

Cannock Chase Methodist Circuit
Bible Study for Advent 2020

These next few weeks see us into the season of advent and in many respects, Advent is the forgotten season in the church's calendar. Despite COVID-19 and lockdowns we are already surrounded by window displays of Christmas goodies and as we go shopping, we hear the sound of Christmas carols. The pressure to make this a good Christmas because of all we have dealt with in the last year is at the forefront of the Governments' mind and ours too. The desire to make Christmas special this year because of all we have endured has its value but so many will not be able to do so or have all they wanted and for many, valuable members of families will be missing. By the time we have coped with all this, we will have extraordinarily little time and energy left to find the time and space to reflect and be still. It would be nice to think that our churches were the places to find this peace but they too cannot be decorated and used in the normal way and our hearts and minds are so preoccupied that we may fail to look for the true meaning to the seasons.

In these next few weeks, I hope we will be able to find a time of stillness and space to reflect upon what Advent means, how it informs our understanding of God and his purpose for us. So, let us together make a journey of discovery into Advent.

We are going to look at the main themes of Advent:

He comes, both Child and Judge

Advent is about:

Coming

Expectancy or Hope

Struggle

Repentance

We will study our Bible passages and see what themes we can begin to understand. A selection of the readings we will look at are below:

Readings

Malachi 3: 1-5

Isaiah 11: 1-9

Lamentations 3: 22-26

Isaiah 9: 1-7

Micah 5: 2-5

Isaiah 40: 1-5; 28-31

Revelation 21: 1-5

Jude 17-25

Daniel 7:13-15 / Revelation 1: 3-8

Revelation 11: 15-18

John 1: 1-9

Luke 21: 20-28

Isaiah 59: 20- 60: 5

Luke 12: 35-38

Luke 1: 68-79

1 Thessalonians 5: 4-11

What are the Advent themes we can find in these bible passages?

To start us off we will begin with a poem written by Ann Lewin, which leads us into these themes of Advent

He comes, both Child and Judge

The first Sunday in Advent is a new beginning, not just because it is the start of a new church year, but because it is the beginning of a series of units of time that bring us in due course, to the presentation of Christ in the Temple, some 9 weeks from now, at the beginning of February. This is one way of the ways we can look at Advent, as it gives way to Christmas, Christmas to Epiphany and Epiphany to Candlemas. Each unit is different, but they belong together as, little by little, they unfold for us the glory in our midst and reveal at least something of what we mean when we say that God is with us – Emmanuel.

Advent has a flavour all its own, with its own hymns and the wreath with the candles and there are things going on at different levels so that it is easy to miss the deeper levels altogether. Advent teaches us that to find Jesus is not just to find the baby in a manger. The baby is part of the truth of the glory in our midst, but there is more to be said and more to be known. It teaches us that to find Jesus is to find the one who, for all his love and mercy, is judge.

Advent signals the beginning of a succession of seasons that ends with Candlemas Malachi 3: 1-2. Advent teaches us that to find Jesus, and to reveal him to others has urgency about it, as if there were no tomorrow.

Advent teaches us that there may already be glory in our midst, but in the plan of God there is more glory still to come. The world has not seen the last of this. Advent is about the coming of a Messiah, the long held hope and belief of the Jews and it is seen as a coming with expectancy and hope. This expectancy though does not come without struggle and our need to see the world through the eyes of God. It is a time of repentance, not in the way of Lent, but an important part of Advent. It is the proper response to a Christ who comes in judgement at the end of time. John the Baptist begins his ministry with the unpalatable message, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand", and also "Bear fruit worthy of repentance".

Wachet Auf - *Ann Lewin*

Advent
Season when
dual citizenship
Holds us in
Awkward tension.

The world, intent on
Spending Christmas,
Eats and drinks its way to
Oblivion after dinner.
The Kingdom sounds
Insistent warnings:
Repent, be ready,
Keep awake,
He comes.

Like some great fugue
The themes entwine:
The Christmas carols,
Demanding our attention
In shops and pubs,
Bore their insistent way
Through noise of traffic;
Underneath, almost unheard,
The steady solemn theme of
Advent.

