

ADVENT 2020

A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM



INTRODUCTION

“The celebration of advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Whatever we make of Bonhoeffer's statement, without a doubt, 2020 has left pretty much all of us longing for better times ahead. Now, we may be thinking of a post-COVID day, but that day (wonderful as it will be) pales in comparison to the 'something greater' that the Bible refers to.

In these Advent daily readings, we will be seeing the season through the eyes of Isaiah, writing to the people of Israel who for fifty years had been in forced exile from their homeland. In his prophecy, at last, Isaiah brings a word of hope to this despondent and disheartened people. It's a promise of God's servant who will come to bring justice to the world, and into the darkness of exile, light.

However, as we will discover, this servant is to take on a surprising form, exposing the dreamers' most wild imaginings as simply not wild enough. The long awaited Messiah would not arrive as a great warrior king as they had perhaps anticipated, but a baby, born in the humblest of circumstances, a child who would lead people of all nations into the glorious freedom and everlasting joy that is found in the kingdom of God.

We will see that from the earliest promise of His coming, to the angelic announcement of His birth in a field outside of Bethlehem, the hope of the world is Jesus, the Son of God given to rescue and redeem a broken and weary world.

However, these words of Isaiah are not merely a prophecy of the coming Christ. God, through the prophet Isaiah, is also challenging the people of God both then and now. The challenge to the people of Isaiah's time was to hear in this prophecy the call to them, as God's people, to be those who would be the bearers of justice to the world, bringing peace and hope to their communities. Today we, as God's people the Church, pick up that mantle and receive that same challenge to bring God's hope to the world.

Our prayer this Advent is that amidst the challenges we face, we too would know the certainty of God's promise fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah, and respond to His call to be those hope-filled people, who will bring light and life to a hurting world - that we would be led by the Christ-child as we prepare for his coming.

May God bless you richly this Advent.

Ruth Hassall, Director of Discipleship

WEEK 1 SUNDAY 29TH NOVEMBER

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING: ISAIAH 1:1-8

“The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. ‘Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken”. **Isaiah 1.1-2a**

My eyesight is terrible. Many years ago I dived into the shallow end of a swimming pool because I was unable to see the warning written in huge 50cm high letters. Fortunately, I dived shallowly and so only scraped my chest on the bottom of the pool. These days I swim with prescription goggles and I regularly get my eyes tested to make sure I can see clearly.

Just like physical eyesight, my spiritual eyesight needs help so that I can see the world more as God sees it. My spiritual vision was massively restored when I committed to following Jesus but all these years later, I still need to stop and get it refocused from time to time. That's why the twin seasons of Advent and Lent are so important. These times of stopping, stripping away some of the things that I fill my life with and refocusing on the purposes of God help me to see more clearly once again.

This year's Advent reflections are touring through the book of Isaiah which opens with Isaiah being given a vision of how God sees things. It's a disturbing picture of loved and nurtured children ignoring the warning signs and going astray, turning their back on God and giving themselves to evil with disastrous consequences. The Lord's beloved children have gone so far off the rails that they get compared to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah – a common biblical image for all consuming sin. Yet the passage is not without hope and by verse sixteen the Lord appeals to his children to clean up their act, to abandon their sinful ways for with him it is possible for scarlet sins to be white as snow.

This Advent we invite you to stop and take stock. To seize the opportunity to have your vision restored once more by simply asking the Lord to let you see what is coming between you and him. Listen closely to the prompting of his Spirit and allow him to let you see your life as he sees it. Remember, there is no need to be afraid of what he shows you for by his power he can set you free from the sins that have crept into your life. However scarlet they may be, through the cleansing power of Jesus you can be white as snow and you too can see more clearly once again.

The Revd Nick McKee, Director of Vocations

READING: ISAIAH 2:1-5*'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord'* **Isaiah 2:5**

I wonder what your response would be to the question, "If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?" If you were watching Miss World or a film about a beauty pageant, you'd expect the participants to say something about world peace. Then you would probably roll your eyes at the cliché. But why? Because in our hearts we believe that it will never be. World peace? That's far too big a thing to hope for, isn't it?

Yet Isaiah's word to Israel and Judah is just that. There is hope.

The vision he shares is for a world in which all nations will come to God; not only Israel and Judah, but gentiles too. The vision is for a just world. Wrongs aren't swept under the carpet and forgotten, but righteousness and justice are in charge. What was made to destroy is repurposed into something made to create. In this utopia, there is no need for violence anymore.

Shane Claiborne, a Christian activist and author, campaigns (among other things) for more restrictive gun laws in America. He is an advocate for RAWtools, an organisation, quite literally, turning weapons into garden tools. Taking inspiration from Isaiah 2:4, they take assault weapons, rifles, hand guns, knives ... and by melting them down, they forge them into something useful. The vision of a world at peace still seems far off, but one weapon at a time, RAWtools is helping create a world where peace is a possibility.

