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**Sunday 3rd December 2023**

**Advent 1**

**Note**

In difficult times we long for God to do something! We look at the wars of our world, the climate crisis, the mass movements of people, the rising prices and want something to be done and, not surprisingly, we don’t have much confidence in our political leaders and so, as people of faith, we want God to intervene. Today we start the season of Advent – the time when we look forward to Christ’s return in glory which, of course, feeds our desire for God to come and put things right. U2’s song Tomorrow expressed that yearning for Christ with the words “won’t you come back tomorrow?” Yet the Church has always had to live with the hope of Christ’s return and the reality that it’s not yet.

**Call to Worship**

Won’t you come back tomorrow, Lord? There’s much to be done – sea levels rise, wars wage, the poor are on the move displaced by conflict, persecution, and famine, undeterred by the borders we erect. **Won’t you come back tomorrow, Lord?**

Won’t you come back tomorrow, Lord? There’s sickness, corruption, and danger all around us; who will tear down the barriers we erect? Who will stand up for justice? Who will bring healing for the wounds and scars of life? **Won’t** you come back tomorrow, Lord?

Won’t you come back tomorrow, Lord? Our schools and public buildings are crumbling, the government is in disarray, our civic life is devalued and there’s no sense of direction. **Won’t you come back tomorrow, Lord?**

Maybe you won’t come back tomorrow, Lord! Maybe your silence should inspire us to act to change our world and proclaim your coming Kingdom. Maybe the needs of our world cry out for us, not you, to act! **Help us to make our world fit for you tomorrow Lord.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness**

We worship and adore You,

Most Holy One high on Your eternal throne.

We bring You, this day,

our prayers and praises,

our pain and protest,

our desire and despair,

along with our longing for a better world.

We worship and adore you, Lord Jesus,

true Messiah coming to reign,

even though we set You at naught and nailed you to the tree;

forgive us

when we turn away from You,

when we refuse to proclaim Your coming Kingdom,

and when we look to You to clear up our mess.

We worship and adore you, Most Holy Spirit,

endlessly exalted on high, and found in the poor.

You remind us, again and again,

of Your call to make

bread,

life and beauty available to all.

Inspire us to follow,

encourage us to accept Your forgiveness,

and rouse us to action! Amen.

**Prayer for Illumination**

Be our refuge, O God, as we hear, contemplate.

and respond to Your Word broken open for us;

that as we wait for Your return,

we proclaim through our love, our lives and our actions,

Your coming Kingdom. Amen

**All-Age & Advent Wreath**

Ask everyone to sit quietly, close their eyes and wait. Tell them you are going to test to see who can tell when a minute has passed (you’ll need a watch or a phone with a second hand or stop watch) Tell them to put their hand up when they think a minute has gone. Tell them to start at the same time as you either start the stop watch or note the time on the phone. Keep quiet and observe who puts their hands up early and who gets it right. (you have to say when a minute is up) Afterwards ask what it was like to wait, who was surprised it as they had their sense of time right or wrong. What was it like to wait?

You may wish to ask a younger person to light the first Advent Candle. This prayer may be prayed:

Waiting God,

we light this candle as we wait for You to come again,

to enlighten our world,

reveal our dark places

and teach us to be Your light in our darkness. Amen

**Readings**

*Isaiah 64:1-12* | St Mark 13:24-37

**Sermon Notes**

*Isaiah*

I have added v 10 – 12 which the Lectionary omits to give the passage its original historical grounding. Written after the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BCE and before the Temple was rebuilt in 515 BCE, the passage is a cry of pain seeking to understand what has happened. War and destruction result in the writer longing for God to rend open the heavens, come down and put things right. The people, facing this disaster, turn and ask where God is amid the pain. In the passage preceding this one the writer notes God’s absence is due to the people turning away from Him but, at the same time, doesn’t let God off the hook. Today’s passage reminds God, and those who hear these words, of the things God has done in the past, confesses sin, begs forgiveness and reminds both God and the hearers that they are the work of God’s own hands.

