

First Sunday of Advent – Year B

Sunday 3 December 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Paul Goode, Member of Sanctuary First and Scottish Churches Disability Group and a Church of Scotland Elder, for his 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.

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

Advent is a time when we start to reflect and wait for the Lord coming into our world. In the secular world many shops and garden centres have been displaying and selling Christmas decorations and ideas for the Christmas table since September. The Church, now in Advent, is creating a time to prepare for the birth of God's Son to come and live with us. Many churches across the land each Sunday will light candles on their Advent wreath, starting with one for hope, then one for love, then one for joy and then finally one for faith.

Whilst preparing for this I went through the readings set for this Sunday and realised that 'hope' was very apt for today and hope runs through all the readings.

Our Church today across the world needs to be open to all, welcoming each and every one of us. We are all God's children and God knows us intimately.

When I was asked to prepare these notes in August, it was very hard in the middle of summer, even though it wasn't that warm, to start thinking about Advent, Christmas and winter. A couple of days later I went to our local garden centre and to my amazement they were already preparing an area for their Christmas decorations.

I was extremely honoured and felt very humble to be asked and started to read the passages.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, we as a family have not been to church as we used to call it. Every Sunday, because my wife and son were isolating, we decided to have a service in our home. As we felt very alone and could not have a lot of personal contact, we decided to send the service via Facebook to our friends and family. Three years on and we are still, every Sunday, broadcasting our service live at 10.15 am. We have only missed three Sundays, taken as holidays. We have a congregation of 150 on average each week and the comments are very encouraging.

Our son, who is 26 but severely disabled, loves the service and often takes part in the prayers.

Hope being the theme today is a wonderful sentiment and the hope we have is that we encourage all to worship God however and whenever it is right for you.

Isaiah 64:1-9

This section of Isaiah appears in the final of three parts of the Book and is addressed to the people who had returned to Jerusalem following the long years of captivity in Babylon. These people need reassurance that God is with them, even though they were feeling that God was not near them.

Isaiah's cry in the first verse of today's reading: "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down," is a cry to the Lord.

Hope is in this reading, that God will listen and will take action. In this Advent period, the hope is that God's Son will be sent to come among us. Hope is also to remember that we are all equal and God knows us: "We are the clay, you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand."

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

This psalm is one of lament and the Psalmist is turning to God for hope. It is a sort of plea to God the Shepherd, to be led to still waters and to be restored. It has the suggestion of Psalm 23; salvation is the cry and restoration so that we may be saved. There is a sense of hope in verses 17-18 and in verse 19: "Let your face shine, that we may be saved."

The psalms are just brilliant to turn to when we are feeling low or need some words of encouragement, especially when we have lost hope for the future.

As we are in the winter and the periods of darkness are becoming longer, we need to hear the words of this psalm to give us hope that when Jesus arrives at Christmas there will be light and that God's face will shine on us. Reflecting on this passage you can really feel the lament, but also the plea in asking God to protect us and take us by the hand to safer and quieter places. The passage also encourages us to ask of God and to be thankful for all God gives us.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

This is the beginning of Paul and Sosthenes's letter "to the church of God that is in Corinth" (v2). On first reading this passage it could be suggested that it is just an introduction, with not a lot to say to us today, let alone the Christians of Corinth. Corinth was a beautiful city

and a place of influence and had a thriving secular society. There were even some in the church that were moving away from the teachings of Jesus.

Paul is writing to the people of the church in Corinth and the newly formed Christian Church. He is saying that they have the spiritual gifts and that they should use them and he is encouraging them to keep hope in their hearts that Jesus Christ will come into their lives and remain with them through every eventuality.

Reading and reflecting on this passage I am reminded that we are all equal, we all have our own individual gifts and that all these gifts can be used by God. We should all be welcomed into God's Church and be encouraged to be part of the life of God's Church. This raises two questions:

- Do we welcome all God's people into our Church?
- Once in church, do we encourage all people not just to 'sit in the pews', but to be part of the life of God's Church?

All God's people have at least one spiritual gift that could enrich the life of God's Church. God is faithful and the hope is that Jesus will be born into our world. There is a sure sign of hope in this passage, one which we could all learn from. And we hear too, how God will remain faithful to us and will be alongside us as we journey through Advent.