Living in this imperfect world, stuck between the Kingdom of God both present and yet to come, we can be assured of a future where death will be no more and all tears are wiped away (Rev 21:4). We can look forward with future hope to a time and place where death is turned into life. Death has been defeated.

And as we await the coming Kingdom, *'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.'* Because when we walk in the light of Christ, we bring the Prince of Peace into the world with us.

The Revd Emma Swarbrick, Assistant Curate, St. Thomas', Blackpool

The vision is for a just world. Wrongs aren't swept under the carpet and forgotten, but righteousness and justice are in charge.

READING: ISAIAH 4:2-6*'On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.'* **Isaiah 4:2**

In Hampton Court, near London, there's a grapevine that's estimated to be 1,000 years old. This grapevine has 1 single stem that's almost 2 feet thick. Despite its age the vine produces more than 2 tonnes of grapes each year. Even though some of the branches are 200 feet from the main stem, they still bear the sweet and delicious fruit because they're connected to the vine. Life flows throughout the vine from that single root, bringing nourishment and strength to each of the branches.

Jesus promises to do the same through and for us. He's the true vine, bringing life in order that we might produce lasting spiritual fruit. When separated from the vine, we wither. The vitality of our spiritual life is dependent upon our connection to our root—Christ.

It was Saint Augustine who said that 'the New is in the Old concealed, the Old is in the New revealed'. All the pages of Scripture are soaked with references to Jesus and today's passage is no exception. Modern scholars understand this verse to be about the Messiah.

This language of branches and fruit is echoed in John's Gospel. Elsewhere in the Old Testament we read of how King David described God's promise to give him an offspring that would rule for eternity. Of course David didn't have the full understanding we have, for we're able to look back in retrospect and see more clearly. Through the shadow of the incarnation we see that Messiah did come from David's seed, through a young Jewish maiden named Mary.

The life of the Branch will also flow through believers and bear spiritual fruit. In John 15:4–5 we read these verses from Jesus: *'Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.'*

We notice that God wants us to bear much fruit, meaning that he's not satisfied with some or more. He wants much. Just like the branch of a vine or a tree, you and I are connected to our vine, Jesus Christ. May we take the opportunity this Advent to establish deep roots with the Lord—allowing him to lead us in our daily lives—in order that we may bear much fruit for him.

LORD, please keep us closely connected to you this day, in Jesus' name we pray.

The Revd David Craven, Parish Priest, St George's, Preston

READING: ISAIAH 5:1-7

'I will make it a waste [...] I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it [...] he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!' Isaiah 5:6-7

A Happy Story

I have a fig tree in my garden (not quite a vine I know but bear with me). It looked almost dead when I planted it, just a dry stick, fit to throw away but with feeding and care it has flourished. I get a childlike pleasure in watching the figs grow, it's the first thing I check when I go into the garden—how are they doing, any new signs of figs today? Yes, I know I can go to Aldi, but my home-grown figs really are the best! I get excited looking for fruit on my fig tree.

A Sad Story

Isaiah 5:1-7 tells us that God planted his people as a vine. He tended it carefully and looked expectantly for fruit - but there was no good fruit, just wild grapes. God has a right to expect fruit from his vine and we hear his sense of injustice when he finds bad fruit. And who can judge him in the course of action he now intends *'I will make it a waste... I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it'* (v6). Who can blame him - *'he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!'* (v7).

The question today is what sort of vine are you? What sort of vine are we as God's church?

A Question

The question today is what sort of vine are you? What sort of vine are we as God's church? God hasn't changed, he expects fruit of righteousness and justice, from his church today and from your life. What sort of fruit are you yielding? Take time today to look at your life, ask for forgiveness where you need to, seek God the master gardener's help to change and bear the fruit which delights his heart.

A Peek of Hope

Advent invites us to look for the coming of Christ in new ways into our lives. Ultimately this sad story and even our prayers for change only find their joyful fulfilment in Christ himself. Hear again that great cry of Jesus, *'I am the True Vine... those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit'* John 15:1,5.

The Revd Sue Timmins, Vicar of All Saints, Appley Bridge & Christ Church, Parbold

READING: ISAIAH 16:1-5

'...a throne shall be established... and on it shall sit in faithfulness a ruler who seeks justice and is swift to do what is right.' Isaiah 16:4c-5

For a while back in 2015, the refugee crisis precipitated by civil war in Syria dominated the news. Many of us have the tragic image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, drowned on a Turkish beach, forever etched into our consciousness. And yet, we have since all but forgotten the 65m or more displaced persons around the world, as other matters displaced their plight from our horizons.

