

worship notes



Sunday 1st December 2024
The First Sunday of Advent
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from the United Reformed Church

Note

(If using U2's *Tomorrow* as an opening reflection) Songs, poems, and writing all have multiple ways of interpreting them. Bono, from the band U2, wrote the song *Tomorrow* about those who had died in the Troubles in Northern Ireland – the black cars at the side of the road and the knock at the door – but later realised he'd been writing about his mother's funeral. She died when he was just 14. Generations of Christians have heard another meaning in the song – about Jesus' return – with the final words about opening ourselves up to the love of God. Advent has multiple meanings too. The Church offers us this season where we focus on Jesus' return at the end of time with readings about preparation and apocalypse. Yet we light our candles counting down to Christmas and busy ourselves with present-buying, card-posting, and the shock-inducing experience of paying for postage stamps!

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, governments are 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.**

with resonances from U2's *Tomorrow*

Lighting the First Advent Candle

And so, we light our first Advent candle reflecting on Paul's words in the letter to the Thessalonians which we'll hear a little later on.

Yearning God, You draw close, aching to hold us in Your love;
teach us to follow Your paths of justice and faithfulness.
Show us Your ways that we may be strengthened in holiness
as we await our redemption which draws ever nearer. Amen

Prayers of Approach, Confession, & Grace

Eternal One, we come to worship You today
with the needs of the world and of our own lives pressing upon us;
a world in need of redemption, warring peoples needing peace,
injustice feeding terror, and the nations in need of healing.
Everlasting God come down and put things right.

Approaching God, as once you came to the poor and excluded,
we long for You to come again;
to remind us of Your ways, to establish Your Kingdom, to lift up the poor,
to send the rich away empty, and to establish righteousness and justice.
Everlasting God come down and put things right.

Healing One, as we yearn for our world to be put right,
we become conscious of what is not right within us,
as well as what is wrong in our world;
give us insight, self-awareness, and the ability to change,
that as we turn back to You we gain the strength,
to see where you have, Everlasting God, already come down,
and how You urge *us* to put things right.

Holy Trinity, give us the grace to receive the forgiveness you offer
and the courage to forgive ourselves, Amen.

Introduction to the Readings

Both our readings today are about hope – but we may not quite get this at first hearing. Paul writes to a group of day labourers in Thessalonica who had converted to Christianity longing to be able to visit them again, urging them to grow in love for each other that they may be holy and ready when the Lord comes again. Our Gospel reading has a graphic description of Jesus' return – a description which clearly inspired Wesley in the hymn *Lo He Comes With Clouds Descending* – offering us hope as our redemption draws near. So, we pray asking for God to enlighten us as we hear truth proclaimed in ancient words.

Prayer for Illumination

How can we thank you enough, O God,
for the ways you reveal Yourself to us?
We perceive You in the natural world and created order,
in ancient words which are ever new, and, above all in Jesus Christ.
Open our hearts and minds now, O God,
that as we hear we may understand and follow. Amen.

All Age Activity

There's a range of downloadable videos and some activities for Advent here
http://www.going4growth.com/growth_through_the_year/advent

Readings

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 | St Luke 21:25-36

Sermon Notes

There's hope in our world even though it doesn't seem like it but there again there's hope in our readings today even though, at first hearing, we may not be entirely convinced!

1 Thessalonians

It is thought that the first letter to the Thessalonians, written to a group of day labourers Paul had converted, was his very first letter. As day labourers they'd have had a precarious existence never knowing if they'd get work tomorrow. Today's passage reveals various tensions in this early congregation. First, there's the issue of the coming again of Christ. Later in the letter, in chapter 5, there is more focused teaching on Christ's coming; it clearly was a concern for this group of believers. In the earliest Church the hope of Jesus' imminent return meant that preaching had a certain urgency; the Gospels were only written as the Apostles and first eye witnesses were dying and it became clear Jesus' return wasn't imminent. Paul didn't press the fact Jesus had already come to this group of new believers; he didn't stress the Cross nor what Christ had achieved but, rejoiced in their newfound faith and in the faith that would yet come. Paul is concerned, with this group of believers, about what Christ will do – strengthen their love for each other and making them holy and prepared for when Christ comes. Salvation, here then, is a future not a past act. That's a tension with contemporary Christianity where we're often asked to reflect on having been saved when we responded to Jesus' call to follow him; yet passages like this, which imply a salvation still to come, are a counterbalance to the idea that we're already saved. Like the Kingdom which has come but is still coming, salvation has started but is not complete. Like Advent when we're invited to focus on Jesus' coming again even as we prepare to celebrate his coming amongst us so long ago we live with paradoxes and tensions.

There's another tension in Thessalonians where Paul uses the term 'Lord' for Jesus Christ. It's a term which is widely used in the Christian tradition and is preserved in much of the Church's liturgy as well as in the New Testament. It's so familiar to us we don't give it much thought. Yet the term is deeply subversive. *Kyrios*, or Lord was a term used with great tension in the early Church as at the time Paul was writing the term referred to the Emperor. So, Christians had to use the term to mean both Jesus and Caesar and the assertion that only Jesus is Lord meant that Caesar isn't. Rulers tend not to like hearing that their authority is questioned or limited so this was a political tension for the early believers. They proclaimed a Kingdom not fully arrived, a salvation not fully complete and a Lord who wasn't the emperor. Further, the type of lordship that Jesus was lived was one based on simplicity, weakness, love, and kindness not overbearing male power. It's all confusing counter cultural stuff.