With growing complexity,
Clashing, blending,
Rivals for our attention,
Themes mingle and separate,
Pulling us with increasing
Urgency,
Until the final resolution,
The end attained,
Harmony rests in awful
Stillness, and
The child is born.

He comes,
both Child and Judge.
and will he find us
watching?

First week of Advent - Rev Margaret Eales

Coming.

For most people it is about the coming of Christmas, a religious dimension to the frantic preparations for Christmas. As Christians we might say that it is about the coming of Christ – a time when we recognise that what we are trying to do is to enter into the mystery of the incarnation that, Christ is born all over again, that he really comes to make his home within us. We sing “Be born in us today” and they should not be empty words, but a real longing for Christ to find his home in us. I began by saying that Advent is about Coming but on a different level it is not about coming at all. It is not about Christ coming long ago, of his coming now but about a future time, a coming at the end of time. The Gospel writers wrote about end of time events and hymn writers followed them with Advent hymns that use end of time language. It is the second coming that they are pointing us to.

The emphasis of the second coming in Advent is often squeezed out by other preoccupations, like pre-Christmas preparations. This is expressed in the poem by Ann Lewin entitled “Wachet Auf” from her book Candles and Kingfishers

Read Poem.

The expectation of the coming of the Messiah is as much to the individual as it is to the Jewish nation. John the Baptist talked to individuals inviting them to “prepare the way of the Lord”. All are called to look to the future and the judgement in case it comes like a thief in the night. All are challenged to repent. All are invited to be open to hear the message from those God sent to tell of his love. The response to the coming of Christ, whether to the earth or to individuals, is love. Love grows out of self-knowledge, repentance and thankfulness for what Christ has done.

Actually, we don't look too deeply at the idea of the second coming because it is not a comfortable place to be. The imagery of Christ as Judge, the final consummation, are not easy to understand because we aren't sure whether we actually expect these things to happen. The statement “Christ will come again” only makes sense when we give it a meaning other than the original one. The second coming can be embarrassing and the invitation in our Advent hymns is not one we expect to find accepted. We can read and sing about it as long as it doesn't actually happen.

In the Gospels we have Matthew and Mark reporting Jesus as saying that the time is coming – there is an imminence about the event and the early Christians, and Paul certainly expect the second coming to happen quite quickly. There was no long-term plan, it was all about an urgent message for the world. In later times the message was modified, but however long delayed, the end would come. Medieval churches show images of the final judgement and the division of the sheep and the goats, the saved and the damned.

What about today?

What do we believe and how do we interpret the gospel message?

Can we still say, “The Lord is coming”?

Do we really believe, are we required to believe, that God will intervene to bring the created order to an end?

Do we seriously expect the possibility of that intervention and that it might come at any moment?

What do we think of those who stand in our shopping centres with a biblical message about the end of the world? Are we embarrassed by those who take the Gospel message seriously?

In general, we may believe that there could be a cataclysmic end but that it would come because of our foolishness or through weapons of mass destruction or environmental stupidity. We may not understand the language of the second coming but if we ignore it, we are rejecting a central belief of scripture and that thought alone means that we must take it seriously. It isn't just a central theme of Jesus thinking, so if we reject it we will never completely understand him, not that if it is rejected it makes faith much more comfortable and cosy, but without much guts. Without the judgement of Christ, we have lost the proper corrective to the picture of an all embracing love upon the cross. If we do not express our faith through the language of the second coming, judgement and the end of time we lose the urgency of our message.

If we accept the Second coming as being as important as the first there are other words that become important.

Prayer:

Let me love you, O Christ,
in your first coming,
when you were made man, for the love of man,
and for the love of me.

Let me love you, O Christ,
in your second coming,
when with unconceivable love
you stand at the door and knock,
and would enter the souls of your people,
and into mine.

Plant in my soul, O Christ, your likeness of love;
so that when by death you call me,
I may be ready,
and burning,
to come to you.

Second week of Advent - Rev Jacob Donkoh

Expectancy or Hope

Luke 3:15 "The people were on the tiptoe of expectation" NEB. That is the meaning of Christian Hope, an urgent but confident expectation. The Advent readings from the prophets are full of it as in the future tenses about what the Lord will do when the shoot shall come from the stock of Jesse. Isaiah 11: 4,6,9. There is an urgent and confident expectation and belief that God is a God who acts, who acted in Jesus, and who can and will act in you and me. We are used to thinking of God acting in the past and we recall and remember his mighty acts. Christian Hope insists that God is acting now, we must be awake, be alert, be expectant for the new impact of the Divine upon the world. The impact would be huge.