Isaiah 16:1-5 comes amidst an oracle foretelling an Assyrian invasion of Israel's neighbour and historical foe, Moab. Isaiah imagines the Moabite command desperately petitioning Jerusalem to receive Moab into vassal status (v1). The women had already recognised what the commanders now, perhaps reluctantly, were conceding: their only hope lay in fording the Arnon river into the LORD's dominion (v2), trusting God's people to keep his Law concerning receiving and caring for refugees (e.g. Leviticus 19:33-34). In this, they resembled the most famous Moabite, Ruth, who likewise sought refuge under the wings of the LORD God of Israel (Ruth 2:12), later to become great-grandmother to King David.

The Moabites seek the protective 'shade' of Judah from the noonday heat of their Assyrian oppressor (vv3-4). But the prophecy goes on to reveal that the Moabites' looking to Judah for refuge is not only a temporary political expedient, but an everlasting, spiritual orientation. Crises come and crises go; but those who seek counsel and justice, refuge and security (vv3a-4b) will ultimately find it only in the coming reign of the Messiah, a king in the line of (one-eighth Moabite) David. Messiah's eternal rule of faithfulness, justice, and righteousness (v5) will extend to all who flee to him for mercy and safety—even gentile, former enemy, refugees.

We live in-between Christ's two Advents: the kingdom has come (Jesus already occupies the throne of David); but the kingdom is not yet fully come (which is why we pray it might) until his return. If Israel were instructed in the Law how to provide generously for asylum-seekers; and if the coming messianic age was linked in Isaiah's prophecy to the reception of refugees from the nation's most bitter enemies; then how much more should the Church be a bastion of compassion, hospitality, and justice for refugees and other desperate migrants?

Advent is a season of penitence and hope. From Isaiah 16:1-5, may we repent for our indifference to and neglect of refugees; and may they and we together find hope in the full coming of the reign of Jesus Christ—himself, lest we forget, like Alan Kurdi, a childhood refugee.

The Revd Dr Tom Woolford, Vicar of All Saints, New Longton

READING: ISAIAH 19:16-24

'On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the centre of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them.' **Isaiah 19:19-20**

In Advent, we look forward to the coming of the Lord at Christmas, to the Second coming, and to the Lord's coming to each of us.

This passage tells us what will happen 'in that day', focusing at first on the terror and the fear. It then continues, telling us another three times what happens 'in that day'. It may be a different day, or it may be the same day, remembering that to the Lord a thousand days are as the blink of an eye. Maybe all the different reactions don't happen in an orderly fashion one after the other, but are there all together, some experiencing one thing, and some another, some more than one emotion at the same time. We see that in our Christmas story, and perhaps we recognise it for ourselves.

As I read this passage over again, I begin to see myself as Egypt, begin to see that in that day, when the Lord comes to me, I am terrified, and yet I hear what God is saying to me, I worship, and above all I cry out to be rescued from whatever or whoever is oppressing me... and I am rescued, I am healed. I am able to be at peace, to make peace with my neighbours, and be a blessing to others, as the Lord has blessed me.

Looking again at that passage, there is a suggestion that this is happening again and again with Egypt, as with Israel, as with each of us, as our relationship with God changes and deepens. A suggestion that as we construct what become those patterns of worship, as we search for order so that we can 'understand' God, and as we wander away on our own path, God is constantly disrupting our life so that we will again turn to the Lord and be healed.

As I read the passage yet again, I am led to understand that what is important is that in the centre of my life, there is an altar to the Lord. What is important is that my life is dedicated, as with a pillar or a monument, to the God we worship. Then, instead of trembling with fear, I will be trembling with awe as I come to know, to the full, all the blessings that the Lord wants to shower on me in that day of the Lord's coming.

The Revd Lesley Prest, Vicar, St Anne, Greenlands and St Paul, Blackpool North Shore

READING: ISAIAH 21:6-12

'For thus the Lord said to me: 'Go, post a lookout, let him announce what he sees. When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently.' **Isaiah 21:6-7**

Most people have heard of, and many have read, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published in 1960, it has become a classic of modern American literature. The plot is loosely based on the author's recollections of her family and neighbours, and of an event which occurred near her home of Monroeville, Alabama, in 1936, when she was ten. The novel deals with the serious issues of rape and racial inequality; and its main character, Atticus Finch, emerges as an image of racial heroism.

In 2014, another novel by Harper Lee was discovered and subsequently published the following year as a sequel to her famous classic. In fact, it has become clear that this work, *Go, Set a Watchman* was in fact a first draft of the prize-winner, written in the mid-1950s. Its title comes from the opening of today's passage: *'For the Lord said to me: "Go, set a watchman, let him announce what he sees"'* (Isaiah 21:6). Lee grew up in a Bible-reading family and the title would still find a resonance with many in America's southern states. The lawyer Atticus Finch is Lee's watchman and moral arbiter.