Throughout Christian history, ever since we became the Roman official religion, the Church has downplayed hope in the Second Coming as it has concentrated on cosyng up to power. (Tyrants, after all, don't want sermons about the justice that is to come!) We've left thoughts about the Second Coming to the fanatical fringe of the Church yet, every time we celebrate Communion, we proclaim that "Christ will come again." Those precarious day labourers were offered hope by Paul; hope that the Lord Jesus would come, hope they'd be ready to meet him, and a hope that through their own discipleship they'd find holiness. These aren't bad hopes for us in our day.

St Luke

Hope is more of a struggle to see hope in our Gospel reading with all that strange language about Jesus' return. It's very dramatic; we're not used to fear and foreboding in church these days! The title "Son of Man" is often used by Jesus about himself in the Gospels. It's a title coming from the book of Daniel about one given power and dominion over nations and rulers. It's a high Christological title every bit as telling as Paul's use of 'Lord' but perhaps a little less confrontational as the Romans would have had to struggle to understand it; Jewish hearers, however, would have immediately grasped the allusion. What's interesting, however, in the New Testament is the pairing of this title with the idea of suffering. It's not all glory; or maybe glory is seen in suffering. Jesus' message of his return is so strange that it's shaped in very odd language; the literary conventions of his age used such language when speaking of the end of time; it's not possible to get a more prose like understanding of these events as it's mystery and imagery. Once we're used to the literary style we can focus on Luke's point – hope. There will be painful things, there will be suffering, but there's hope "salvation is drawing near". Christians have been tempted to overlook the hope and take strange byways with this passage; some have been tempted to deny the world and become rather fanatical, others to despair, others yet to withdraw into alternative communities and watch the world go to hell in a hand basket. Instead, we are to hope.

And so...

We hope in a better future, we hope in Christ's return when all shall be put right, we hope in the grace given to us to improve things now. We hope not in, as Marx put it, an opium of faith to dull the senses, but in the courage, energy, and vision given to us to both proclaim and work for the coming Kingdom.

We often long for Jesus to come back and put all things right; yet we also know that since the Ascension it's been over to us until Jesus returns. We may ignore the teaching on the Second Coming as, to be honest, the Church has been waiting for some time. We may long for the Second Coming as, to be honest, it lets us off the hook. So maybe it's another tension to live with. Just as the early Christians had to understand 'Lord' in different ways, just as we know that Advent is about two things at once – looking back and looking forward, so we must live with a tension about mission. We're called to love and embody God's love in the world. We're called to make changes, to make the world more loving, more just, more like the coming Kingdom yet, at the same time, we know these things won't come until the End. Until then we're called to both wait and work, hope and help.

You may want to use this prayer at the end of a sermon as it tries to encapsulate what I'm trying to convey.

You probably won't come back tomorrow, Lord, will you?
You probably won't make everything right tomorrow;
yet as we wait we know that You call us
to proclaim and embody Your love, Your Kingdom, Your justice,
and Your message, today and tomorrow. Amen.

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

We bring our prayers before you, O God, that we may wait and work for your coming Kingdom.

Eternal One, we thank you for all that is good in our lives;
the beauty of our world, the love we share with friends and family,
the freedoms we enjoy to worship, love, and live as we please.

Yet as we thank You we remember those who aren't free;
those persecuted for faith, politics, and love;
those living in fear that once precious freedoms will be removed.
Help us, dear God, **to hope and help.**

Living Lord Jesus, may your joy abound in our hearts
as we pray, night and day, for your coming reign.
We may not see the signs in the heavens you spoke about,
but see plenty of signs in our world:
the rise, again, of dictators and those who envy them,
the mass movements of people, war and terror, ecological disaster.
We long for the joy you promise but live in the gloom of our realities.
Help us to speak truth even when inconvenient,
to lift up those oppressed by life,
and to challenge the unjust use of power wherever we encounter it.
Help us, dear God, **to hope and help.**

Most Holy Spirit, strengthen our hearts in holiness
as we live and work in a confusing world
full of pain and praise, tragedy and beauty, failure and glory,
that we may become blameless before God.
Help us to be alert to the needs of our world, and of our community,
that we may respond to Your call to love
both as individuals and as a congregation,
showing your life and love as our redemption draws ever near.
Help us, dear God, **to hope and help.**

Eternal Trinity, be with us this Advent as we look both forward and back,
to pray and work for the coming Kingdom as, with Jesus, we pray, Our Father...