Mark 13:24-37

This reading is the second half of Jesus's longest speech. It is the so-called "Little Apocalypse" at the beginning of the new lectionary year. This passage looks forward with hope to the end of suffering.

The disciples are being instructed to wait and watch for the fall of the "powers" (v25) and to anticipate a genuine transformation of the world. We still have that sense that we need to hope that the world will become at peace. These are words of hope to people living through a crisis. Even the fig tree, that was cursed (Mark 11), is coming back to life and flourishing.

Today, the garden is sleeping; the grass, all the shrubs, plants and trees are looking dormant, recovering from the summer. Yet we know that underground the plants are preparing themselves for the Spring, getting ready, like the fig tree that had withered, to put out leaves.

We need to learn to wait and watch, not to be too impulsive and impatient, Jesus *will* come again: “And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (v37). Remember to keep awake – not physically but mentally – as we never know what God’s plan is for us and when Jesus will come again. But we should take comfort in the words found in John 14:3: “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

Sermon ideas

Advent and Hope

Advent is a time when we start again; the start of the Christian year and a time not only to reflect on the past year but also to look forward to what the coming year will bring. As a nation, we like to be positive about the future, whether it be in our church life, our personal life or our nation’s life.

For the last few years, my wife, my son and I have developed a way to talk to people about our faith and God over the internet. We were isolating due to Covid-19. It is very strange sitting in front of a screen with no congregation in the room and delivering a message with enthusiasm.

I like to ask questions to my congregation. When I was leading worship in person in church I would ask questions at the start of my message. I would not only ask them from the front, but I would go to them at their seats and ask the question. This was an interesting exercise as many people would initially feel very uncomfortable, but once they understood, they would become very involved. It does take practice and confidence to ‘think on your feet’ but everyone would remain awake, as per Jesus’s instructions in verse 37 – “And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Some questions you might like to ask your congregation:

- Why should you keep you awake?
- What were your hopes for last year?
- What are your hopes for the coming year?
- Why should we need hope?
- How can ‘the Church’, or ‘your church’ be inclusive?
- Is the Church inclusive?

One thought for the last question might be: How can God’s Church be more inclusive?

After I have asked these questions and heard the answers, I would then develop the responses, often talking about my own experiences as illustrations.

I would also pick a few sentences from the readings and talk about the relevance in my life to that particular sentence. For me, Isaiah 64 verse 8: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." We are all made of the same clay and God moulds us as God wants us. We are all God's children and loved equally.

Church should be accessible to all, not just to be able to enter the church, but also all should be encouraged to be part of church life to the full. It is my hope that God's Church will welcome each and every one of us, irrespective of who we are.

I always like to end my message or sermon with a thought for the congregation to go away and think about. I also like to make them smile, so I might preface the last question with something like: "I hope you are still awake."

Prayers

Prayers are very individual, but my wife and I have always tried to include our son, who has profound disabilities but clearly understands prayer and likes to join in and help. So these prayers are meant to be inclusive and the refrains/responses allow the congregation to join in.

Gathering prayer/ Call to worship

O Advent God, come to us we pray.

Enter our hearts this day,

as we worship, bring our prayers and our praise to You.

As we light the candle of hope in our hearts,

may we hold the small flickering flame throughout this week.

May the flame of Jesus Christ's love stay within us, and be close by us.

Light the flame of hope in our hearts.

We thank You, God for this time of Advent
to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ child.

The wee baby born in a lowly stable

who was Christ the King, Christ our Saviour.

Light the flame of hope in our hearts.

The mornings are chilly with the cold and early frosts of winter.
As we wake and look at the swirling misty hills, fields and valleys,
such views bring us hope.
Hope that Your creation is always turning
and we can have certainty in its glory and beauty throughout the seasons.

Light the flame of hope in our hearts.

O God of mists swirling in the elements
You brought the mystery of the Christ child to earth
You sent us hope of His coming.
The hope of the star, that pointed the way.
The hope that brought the shepherds and the wise men.
Come Advent God, come.
Come Advent God come, be in our hearts today.