Isaiah was a prophet in the Kingdom of Judah, probably between 742 and 701 BCE and, here, he is prophesying about the fall of Babylon. The historian Wayne Flynt has suggested that Harper Lee likened Monroeville ('Maycomb' in the novel) to Babylon, 'the Babylon of immoral voices, the hypocrisy'. Flynt adds: 'Somebody needs to be set as the watchman to identify what needs to be done to get out of the mess'. Babylon's idols couldn't save her (v.9); and Babylon's fall is consoling news to a Judah that had suffered much under her.

Dumah (and Kedar) descended from Ishmael (Genesis 25:13-14). Dumah is an oasis in Arabia. Seir is a mountain in Edom, and sometimes used as a metonym (substitute) for it. The meaning of these verses (11,12) is uncertain, but it seems that to a 'watchman' (i.e. a prophet) in Judah there comes from Dumah (therefore, from the East, the direction of Seir) an interrogation concerning 'the night' – this may refer to a period of trial, perhaps of the Babylonian domination. The response (v.12) suggests a temporary relief only but, encouragingly, leaves the door open to future hope.

'We are pursuing a future, not a present, glory...Waiting and patience are necessary if we are to fulfil what we have begun to be, and to receive, through God's unfailing help, what we hope for and believe.' - St Cyprian.

The Revd Canon Stephen Jones, Parish Priest, Carnforth

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING: ISAIAH 22:8-23

'I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David.' **Isaiah 22:22**

This chapter is introduced as the prophet's 'oracle concerning the valley of vision'. Isaiah's words drip with painful irony as he implores the city of Mount Zion to see how low their sights are set. First, we see the citizens of Jerusalem following an attack on the nation of Judah. Disaster had come to their doorstep. They have just survived a siege. They narrowly evaded invasion. Despite a late reprieve, this was their reproof. Yet, with wine and feasting, they climbed the terraces and hailed a partial defeat as a moral victory instead of mourning their moral failure. This should have been a moment to meet again with God. But among the revellers on the rooftops, far from the mountaintop, long memories are in short supply.

Lost in the valley, you can't see the forest for the trees. They looked to the contents of Solomon's armoury yet ignored the wisdom which built it. They broke down houses to fortify the wall. They channelled static water to slake their thirst - as if all this were good enough to keep things bubbling along. They forgot to remember the one on whom they depend. Low-level thinking and complacent self-sufficiency were symptoms of a destructive rejection of God. With no Defender there is no defence and 'He has taken away the covering of Judah' (v8).

In the second scene, tucked away in the palace, the big picture is seen in microcosm. There is Shebna, the palace administrator who has taken advantage of his station to serve himself. Strutting around the palace, he has sorely misjudged the security of his status. Shebna's job will be taken away and given to Eliakim. The words of the prophet point to the hope for all God's people stuck in the valley. Eliakim, God's servant, is literally 'the one raised up by God'.

This one who is coming will be clothed with the garments that match the authority given to him. Once again it will be clear that true government rests not on Temple or Palace, but on the House of David. The one who is coming shoulders the key. Looking to the one raised up by God points the way out of the valley and makes an open-and-shut case for self-sufficiency and self-importance. Instead of breaking houses to raise walls, strongholds will be broken to build God's House.

I wonder how well I am reading the signs of what God is doing now? Do I recognise when I am in the valley? How might I look beyond myself more to recognise and build upon the things of God which will last?

The Revd Matt Allen, Director of Training

READING: ISAIAH 24:1-18

'Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants [...] The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.' **Isaiah 24:1,5**

It's early December and you and probably many other people are beginning to think of Christmas. It's been a tough year... the shops are pushing their wares on us... we really need these things, don't we? It's been a tough year... we really deserve to 'let our hair down, don't we? It's been a tough year... it's time for some 'me time!' It's been a tough year... the words of these verses and our text are NOT what we want to hear today!

We can look back on our world this year and remember the floods that came not once but twice in some areas of our country and caused great upheaval in our communities; the fires that ravaged Australia and America; strong hurricanes that whipped up the sea; the protests and civil disturbances here and abroad and of course the Coronavirus. What could be worse....

Isaiah tells us it could be much, much worse. The Lord is ready to judge the Earth. Our text is often referred to as Isaiah's apocalypse. Verse 2 tells us that everyone will be in the same boat, no one can escape or be immune from the things to come, not even Christians. Our earth will wither...the whole world languishes and even the heavens languish, both earth and heaven grow weak and are withering... dying. Isaiah sees that the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) has been broken and the world is cursed.

Today most people are aware of how God wants us to live our lives, yet we, as a society and as individuals are all guilty of transgressing his laws and violating his statutes. We pollute the earth not just environmentally, but we pollute our world in the way we speak; the language we use; the way we behave; the crime and the violence. No one is exempt as we have become a selfish people and have strayed from the Way and the Truth. *'Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth'*. Isaiah says the Lord is ready but hasn't acted yet.....is there hope?