Offering

As we hope for better times we know we have to give. Not just in the frenzy of Christmas where giving can be difficult, but in our day to day lives where we give of our time and our talents as well as of our treasure. St Paul told us that God loves a cheerful giver, but often we can be a bit grumpy as we give! We complain about our busyness, our exhaustion and our bank balances yet, despite the grumbling we know there's joy in giving. The face of a child on Christmas morning, the thank you of a friend, the kiss of a lover. And so we give, in joy and sometimes with grumbling, but together God takes our gifts, and our attitudes, and makes wonderful things. Let's pray.

O God, giver of all that is good, we thank you for the gifts given in this community
kindness to strangers, food to the hungry,
time to the lonely, a listening ear to the depressed
and the financial gifts to church and charity.

Bless our giving, O God, and bless us, that through our lives and by Your will, Your Kingdom will come. Amen.

Holy Communion

May God be with you | **and also with you!**
Lift up your hearts | **we lift them up to God.**
Let us give thanks to God. | **It is right to give our thanks and praise!**

It is right and just, our duty and our joy
always and everywhere to give you our thanks, Eternal One,
through Jesus Christ, Your word made flesh.

We look at the signs of the times and see the earth and the heavens shaken
with the selfishness of human greed,
the drunkenness and dissipation of life and the worries of the world,
yet You teach us to be alert, have hope, and to see our redemption drawing near.

And so with the angels and archangels
and the whole company of heaven we sing to your praise and glory:

The Ash Grove Sanctus

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**O holy, most holy, the God of creation,
forever exalted in pow'r and great might.
The earth and the heavens are full of your glory.
Hosanna, hosanna, and praise in the height!
How blessed is he who is sent to redeem us,
who puts ev'ry fear and injustice to flight;
who comes in the name of the Lord as our saviour.
Hosanna, hosanna, and praise in the height!**

In these days of Advent, Eternal One, we wait in joyful hope,
for the world to change, the Kingdom to come,
justice to be established, and Jesus to return.

We look back to Bethlehem's cradle and forward to the final consummation of all things
when all creation will be made whole, the poor lifted up, the hungry fed,
the oppressed run free, and where, in Your presence, we will dance with joy.

Until then we wait and work for the coming Kingdom,
gaining strength and inspiration at Your table,
where, in obedience to Jesus' command,
we show forth His sacrifice on the Cross
with bread broken and wine poured for us to eat and drink.

For we remember that night, long ago,
when Jesus, gathered with his friends around a table,
and shared in the simplicity of a meal.
During that meal he took some bread, blessed it, broke it,
and gave it to his friends saying:

“this is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me.”

Then, after supper, Jesus took the cup of wine,
said the ancient blessing, gave the cup to his friends and said:

“this cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you.”

As we meet to share in this meal Jesus himself, risen and ascended,
is here with us - for we are gathered up into the heavenly places.
Jesus gives himself anew for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.
So let us, together, affirm our faith:

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Come Holy Spirit, on these gifts of bread and wine, that they may be, for us,
a communion with the body and blood of Christ which we share.

Remind us we are Christ’s body and blood, his hands and feet
in our world until he comes again.

Unite us with the whole Church in heaven and earth,
as we gather here to present our offering of praise and thanksgiving
presenting ourselves again rejoicing in Jesus’ promise to return in glory.

Through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
All glory and praise is Yours, Eternal One, forever and ever, Amen.

God’s holy gifts are given for God’s holy people;
let us share and rejoice as we encounter the living God.

Post Communion Prayer

God of the signs of the times,
you draw near to us in word and sacrament,
to strengthen, renew, and enthuse us with the fire of Your presence.
Give us hope, that as we see our redemption drawing near,
we may abound in love for you,
for our sisters and brothers we know,
and for those we are called to serve but don’t yet know. Amen.

Blessing

May the One who loved you since before the ages began,
the One who became flesh to show you how to live,
the One who burns with a power that drives change,
hold you in love, show you how to live,
and enable you to change the world,
and the blessing of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *or* Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, and Energising Spirit
be with you, now and evermore, Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Lo He Comes With Clouds Descending	656	477	177	424
Hills of the North Rejoice			172	
Come Thou Long Expected Jesus If you fancy a change double the verses and sing this to Stenkarazin "when the Carnival is over" melody line here .	138	472	169	102
Creator of the Stars of Night		288		
Christ Is Surely Coming				75
Advent Candles Tell Their Story			165	
Into the darkness of this world			173	
Sing we the king who is coming to reign			185	602
There is a light upon the mountains			188	
Christ is coming let creation		475		
Hail to the Lord's Anointed	127	474	228	204
Wake O Wake	132	278		
And Art Thou Come With Us To Dwell	136			
O Lord How Shall I Meet You	140			
And from further afield...				
When the King Shall Come Again Christopher Idle 7676D works well to Ave Virgo Virginum and to Good King Wenceslas				
The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns 8686 (Common Metre) Land of Rest works very well to this as does St Columba.				

Other Ideas

Use a clip from *Tomorrow* by U2 at the start of worship. Andy can email you this if you contact him via andy.braunston@urc.org.uk

The Sanctus suggested is by URC minister Michael Forster and goes to the Welsh tune The Ashgrove and can be found in *Tunes We Know* published by Kevin Mayhew. Other Sanctus settings could be sung or it could be said. The (said) words are found at RS 12 and CH4 651.