Light the flame of hope in our hearts. Amen**Confession**

O Lord, though You have given us great hope, at times we doubt.
We know our faith is weakened by challenging events in our lives.
Sadness and despair drown all hope as the tears fall,
and we are washed away in the floods and torrents of regret and fear.
Forgive us Lord we pray, and give us renewed strength for our weakness.

May we follow the Advent star.

Forgive us Lord, when we become too immersed
in the hurly-burly of Christmas.
Forgive us when we get stressed about all the preparations.
Forgive us if we become overwhelmed by all we have to do.

May we follow the Advent star.

We are truly sorry that at times we lack faith,
we lose hope,
we do not hold onto Your way.

We stumble on our journey towards the stable.

May we follow the Advent star.

Teach us to be more like the wise men
who never doubted the journey they had to make,
following the star.

Teach us to be humble like the shepherds
who travelled with the star.

May we follow the Advent star.

And may the star of Christmas Hope be with us this day
and all through Advent.

Amen

Thanksgiving

O Lord, we thank You for this time of Advent.

A time to be still and know that You are God.

A time to prepare our hearts and minds.

We thank You for this time of peace and calm to prepare.

A time to think about what happened all those hundreds of years ago.

Let us take a moment to reflect on the star,

the star that shone as a beacon of hope over the lowly stable.

As the flame of the hope candle flickers

we give thanks for all we have.

We give thanks for our families and friends

and for the time we may be able to spend together
during Advent and at Christmas time.

We give thanks for the farmers

who will provide the food on our tables on Christmas day.

We give thanks for the stars

that pinprick the sky on a winter's night.

We give thanks for the moon

that guides our way in the darkness.

We give thanks for the beauty of nature

and the world You have made.

Amen

Prayers for others

O Lord, we give thanks that we are all Your children and You love us all equally.

We are all *included* in your love.

Whether we have a disability,

wherever we come from,

whatever our background or experience,

whatever our ability and our talents.

We are all here together to share in prayer with You.

Let us build a house where all are welcome!

O Lord, we pray for all those with unique disabilities today.

Those with a physical disability,

those who are blind or deaf,

those with a rare condition.

We pray for strength to overcome their daily struggle.

We pray for more funding for equipment like wheelchairs,

for a faster response for support workers

and carers and PAs to be employed.

Let us build a house where all are welcome!

We pray for anyone we know who is suffering in body, mind or spirit and feels a lack of hope.

Covid is still with us and has been devastating for so many families and individuals, who have lost a family member or a close friend or neighbour.

We pray for those who are lonely who may have lost a loved one.

We hold them up to you now Lord.

Let us build a house where all are welcome!

We pray for all churches everywhere,

that they can open their doors wide and their hearts to all,
to accept everyone.

We pray our churches can always be a place of acceptance,
kindness, understanding and love.

We pray that we find a welcome wherever we go,
and in our communities.

We pray that those we meet on our life's journey will be open to learn,

to understand, to show compassion
and accept our beautiful differences
and include us in their worship.

Let us build a house where all are welcome!

O Lord, we pray for hope for those who may feel despair this day.
Those who may feel lost in their lives.
Those who may have no faith.
We pray for those who are worried about money to pay for heating or food
at this costly time of year.

Let us build a house where all are welcome!

We give thanks for the NHS,
we pray that those working long hours can continue to have hope.
Hope that they are making a difference to people's lives
and hope that they can help someone get back on track with their health.
We give thanks for all professionals who support those who've been ill or are disabled:
the therapists, the specialist teachers
and all those working daily to assist them to develop new skills,
allowing them independence in life.

Let us build a house where all are welcome!

Blessing

O Lord, be our hope in the days to come,
be the flickering flame in our hearts.
And may the God of hope, love and joy
be with us all as we wait and prepare for the birth of Christ.

Amen

May the blessing of the swirling mists
and the morning frosts be on you.
May the blessing of the advent star be on you.
May the blessing of sister moon and mother sun be on you.
May the blessing of the earth, sea and sky be on you.
And now may the Lord bless you, and bless you with hope.