Today let us take time to lay before the Lord all the many things our society does wrong and seek his forgiveness. Let us also take time, to devote time, today to look at ourselves and humbly come before our God. It is time to say sorry.

The Revd Lesley Hinchcliffe, Vicar of St John's, Higham and St Anne's, Fence-in-Pendle.

Let us also take time, to devote time, today to look at ourselves and humbly come before our God. It is time to say sorry.

READING: ISAIAH 25:1-5

'O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt.' **Isaiah 25:1-2**

What 'wonderful things' will you exalt God for today? Numerous things may spring to mind. However, I doubt that God's destructive judgement would be top of the list. When was the last time you sang a song of praise to God for 'ruining a city'? And yet this is precisely the theme of Isaiah's song. Isaiah praises God for his wonderful plans (literally: wonderful counsels, cf. Isa 9:6) which are equated with ruining a foreign city with such devastation that it will never be rebuilt. This city is not identified with any of Israel's neighbouring enemies (cf. Isa 13-23), rather it represents every instantiation of the corruption, injustice, violence, and oppression of rebellious humanity. It signifies the City of Man set up in proud defiance of the City of God. In short, this city stands for the evil of sin, the resultant reign of death, and the ruler of such a kingdom, Satan.

What 'wonderful things' will you exalt God for today? Numerous things may spring to mind.

Isaiah praises God as he looks forward to a time when the storms of such powers are stilled and no longer wreak havoc on the poor and needy (v.4). He looks forward to a time when the oppressive heat of this mighty inferno no longer causes God's people to faint (v.5). A time when these ruthless enemies of God are humbled and bow the knee before the LORD (v.3).

Advent is a time when we look forward to our coming salvation, secured in Jesus' first coming and completed in his second

coming. But this also entails contemplating what we are saved from. Here in Isaiah we are reminded of the fact that for God's city of life, peace and justice to triumph, the city of sin, death and the devil must fall. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has already disarmed these rulers and authorities and he has broken the power of sin and death. Now we await his second coming when he will finally put an end to all evil and opposition against God.

As we sing for joy over our future salvation and as we pray, 'come, Lord Jesus', we are at the same time, necessarily praying 'make the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin.' As we dwell on that reality today, let us learn to rejoice in the fact that this city that causes so much harm and sadness will finally be destroyed... and never be rebuilt.

The Revd Andrew Meeson, Vicar of St John's, Leyland

READING: ISAIAH 25:6-26:6

'the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food [...] he will swallow up death forever.' **Isaiah 25:6,8a**

As well as being part of the lectionary provision for Advent, this particular passage (or at least some of it) is sometimes read on All Souls Day and at funerals. Why are we thinking of death when Advent prepares us for life—a new life, the life of 'the little child who will lead us'?

As we journey through these verses, we are reminded that we can find ourselves in the loving hand of God, or under his feet. Of course, Advent is not just a preparation for Christmas (birth) but for judgement (death). That is why this passage is sometimes read at funerals.

This year's Advent may find the two main themes (life and death) closer than ever before as we approach Christmas with Covid. For some the experiences of 2020 are perhaps more painful than ever imagined.

The 25th Chapter of Isaiah is a poem about Heaven and about the joy of the righteous on the day of judgement. It's a joy that calls for a great party, the great banquet in celebration of 'the Lord for whom we have waited' (25:7).

In order to be counted among the righteous, are there ways we may want to use Advent to reflect on our sins and failings? We are longing for the Redeemer, the Saviour who will take away the sins of the world. The great banquet described at the start of this passage is the party that awaits you and me and the end of our earthly life. Despite the darkness and uncertainty that envelopes our world, more than ever at the time of this pandemic, the promise and the bright hope shine forth as never before.

Christ came to bring peace to the earth and we need to remember that. Whatever external forces we contend with (whether that be spiritual warfare or human sickness and disease) we are never far from the peace of God. Indeed, we are reminded (26:3) that *'those of steadfast mind you keep in peace; in peace because they trust in you.'*

As our Advent journey continues may our trust in God deepen for, at the end of our journey, He waits for us with a banquet like no other.

The Revd Neil Kelley, Rector of St Laurence's, Chorley

Despite the darkness and uncertainty that envelopes our world... the promise and the bright hope shine forth as never before.

READING: ISAIAH 26:7-21

'My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you'

Isaiah 26:9a

'O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us.'

Isaiah 26:12

These two verses might be said to be the preface and postface to Christmas Midnight Mass. We go to church with longing and yearning in our hearts, preparing ourselves for the birth of the Christ child. We leave church having heard the words of the Gospel that proclaims to us that He is come, the Prince of Peace has arrived; and having obeyed His command to receive Him into ourselves in bread and wine. We arrive preparing our hearts for his coming, we depart having witnessed what God has done for us.