There’s an interesting line in v5 “because you hid yourself we transgressed” (though the Hebrew text isn’t clear). It’s as if the writer is blaming God for the people’s sins. This claim was not meant to excuse the people but to goad God into action. With the verses about God being Father and Potter it’s as if the writer is reminding God that He is bound to act, to step in and save the people.

The passage portrays God in two ways – the comfortable image of a saving God who will redeem the people and the disturbing image of a confusing God who absents Himself in time of trouble.

Three times the writer asks God to reveal His presence. The language of God hiding grapples with some deep theology – theology that we still wrestle with. In the past, Isaiah writes, God intervened and saved the people. The Bible recounts God leading the people dry shod from Egypt, with fire and cloud through the wilderness, and feeding the people miraculously in the desert, but now God is silent. In the past the Kingdom was established, and God’s saving acts protected the people - but now God is silent. Did the people get it wrong in the past? Has God changed His mind? If God intervened in the past why not now? Of course, since the mid 20th Century we’ve had to wrestle with the God who delivered the Jews from Egypt didn’t deliver the 6 million (nor the others) from the death camps. We want the sufferings of today’s world to merit a few mountains shaking with God’s anger but, instead, there’s silence. This is a theological problem for us as much as it was for Isaiah.

Scott Bader-Saye in the *Feasting on the Word[[1]](#footnote-1)* entry for this Sunday turns to the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who from his prison cell wrestled with this silence and concluded “God would have us know that we must live as those who manage our lives without Him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us….God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.” (Letters and Papers from Prison: New York, Macmillan 1971, p360) Bonhoeffer found again the God who suffers, the God who is with us in the pain. God hides himself, said Bonhoeffer, so we realise that God chooses to relate to us through weakness and the vulnerability.

The images of God as Father and Potter are more helpful to Bonhoeffer’s ideas of the weak, suffering God than the mountain shaking furious God that Isaiah longs for. Of course, Isaiah’s longing is reflected in Jesus’ words as recorded in Mark.

*St Mark*

This passage is written in a style known, since the 19th Century, as apocalyptic. When times were hard this style of literature was popular. In the face of Babylon, Greece, and Rome, Jewish people consoled themselves with ideas of the battle between good and evil, and the imminent arrival of the end of the age. Apocalyptic literature helps people who long for judgement and the hope of better times. Apocalyptic literature often was filled with cosmic signs – as today’s passage is – as well as teaching and warnings. When this was written the earliest eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life and ministry were dying and the Church had to adjust to the lack of an imminent return. The qualifications in the final paragraph about no one knowing when the return will be read as a bit of theology of the earliest Church to counter any enthusiastic believers foretelling an imminent return.

There may be multiple things going on in this text. Some think that Jesus’ words to the High Priest in 14:62 mean this passage was foretelling his resurrection. Mark’s original readers would have read this passage against the background of the Roman sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple – as traumatic as the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem had been in Isaiah’s time. The warning that “this generation shall not pass away…” makes this a foretelling of that destruction ring true.

For the contemporary reader, however, whilst we may have much empathy the destruction of a city and a Temple 2000 years ago, we aren’t filled with fear and dread. Yet Jesus foretells multiple wars (13: 7-8) so maybe the passage has warnings for us now – many Christians treat it so.

Drawing on older apocalyptic books, like Daniel, the editor has created this snippet to give hope – things are grim, they are going to get worse, but hold on as, in the end, God will come and put all things right. It’s the same theology as in the Isaiah passage, the hope that in God’s good time all shall be well. Daniel was written against the backdrop of the Greek oppression of the Jews; the editor of Mark repurposes those ideas against the backdrop of the Roman oppression of God’s people. Many now use these stories to give hope in the oppression wrought by our contemporary empires.

*Weaving the two passages together*

Where you go with these passages will depend on your theology. You might want to follow the logic of the Mark passage, and Isaiah’s fervent hope, that grim though things are Christ will return and there will be a happy ending. It’s a central, traditional, theme of Advent.