There is a promise of justice and equity for the poor. Isaiah 11:4. The hope offered here, will see all forms of inequalities and discriminations become a thing of the past. So, gender pay inequalities, criminal injustices, racial injustices and injustices against women and children; and people living with all forms of disabilities will be no more. 'The Me Too Movements', 'Blacks Lives Matter' and all organisations against social injustice will be vindicated. The pain and suffering across our world, from Africa to Australia and for people everywhere will cease. Perhaps only the wicked will have to fear.

There is also the promise of salvation for us who are in Christ. Paul writing to the Church in Thessaloniki says, 'For God has destined us not for wrath' but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us. 1Thessolonians 5:9. This verse goes a long way to calm our fears, as to what might happen to us when Christ comes. When Christ comes, we shall be like him because we would see him as he is. 1 John 3:2. It shows that we have not believed in vain; there is a hope for us who are in Christ, and as expected of us, we should be, in the words of Fanny Crosby, 'watching and waiting, looking above, filled with his goodness, and lost in his love' (StF 548:3).

In the 21st century, the injustices done to God's creation has come to the fore of most political conversations. The Paris Climate Change agreement, seems to offer some hope in our response to climate change. No wonder when a powerful nation like USA withdrew from the Paris Accord, it angered many across the globe. As stewards of God's creation (Psalms 8), we seek to address the injustices done to our environment because of greed and domination. Ecojustice, therefore, has its place in the second coming of Christ. Paul, talking about this personifies creation, and says 'creation waits in eager expectation...in hope that creation itself will be liberated from the bondage to decay and be brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Paul continues to say that natural things, like plant and animals suffer in sickness and death, even as they wait for this great event. Romans 8:19-22

This great event refers to the second coming our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible makes clear that the second Advent of Christ would be preceded by scary events (e.g. Luke 21:25-36). It calls us to be watchful (Romans 13:11-14) but it offers us sure hope – a hope that says that 'look up, and lift up your heads because your redemption is near', 'nearer than when we first believed'. This is good news. The good news is God

then brings all things together to himself; a glorious 'harmony' Ann Lewin envisages in her poem 'Wachet Auf' above.

For reflection:

Let ponder over the words from Rachel Boulding: 'What difference will it make if more of us are truly convinced of this sure ground for hope in everyday details of our lives? Is there anything you are anxious about today that you need to offer to God, knowing that he will judge fairly? Can you trust his judgement in the spirit of knowing that he is coming to rule justly?'

Advent Hymn

Sing we the King who is coming to reign,
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain,
Life and salvation his empire shall bring
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King.

Refrain:

Come let us sing: Praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King;
This is our song, who to Jesus belong:
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.

Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray,
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
When this new song thy creation shall sing,
Satan is vanquished and Jesus is King. (StF 185:1,4)

Prayer

Loving God,
we hope for the coming of Christ,
a time when you will bring all of your creation to yourself.
As we wait and hope, strengthen us to live for you,
Help us to love and serve you and our neighbours;
As we prepare for you coming, grant us faith to serve to the end.
May you find us worthy when you come;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Third week of Advent – Rev Chris Ambler

Struggle

Read Mark 13: 14-23

In a recent book of essays looking at how the Bible might inform our thinking about mental health; the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann called his 'Truth Telling as Well Making'. Deliberately making the connection that knowing the truth helps us out of difficulty. You may remember some words of Jesus about knowing the truth and the truth setting us free. Often, we hear that as a pastoral process, but it is true of the bigger pieces of thinking as well.

Truth telling though is difficult. Telling someone something they do not want to hear and receive is deeply uncomfortable, even frightening. Being the person who needs to hear it is harder still. We will all at some point, in some setting have said that we wanted the truth about something even though we knew that the truth could be costly as well as freeing. Knowing the truth usually means we cannot stand still, it requires us to act, to change.