Amen

Reflection and prayers for World AIDS Sunday 2023

Written by Carol Finlay, on behalf of the Church of Scotland Faith Action Programme

[Isaiah 64:1-9](#)

*⁸O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.*

World AIDS Day 2023 (Friday 1 December) has the theme of *Let Communities Lead*. The day is an opportunity for everyone to help raise awareness about the status of the pandemic and encourage progress in HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment and care around the world. The world can end AIDS, and communities who are living with, or at risk, or are affected by HIV are leading the way. Those living in communities are at the frontline of progress in the HIV response. This is where the person-centred approach is vital to build trust and implement policies and health services and to ensure governments and other organisations are held to account.

Churches across the world play their part in the community response and are often a mainstay of care and can be a voice to raise the concerns of the community at a higher level. The Church of Scotland HIV Programme plays our part in supporting partner churches and organisations across the world as they show God's love to all in their community.

The Church of Christ in Thailand AIDS Ministry (CAM) supports Baan Saabay, an emergency shelter in Chiang Mai, providing holistic care for those temporarily homeless, or who need to be near medical services. It also offers respite care, and is one of the few facilities providing care for men, particularly hill-tribe and migrant workers. The shelter also provides training for income-generation projects, and works closely with the local church congregations as they seek to be leaders in their community.

Arunima Hospice is one of the healing ministries of the Church of North India, Diocese of Calcutta. It is dedicated to help people living with HIV and AIDS through care and support. Their nutritional intervention plays a crucial role in improving the quality of life of HIV-infected people. The hospice provides end of life care, ensuring dignity and love for all, and they run a ministry for children living with and affected by HIV and AIDS.

CCAP Ekwendeni Hospital AIDS Programme in Northern Malawi aims to provide orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) with good nutrition and educational support, and access to health and social services on an equal basis with other children. It helps to pay school fees,

provides nutritious food, sets up children's corners to give psychological support and ensures farm inputs (seeds and fertiliser) for families.

World AIDS Day provides more than a celebration of the achievements of communities; it is a call to action to enable and support communities in their leadership roles. World AIDS Day 2023 will highlight the need to unleash the full potential of community leadership, including churches, to enable the end of AIDS.

The following prayers may be included with or as part of your prayers of intercession:

Prayer of intercession 1

We give thanks for all the folks who quietly go about their daily work as they support and care for those living with HIV and AIDS.

We rejoice with the voices raised in communities around the world who seek a fair and just life for all.

On this World AIDS Sunday we pray that until there are no new infections and no one dying of AIDS, we will continue to pray for all who are infected and affected and those who lead their community response from the grass roots.

Prayer of intercession 2

Today, on World AIDS Sunday we pray especially for all who are infected or affected by HIV and AIDS, for children and young people, for adults and old people, for those who seek to provide spiritual care or health care, for those who allocate resources, for those who can shape policy, for our Church of Scotland.

Loving God, our loving parent,
Let love abound in our praying and in our actions.
Let Your kingdom come, let Your will be done,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

For the latest information about HIV globally, visit [The Path That Ends Aids – 2023 UNAIDS GLOBAL AIDS UPDATE](#). For more information about the Church of Scotland's HIV Programme, contact [Carol Finlay](#) or hiv@churchofscotland.org.uk

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.

- CH4 273 – “O come, O come, Emmanuel” – an 18th century, hymn based on the ancient Advent Antiphons
- CH4 276 – “Wait for the Lord” – this Taizé chant encourages us to wait, keep watch and take heart
- CH4 278 – “Wake, awake! for night is flying” – verse 3 refers to Isaiah 64:4: “No mortal eye nor ear can comprehend or bear such great glory”
- CH4 279 – “Make way, make way, for Christ the King” – an upbeat tune which raises our spirits while reminding us that Jesus will come even when we don’t feel enthusiastic
- CH4 284 – “Hope is a candle” – This is a great hymn to use when lighting today’s candle for Hope: you could sing the first verse today and then add one verse each week throughout Advent
- CH4 472 – “Come thou long-expected Jesus” – written by the great hymn writer, Charles Wesley. At Advent, we expect things to change. This hymn would be one to end the service; there is a sense of hope that Jesus is coming to save the world
- CH4 573 – “Saranam” (Jesus Saviour, Lord, now to you I fly) – Sri Lankan text and Indian melody. This hymn refers to Psalm 80:3, 7

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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