followers are called to 'keep awake', to stay alert to the world around them as they live. The scenes Jesus paints are very domestic – everyday life continues, and yet in the midst of them the kingdom is to arrive. This suggests that it is amongst the everyday of our lives that we might catch glimpses of the kingdom to come.

These verses say very little about what this kind of preparedness looks like, but the three parables following these verses give us some indication. The parable of the faithful or unfaithful slave, the parable of the ten bridesmaids and the parable of the talents each speak to similar themes of good stewardship of resources. Each says something about planning ahead, and doing good with the resources with which we are entrusted. Like most parables they say this in a somewhat cryptic fashion, and it's hard to ignore that in each – and in the passages set here – there is a clear sense of right and wrong choices, and even of punishment for those who are not alert to God's coming.

Once again, the overarching theme of these verses is a calling to live differently in anticipation of the things to come. Jesus' followers are not simply to conform to what has been, but to shape their lives to reflect the hope of things to come.

What does keeping awake to the world around us look like today? In the everyday tasks of life, how might we remain alert to God's presence? In the light of the climate crisis, how might keeping awake look like careful and conscious stewardship of the resources with which we have been entrusted?

Sermon ideas

The key question that stands out to me from today's readings is: What am I being invited to do differently by these passages? Each of these passages prompt a conversation about what it means to live differently as we anticipate Jesus' arrival among us this Advent. We are invited to imagine what God's kingdom come might look like, and how this shapes our lives today.

Whilst it's welcome that this week's lectionary passages have so many common themes, it might be a challenge to include every one of these passages in a service, and doing so might mean we don't get the chance to really dig into the application for our lives today. The Gospel and New Testament readings offer the chance to look at how we might apply the message of these passages to our day-to-day, so for more practical reflection they might be more useful. The psalm might be incorporated in the prayers, as an alternative way of including this message.

As it's the first Sunday of Advent, it might be helpful to hold this as a focus. The imagery of light and dark in the passage from Romans provides scope to be creative with how we introduce this challenge to live differently. Many churches light a candle in an Advent wreath each Sunday in the build-up to Christmas. The solitary candle lit this week could provide a good visual prompt for exploring the challenge in Romans to put on light in the darkness. The candle could be used for a focus in prayers or reflection, or in an illustration during the reflection. It might even be helpful to spend some time in prayer, with the lights dimmed, and an invitation to focus on the candle.

In these passages, there is an invitation to use our imagination, to think differently about how things could be in light of the God's kingdom. This is an opportunity to reflect on the world around us, to hold together what currently is happening in the world, and how this might be transformed by God's light.

For example, it could be helpful to draw attention to the challenges of the cost of living crisis. This could be done through conversation, personal reflection, or by inviting someone with lived experience of poverty to be part of the service. In considering issues of poverty and inequality, it's important that we don't tell others' stories for them. Inviting someone to share their experience in your service can be a powerful opportunity to create a platform for experiences of poverty to be explored amongst the congregation. You can find some Advent resources from the Joint Public Issues Team [on their website](#) to help you do this.

Finally, our challenge at the Joint Public Issues Team is always to consider how we might turn reflection into action. As in the Romans passage, we are not only invited to see Christ's light but to 'put on the armour of light'. In worship together, could we invite ourselves and one another to commit to an action which enables us to share the light of God's kingdom in the darkness this Advent season? Your church might have connections with a foodbank, warm bank or other local service which is helping people with the cost of living crisis. Alternatively, you might want to think about a message to share with your MSP or MP, to

raise your concerns about the impact of rising costs on the poorest in our communities. [You can find out more about the impact of the cost of living crisis here.](#)

Prayers

Gathering prayer/Call to worship

I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord'.

We gather here today God, standing in Your house,
ready to encounter You in word, song, prayer and in one another.

May Your peace fill this place,
that together we might turn our hearts and minds to You,
and dedicate this time in praise of Your glory.

Amen

Confession/Repentance

You might choose to focus on a candle, perhaps in the Advent wreath, during these prayers.

God,
We live in the in-between times,
where we know the light that You bring,
yet still we fear that the darkness will overcome.

We are sorry for the times this week where we have thought the darkness more powerful
than Your light.

Hold a moment of quiet for reflection

Ever-present God, You bring light that banishes all darkness.
Help us to trust that the day will dawn and the night will be no longer.

In Your gracious love, You shine Your light upon us,
that we might know Your forgiveness.
Call us, God, to put on the armour of Your light,
that we might be emboldened by Your mercy to be bearers of Your love,
today and evermore.

Amen

Thanksgiving/Gratitude

God, You bring hope for restoration,
even beyond the imaginable.

You surround us with peace,
that we might be bound together in Your love,
held in right relationship that enables each of us to flourish.

We thank You that in Your generous love
You promise light beyond the darkness,
peace beyond the war,
and life beyond death.
Amen

Prayer for others/Intercession

These prayers of intercession invite you to set up three prayer stations, each with items to help you consider those who are struggling with the rising cost of living. Each station has an item to prompt reflection, and some text that will need to be written or printed with the item to guide prayer.

Station One: You will need – a blanket, or box of blankets.

This winter, rising energy prices in the UK mean that many will go cold, for fear of energy bills they can't pay. Feel the blanket, and as you do so pray for warmth for those feeling the cold, and for long- and short-term solutions to the energy crisis that enable everyone to live well.

Station Two: You will need – a lamp, with a switch, plugged in.

For many, the long nights and dark days this winter will mean hours spent without light, as switching on their lamps will be too costly. Spend some time reflecting on the struggle this will bring to many families. Switch the light on, and pray for God's light to shine over them.

Station Three: You will need – some tinned or long-life food.

More and more people are coming to rely on foodbanks and food pantries, to get the essentials they need. But the charities and community groups who provide these services are struggling to keep up with the demand. Pick up some of the food before you, and as you

hold it, pray for those who use foodbanks to receive what they need, and for those services to receive the support that they need.

Blessing/Closing Prayer

As you go from this place,
may you put on the armour of light,
carrying with you the dawn of God's love over all creation.
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.

- CH4 273 – “O come, O come, Emmanuel” – This traditional Advent hymn sings of God's coming light of the darkness overshadowing Israel. It reflects the themes in the OT and Psalm readings of today
- CH4 448 – “Lord, the light of Your love is shining” – This song might be suitable for the end of a service, as it has a strong sense of sending out in God's light
- CH4 543 – “Longing for light, we wait in darkness” – This more modern hymn considers the transformational power of Christ's light in our lives and in the world. Its socially conscious themes resonate with the themes for today's service
- A suggested playlist of songs for Advent can be found online here: <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/inspire-me/playlist/advent>

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'.
- While singing in our congregations is still 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](#)

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc., but reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.