The struggle within Advent, as with Lent is that the message can be hard to hear. That can be true as we look back to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, with their challenging call for change and justice among their contemporaries. A call that still resonates in our world today, where justice still needs to come and still needs to be fought for. The cost of speaking that truth can be seen as we read the stories of the Hebrew prophets. They meet opposition, persecution and violence as a direct result of speaking the message.

If the justice message of the Hebrew Bible is hard then the second coming message of our New Testament can be even harder. Justice requires change now for an immediate benefit for someone. The passages that talk about Jesus return require change now but with an intention of seeking a future change, the details of which we do not know. A reading of Luke 21 or Mark 13 or Matthew 24 could make us frightened, without exactly knowing why. As Alfred Hitchcock pointed out we are most frightened when we don't know what we are frightened of.

There is also the issue of the remoteness of the message from our generation. The people of Jesus day believed in God, understood that God spoke and acted in the world, and expected God to engage with them sometimes calling for repentance, sometimes acting out a powerful hope. That belief and expectation is no longer a quality of our world, so we face a struggle to connect the message to our generation, as well as the challenge of the message itself. The result of what is known as 'the Enlightenment' of the eighteenth century is a world in which people believe we can think our way through anything. Rational thought is all we need so we are told. However, the multi-layered teaching of Jesus does not simply reveal its full truth to rational thought, if it did, we would already know all the answers. As our generation slowly realises that there is more to life than just the rational experience of the world, we are presented with an opportunity to offer a new direction. There is another aspect of the struggle as we work out how to respond.

Then, as we read these passages about the second coming there is the question what do they mean? The Hebrew prophets called for change and indicated something of what that change should be. The second coming passages are much less specific,

calling for watching and waiting, but also suggesting signs that are in no way clear. So, we will not read the sign simply in our own strength, but under the leading of the Spirit. Some of these signs could be related to events that have already happened, some could not.

Perhaps the big question of all this is, How do we understand these passages in the context of the whole of Jesus ministry? Whatever we do or do not understand about these passages, one thing is clear. Jesus cannot act in the future in a way that contradicts what he did in the past. So, these are not disconnected signs, but signs rooted in the past even if the future they point to is radically new.

Questions for reflection

Are you familiar with these passages of scripture?

If not, why not?

Does the idea of Jesus return bring hope or fear?

Let us pray.

Lord you were led by the Spirit through many struggles, and you remained true to what you were called to do, not what you thought would be easiest for you. So, you call us to follow the leading of the Spirit in our discipleship to you and to remain true to that call.

Lord grant that we may not simply understand with our mind, but also with our heart. That our knowledge of you may inform our understanding of what it means to hope and pray for your return.

Grant us too, the courage to share the struggles of those around us that your kingdom may come.

All this we ask in your name.

Amen.

Fourth Week of Advent - Deacon Sue Culver

Repentance

"Beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there lies a field. I'll meet you there,"
(Rumi – 13th century Persian poet)

I met a man in the prison where I am one of the chaplains – I am going to call him Shamus. Shamus is a member of the travelling community who found himself in prison, not for the first time, for offences that the criminal justice system felt warranted a period of incarceration. Despite what you might think, Shamus was a deeply devout man and knew his Bible inside and out to such an extent that might shame the rest of us. He was able to tell me of all the great men in the Bible who had fallen short of the ideal – Noah and his drunkenness, Lot and his desire for the flesh, Moses and his anger, Joshua and his jealousy, David and his adultery, Peter and his denial...the list goes on – but Shamus was always hopeful that despite his own wrong doings, if God could use these great men in scripture so powerfully despite their shortcomings, then God could use him too.