As we prepare for the birth of the Christ child the words of the first half of verse 9 become a lovely and compelling prayer expressing the desire of those who yearn for God. It is also a prayer of the penitent who knows that judgment and the second coming of Christ is not to be feared by those who have an honest and upright relationship with God, because, as verse 12 mentions, God does everything he can to bring us into a relationship of peace with himself.

Advent helps us to realign ourselves with the God who loves us so much that he becomes one of us. God has decreed that we should enter into his peace and so he enables our steps towards his perfect peace by sending us Jesus, the prince of peace. Human beings, however well-intentioned, selfless and devoted, cannot establish the peace that God has ordained for us, because we are flawed. Only God can establish perfect peace because only God is perfect.

Because we are created out of God's love then God will do everything to bring us back to his creating love when we wander away. The incarnation is that outpouring of God's love that is revealed to us through the life and action, death and resurrection of God's son. If we believe in a God of love, then God cannot act other than what he is. So he reaches out to smooth the path to perfect peace for those who respond to his invitation to a relationship with him and have a desire to obey his rule of love.

Jesus shows us the path to peace that we have been too blind, stubborn and ignorant to follow. His death on the cross enables us to be forgiven the sinful barriers we place between ourselves and God so we can be confident in walking the smooth path into God's perfect peace.

The Revd Lesley Atkins, Vicar of St Paul, Marton

READING: ISAIAH 27:1-13

'[O]n that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.' **Isaiah 27:13**

One of the difficulties of the pandemic is that there was no definite end in sight. Nothing concrete to work towards. Waiting for the coming of the Lord can seem similarly vague. When there is no clear goal in sight our efforts often wane; our initial enthusiasm dries up. With this in mind, the Church gives us two penitential seasons with very definite end points, and asks us to focus our effort on preparing for the coming of the king for a short intense period. Not so that we can slack off the rest of the time, but so that we can take very deliberate steps forward.

We have reached the half-way point of Advent, and perhaps you feel yourself starting to grow weary. Maybe some of the things you gave up have slipped back in. Maybe some of the things you have taken up, have begun to fall by the wayside. The penitential period of Advent feels just that little bit too long. I imagine that is how the Israelites in exile must have felt too, and so God has his prophet tell the people beforehand that the end will come. We heard back in Isaiah 5 that God's people would be judged, and a time of penitence was given to God's people. This time of exile would last not twenty-four or forty days, but seventy years! During this time God's people may be tempted to give up and so God reminds them that the end will come; that he is coming. We must not give up, but rather keep on striving in order to be ready when he appears.

Sadly, when Christ came that first time, most of the people were not ready. Most of God's people had fallen back into the ways which had led to their exile. This is a warning for the Church as she looks forward to the second coming of Christ, that we should not take our position as God's people for granted. Instead, we should be constantly preparing ourselves, getting ourselves ready for that great day.

We are half way through Advent and we may be starting to lag. But Christ encourages us through the words of his prophet to lift up our eyes, fix them on the goal, take a deep breath and keep on plodding. Today, let us recommit ourselves to dealing with those sins which are holding our Christian lives back, and push on, certain that all our time, effort, and prayer will have been worth it when Christ once again appears.

The Revd Michael Print, Vicar of St George's, Chorley

READING: ISAIAH 29:1-8

'And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the Lord of hosts with thunder and earthquake...' **Isaiah 29:5b-6a**

'Oh your voices, your voices. Why don't the voices come to me? I am king, not you' the King, in Bernard Shaw's play St Joan, asks. Joan replies, 'They do come to you: but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed with your heart, and listened...you would hear the voices as well as I do.'

Woe to you Ariel, our text begins today, woe. In Ch 29. vs 1-8, Isaiah continues to give us the image of a people, who like the King in Shaw's play, no longer listen to the voice of God. Because of their faithlessness, their ignorance and lack of justice for the weak and oppressed, because they do not listen to God, they must fall. The city will be besieged, attacked, but what begins as a threat in verses 1-4 becomes an assurance of salvation as we move into verses 5-8. Those who come to bring about Jerusalem's downfall, its attackers, they will fall too, so that purified, a New Jerusalem might come into being. This New Jerusalem will be faithful in worship, in prayerfulness and in acts of loving mercy to all her children, a people that will listen to their God! 'A man without prayer' said Pope Pius XII 'is like a tree without roots'. Recapturing an image from earlier on in Isaiah, the tree that is Jerusalem must fall, so that from it a new branch may spring forth, this branch, the true source of life, is Emmanuel, God with Us.

'And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the Lord of hosts with thunder and earthquake...' it is with calamity and a loud voice that Jerusalem will hear, but in contrast Elijah, in 1 Kings 19, hears God not in an earthquake or fire but a still, calm voice. God speaks to us, in a myriad of ways, it is us who need to be attentive. Let us therefore, like St Joan, listen for God's voice, and may we have the wisdom of Eli and Samuel to respond 'speak Lord, your servant is listening'.