You might want to ponder if the Bible offers us happy endings though. Job goes through Hell but his relatives, animals, land etc were not returned to him. He ends up enjoying God’s favour but with the experience of profound loss. The resurrection wasn’t, as Bishop David Jenkins memorably said, a conjuring trick with bones; the Risen Lord wasn’t recognised when people met him, he was different, wounded but whole, with an ability to come into locked rooms and disappear at will. The glory Christ had came at a dreadful cost.

Maybe Bonhoeffer’s difficult ideas of a God who’s left us to get on with it but who inspires us through weakness, vulnerability, and suffering is a way to go; after all in a few weeks’ time we’ll be celebrating the birth of a baby, needy and naked, wrapped in blood, born into exile who would, a few short years later, suffer the degradation of the Cross. The happy ending apocalyptic writers longed for might not be what’s in store – instead we may see the Cross teaches us that victory is found on the rubbish heap, weakness and vulnerability trump might and power, the heavens being rent open might not happen in the way we hope.

**Affirmation of Faith**

Since its earliest days the Church has proclaimed that: **Christ will come again!** In times of despair, doubt, and despondency God’s people have hoped: **Christ will come again!** Yet we’ve been waiting a long time. Advent after Advent we proclaim: **Christ will come again!** Yet, at the same time we’ve learned to live with views of power and glory where grace is costly and God is at work on the margins, with the weak and despised. If **Christ does come again** we’ll see him at work on the edge, with the poor and the least, showing us how to live and love with hope despite God’s silence. Only when we’ve learnt how to live as Jesus taught will **Christ come again.**

**Intercessions**

At the end of each prayer I will say “Come Lord Jesus” please respond with the words “**Come and inspire us anew.”**

Risen Lord Jesus, long expected,

with us in our hearts yet hidden from view,

we ponder your words anew this Advent

as we long for our world to be made right.

We weep over the wars of our world

remembering the people of Ukraine, Palestine and Yemen in particular.

Inspire those working for peace and justice with your love, wit and wisdom.

*pause*

Come Lord Jesus…**come and inspire us anew**.

We yearn for our world to be different,

for the hungry to be fed,

the poor lifted up,

for justice to flow like a mighty river,

for the rich to be sent away empty handed

and made to pay their fair share

yet we live in the world as it is

where might is right and power valorised.

Teach us quickly O Lord,

how to turn away from our power and embrace Your weakness,

found on the edge with the destitute and downtrodden.

*pause*

Come Lord Jesus…*come and inspire us anew.*

We long for our world, and our nations, to be better governed.

We pray for those who hold or seek elected office,

that they may be honest, act with integrity,

always seeking the welfare of both creation and the poor.

We pray for our nations in a long approach to a General Election,

that we may vote wisely and hold our political leaders to account,

as one day they will have to give account to the king of Kings.

*pause*

Come Lord Jesus…**come and inspire us anew**.

As we long for the Kingdom to come we pray as Jesus taught saying: Our Father…

**Offertory**

We look at our world and see the pain and the poverty, the degradation and despair and realise much must be done. We may long for Jesus to return to put these things right but, sometimes, such a longing simply displaces the reality that we are the ones who must act. Teresa of Avila wrote: Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which He looks. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good, yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world. As we wait for the Kingdom to come, we have to act, to give of our time, talents and resources to support charities at home and abroad as well as the Church. Our discipleship and our bank balance are intimately related.

Great God,

we give You our thanks and praise,

and recognise all You have given us.

Bless these gifts, inspire us to use them wisely

in the service of Your coming Kingdom. Amen.

**Holy Communion**

Since the Last Supper Jesus’ friends have shared bread and wine to both remember Him and to make Him present with us now. As we share bread and wine we are gathered up to the heavenly places, fed by the hand of the Most High, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. We listen again to the story of the Last Supper in a paraphrase of Scripture by Isaac Watts.