The opening of Marks Gospel begins with the words 'The beginning of the good news'. I wonder if you have ever pondered on these few words, the beginning of the good news - the very start of the story. It tells me that the beginning of every story – your story, my story and here, Mark's story is precious and worthy of mention even if those stories like Shamus' go a bit wonky from time to time. Mark's story unfolds for us at breath-taking speed and he immediately goes on to tell us about this wild looking man – John the Baptizer, who calls us all to prepare for someone very special, someone powerful, someone who is so amazingly holy we are not worthy to even undo his shoes. Why his shoes get a mention is interesting and you might find yourself wondering what his shoes had to do with it. My own reflections are that this had something to do with the last supper, where horror of horrors, Jesus undertook to wash the feet of his disciples, something so radically subversive because it up-ended the common order of behaving, disturbing social order. Don't you just hate it when Jesus pops up and mixes up our thinking! Back to John the Baptizer before we jump to another part of the story. John is asking us to prepare the way. What exactly does this mean and more to the point, how do we do that. Traditionally, this has been thought of as a period of repentance and penance, not quite like Lent, but nevertheless a period of preparation ourselves to greet the Christ child once again. Why repentance you might ask – this is a time of celebration, a time of gathering, of gift sharing, of hospitality not a time of sack cloth and ashes.

Well one way looking at repentance is thinking about how we might prepare ourselves for a special occasion – maybe a first date or a wedding, or some other occasion when we want to present ourselves at our best. We might take a long bath, using a little of the special bubble bath we were given as a gift – too special to use ordinarily. We take time to choose the right outfit, matching our accessories carefully and finally, a final glance in the mirror to make sure there isn't a hair out of place, we present ourselves to the world. We may not make the front cover of Vogue but the very process of making the time to prepare ourselves indicates what we feel about the occasion we are celebrating how much we might value it. The act of preparation, preparing to present ourselves as nicely as we are able to, is precisely what John is calling us to do as we wait for the one who is yet to come and how we do that also indicates the value that we place upon it.

So how might we take the spiritual equivalent of a long warm bath to help us prepare, to help us into repentance and beyond? It might be helpful to look to one of the ancient church fathers for some help and in particular St Ignatius. Ignatius wrote something called The Spiritual Exercises, which have guided retreats of centuries and the Exercises begin with 'The Examen'. The examen, or the examination of our conscience is something that changed Ignatius from a wild soldier to a pilgrim walking barefoot to Jerusalem. He expected that God would speak through our deepest feelings and yearnings, what he called consolation and desolation. For us, consolation is whatever helps us connect with ourselves, with others and with God whereas desolation is whatever disconnects us. Ignatius asks us to return to our deepest moments of consolation and desolation simply because experience is the best teacher, and that God is constantly revealing himself to us in our experience. Ignatius saw the examen as the cornerstone of spiritual life.

The invitation here and now is to make The Examen a daily part of your preparation throughout Advent. Find a quiet space and you may wish to begin by lighting a candle and letting yourself become aware of God's loving presence. Take some time to consider two questions... 'For what moment today am I most grateful?' and 'For what moment today am I least grateful?'

There are many other ways to ask the same questions:

When did I give and received the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?

When did I feel most alive today? When did I most feel life draining out of me?

When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others and God? When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When was I happiest today? When was I saddest?

What was today's highpoint? What was today's low point?

When did I truly give of my best today? When did I withhold me best today?

These are beguiling simple questions on the surface, but when you truly engage with them, and let yourself be honest with yourself, they can reveal patterns of behaviour and being that can be celebrated and cherished as well as behaviours that perhaps we need to modify or turn away from – the real meaning of repentance.

Shamus was released from prison, taking with him a gift from me of some prayer beads and a copy of The Examen. He now works with young men in his community of travellers as poacher-turned-gamekeeper using the Examen as tool to help them to build up their self-esteem and examine their own patterns of behaviour so that they may choose to behave differently rather than allowing themselves to be trapped within them. He meets them in the field beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing. As you prepare yourselves to greet the Christ child once more, consider where you have given of your best and thank God for it. Consider where you might have not given of your best, either wilfully or ignorantly and ask God to help you make different choices.

Day by day,
Day by day
Oh Dear Lord
Three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day.

Second Advent

Shall we gaze into the sky,
 waiting for the coming of the Christ
 who never left us?
Do we look to the heavens
 for the one who lives in our hearts?
Has he left the stage
 of the world's drama
 in order to return in triumph
 and save us all
 just in time?

Or will the flash of his appearing
 strike upon our vision
 not from the clouds above,
 but from the depths of faith and love
 in those who already see him?

Blessing

May the grace of Christ uphold us.
May the Father's love enfold us.
May the Holy Spirit guide us,
 So that with the Lord beside us,
 we may be at peace. Amen