The Revd Chris Holden, Parish Priest of Rishton, Saints Peter and Paul.

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING: ISAIAH 29:13-24

'I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing.' **Isaiah 29:14**

'The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden [...] The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.' **Isaiah 29:19**

As human beings we are conditioned to value knowledge and understanding, and can all too often become so obsessed with it, that we can forget what is truly important in our lives. It is something that is instilled in us as youngsters at school. But the problem is that it simply reveals to us the extent to which we don't fully understand everything, and inevitably leads to disappointment.

On the other hand, Isaiah is reminding us of a need for simplicity: simplicity of life, and simplicity of faith, rather than this blind pursuit of knowledge and understanding. For it is in such simplicity of faith that we have the promise that the Lord will indeed do amazing things with his people (v.14). Further, he issues a warning to those who would seek knowledge above their relationship with the Lord: those who imagine that true worship consists of human commandments learned by rote. The challenge that we are issued with from these verses of Isaiah, then, is to come to the Lord in simplicity, and to come to him in true worship.

Jesus himself gives us a pointer of the ways in which we might do this when he says, *'a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.'* (John 4.24). This is, of course, in the context of a challenge from a Samaritan woman, which leads into Jesus revealing himself to her as the Messiah — revealing himself because she has come to him in simplicity and faith.

If we do the same thing: if we come to the Lord in simplicity and faith, then Isaiah reminds us that Lord also promises to reveal himself to us, and gives us our hope for the future. May we, this Advent, seek to lose some of our obsession with human wisdom and understanding, and instead come to the Lord in simplicity and faith.

For when we do that, we are granted the hope that the little child will indeed lead us to the promised kingdom of God, where justice and mercy reign, and where all are offered his loving care (v.19). This is the true knowledge and understanding to which we are called: knowledge of the love of God and his purposes for our lives.

The Revd David Arnold, Vicar of St Paul's, Adlington

READING: ISAIAH 30:18-26

'Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you.' **Isaiah 30:18-19**

Today's passage from Isaiah mixes God's judgement and justice with his love and compassion. His people have done things wrong; they have relied on themselves instead of the Almighty, they have made idols for themselves, but their future is not as bleak as it might first appear.

A day of great slaughter is coming because a Holy God cannot stand sin and wrongdoing and has the power to uproot them and destroy them. But this is not the heart of God. The heart of God longs for his people to turn back to him. He is waiting to be gracious to them. The first step though has to be made by them. God will not impose or force his favour and blessing on them, he waits for their cry of help to reach his ears. When they cry out to him, he will be gracious. They will receive the right weather to grow their crops, their animals will be satisfied and there will be water in their brooks.

The hearers would have been reminded of their ancestors wandering in the desert when they heard of the *'bread of adversity and the water of affliction'*. In the desert God had supernaturally provided bread and water for his people, it was a sign of his presence and provision with them on the journey. Here again they are promised the Lord's presence, to be taught by him, guided by him as they go through hard times, *'your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'*

For us today we need to live in the light of God, balancing his holiness and justice with his heart of longing and love for each one of us. Will you pause and listen for his voice? Will you turn to him, put him first in everything and respond to the blessings he will pour into your life?

Father God, may we live this day in the light of your justice and judgment as a holy God but also secure in the face of your love and care for each one of us, your longing for our presence in everything we do. May we take the time to pause today to listen for your voice speaking to us, reassuring us, loving us and guiding us. We ask these things in and through Jesus our saviour, Amen.

The Revd Hannah Boyd, Vicar of All Saints, Higher Walton & Holy Trinity, Hoghton

READING: ISAIAH 31:4-9

'Like birds hovering overhead, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it. Turn back to him whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel.' **Isaiah 31:5-6**

I had two choices - the M6 - or the A49? A journey to Hereford beckoned. It was mid-February and Storm Dennis had struck and emptied itself over the area. I needed to be in Hereford for 10am in the morning. I could go down the M6, turn off at Gloucester and travel through the Malvern Hills - possible flooding on the River Severn - or I could travel the A49 passing through Cheshire; North Wales; back into England through Shrewsbury, then Church Stretton stopping off for a delightful cooked breakfast which I didn't need but... you know what it is like...

And guess which choice I made? Yes, the cooked breakfast route - but it was the route that also took me to the road alongside the railway line from Leominster. The rains had swelled the river and the fields over the railway line and onto the road rendering it impassable. I tried several routes but only after sitting in a queue of traffic - ignoring my satnav because I know best - I have been driving for over 50 years I know the best route even if I have only ever been to Hereford on one previous occasion using the train.