*‘Twas On That Dark, That Doleful Night*

Isaac Watts, Public Domain, 8888 Suggested tunes: O Waly Waly, Rockingham

'Twas on that dark, that doleful night

when all the powers of hell arose

against the Son of God's delight

and friends betrayed him to his foes:

2 Before the mournful scene began

He took the bread, & blessed, & broke:

what love through all his actions ran!

What wondrous words

of grace he spoke!

3 "This is my body broke for sin;

receive and eat the living food."

Then took the cup & blessed the wine,-

"'Tis the new covеnant in my blood."

4 "Do this," he said, "till time shall end

in mеmory of your dying Friend;

meet at my table, and record

the love of your departed Lord."

5 Jesus! thy feast we celebrate; we show thy death, we sing thy name

Till thou return, and we shall eat the marriage supper of the Lamb

Come now Holy Spirit, upon these simple things of bread and wine

that they may be, for us, the body and blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

As we eat and drink these gifts in Your presence

we ask you to inspire us to live and work

proclaiming the coming Kingdom,

where there will be no pain, persecution or poverty,

where all Your people will run free,

where all creation will sing of Your praise and all will flourish

through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus, with You, Most Holy Spirit,

all glory belongs to the Most High, now and for ever, Amen.

**Post Communion Prayer**

Lord Jesus,

as we have tasted and seen You in these gifts of bread and wine,

may we taste Your death and resurrection,

and serve You through our earthly journey.

May You dawn upon the darkness of our time;

may we be ready to receive You when You come in glory

and You are all in all, one God in Trinity of love. Amen.

**Blessing**

May the creator of the stars of night,

comfort you as you seek to shine in the gloom.

May the redeemer of the world,

inspire you to find him on the edge with the poor and forsaken.

May the eternal flame of divine love,

inspire you to search for and proclaim the coming kingdom,

even when things seem bleak.

And may the blessing of Almighty God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ***or***  Eternal Majesty, Incarnate Word, & Holy Spirit

be with you, and all whom you love,

now and always. Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Lo He Comes With Clouds Descending | 656 | 477 | 177 | 424 |
| Come Thou Long Expected Jesus  (double the verses up and sing to When the Carnival is Over/Stenka Razin) | 138 | 472 | 169 | 102 |
| [Hear Us O Lord As We Voice Our Laments](https://globalworship.tumblr.com/post/129257668350/hear-us-o-lord-as-we-voice-our-laments-god-is) (to Abide with me) |  |  |  |  |
| The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns (see below) |  |  |  |  |
| Christ is coming let creation |  | 475 |  |  |
| Creator of the Stars of Night (try to Old 100th) |  | 288 |  |  |
| Christ is surely coming |  |  |  | 75 |

**The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns**

John Brownlie (1907) Public Domain

Tunes – St Columba, Crimond, Land of Rest, Amazing Grace, Lyngham/Desert

The King shall come when morning dawns

and light triumphant breaks,

when beauty gilds the eastern hills

and life to joy awakes.

2 Not as of old a little child,

to bear, and fight, and die,

but crowned with glory like the sun

that lights the morning sky.

3 O brighter than the rising morn

when He, victorious, rose

and left the lonesome place of death,

despite the rage of foes.

4 O brighter than that glorious morn

shall this fair morning be,

when Christ, our King, in beauty comes,

and we His face shall see.

5 The King shall come when morning dawns

and earth's dark night is past;

O haste the rising of that morn,

the day that aye shall last.

6 And let the endless bliss begin,

by weary saints foretold,

when right shall triumph over wrong,

and truth shall be extolled.

7 The King shall come when morning dawns,

and light and beauty brings;

"Hail, Christ the Lord!" Thy people pray,

come quickly, King of kings!

*Other Ideas*

Why not download and play before the service (but don’t broadcast unless you have the requisite PRS licence) U2’s Tomorrow before the service and REM’s It’s the End of the World as We Know it afterwards?

1. Bartlett, David L & Brown Taylor, Barbara, Editors*, Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 1 Advent through Transfiguration* Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)