Now, choosing the wrong route is not a sin (although the resultant emotions may be) unlike the sin Judah committed when they trusted in the military might of the Egyptian horses and chariots to defeat the vast Assyrian Army rather than trusting in the Lord. God had promised to deal with the Assyrians. He declared He will defend Judah and Jerusalem. As a lion growls.... So the Lord will come down to do battle on Mount Zion. Their trust in Egypt for protection was both foolish and unnecessary. God would protect. Like birds flying about, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem. Is this not a powerful image? God will defend Jerusalem with the ferocity of a lion and also with the tender care of a bird. Judah thought they knew best! I thought I knew best when travelling a potentially treacherous journey!

The Good News for Judah, for me, and all mankind, is the invitation to repent to the God who will deliver. Return to Him... (v6-9) That is the wonderful opportunity we have, and this is a season when we can reflect on the wrong choices we have made, seek God's forgiveness and return to Him.

The Revd David Ward, Rector of St James, Brindle

The Good News for Judah, for me, and all mankind, is the invitation to repent to the God who will deliver.

READING: ISAIAH 32:1-8

'For fools speak folly, and their minds plot iniquity... But those who are noble plan noble things, and by noble things they stand.' **Isaiah 32:6,8**

There is much in these verses to challenge those who claim to be a believer in God. The life of a God-follower is to be called to account for our actions and priorities. The first line speaks of the fool plotting iniquity. The Hebrew of the Bible talks of this as thinking and acting in a self-serving manner; iniquity is where we put ourselves first and conspire to ensure we do well out of a situation. We see this all around us, people living self-centred lives where their actions and attitudes are about their own promotion or gratification rather than the good of others.

The noble person is a person of integrity and depth. Nobility is not something we are born into but is a way of living, of being, of living for the greater good. In British history the nobility, whilst being the landowners also had responsibility for those in their care. Those noble folk who took their role seriously worked selflessly for the good of the local community. They were landowners who stood by their principles and alongside their people. We are noble when we see the needs of others. Other translations of this passage use the words righteous and wicked rather than noble or fool: fool implies something light-hearted but the message here is clear – it is not something to think of lightly. The fool is wicked, the noble is righteous.

And so we might want to reflect on our own lives this Advent. As we prepare to welcome the Messiah, the King of Kings, we might ask ourselves whether we are foolish or noble.

Do we live our lives with ourselves at the centre, looking out for our own success and glory or do we live more noble lives, focused on the needs of others?

And if we call ourselves to account and find ourselves wanting, if we recognise that we are more fool than noble, then what are we going to do about it?

As we look to the nobility of a king born in a stable, we examine our own iniquity:

For the times I have put greed before giving, I'm sorry.

For the times I've put myself before others, I'm sorry.

For the times I've been less noble and too foolish, I'm sorry.

Lord, wash away my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Amen.

The Revd Mo Baldwin, Assistant Curate of St Laurence's, Chorley

READING: ISAIAH 45:1-13

'Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making"?' **Isaiah 45:9**

When we first toured the Free State, South Africa, we had the privilege of visiting a gold mine. Fired under terrific temperature this grubby looking rock was converted into a red glowing hot liquid. After cooling, the black rectangular shape rested in its ingot before a man hit it with a huge hammer. As he did, all the burnt rock and cinder fell away and there shining was what looked like gold. The processing was finished by hand until its shape and appearance looked every part real valuable gold. Forgive me if I am mixing the analogies but I believe the points remain the same, the processing of gold and the making of the pot. Both require the confidence of the maker and the willingness of the subject to be made. Both the Potter, as referred to in Isaiah, and the gold processor are committed, skilled craftsmen. Neither the soil nor the rock can themselves produce either the pot or the gold bar, but together with their respective makers there is the material and skill to produce that which goes on to give much pleasure.

God had always had a plan for King Cyrus, Isaiah had helped Cyrus to see how God had been preparing him for this eventuality. Cyrus would enable God's people to be freed and Cyrus was *not* of the Chosen People. Have you ever noticed those God-incidences; what others call co-incidences? When those occasions occur, I wonder if this might be the time when my will and God's will are united. Jesus says, "*I and the Father are one*", is not our calling to also share in that same purpose of unity? Is that not what Cyrus is also being asked to realise?

So often we are measured by what we *have* rather than what we *are*. But as Christians we are called daily to find ways of uniting our will with God's. It is so easy to get caught up in the frenzy of "I am special because I am worth it." In doing so we become ever more dissatisfied with who we are and forget to trust God. It can be a struggle to pursue that unity of purpose for God. I have seen those glimmers of gold when I look back upon my life. Can you see them in your own life's journey? Trusting in the Potter's purposes for us, does indeed demand faith and perseverance. We submit, not because we are forced, but because love responds to love and in doing so through our newly created goldenness, we reflect back to the world the origin of our being and the reason we were made.

The Revd Canon John Hall, Vicar of St. Peter & St. David, Fleetwood.

I have seen those glimmers of gold when I look back upon my life. Can you see them in your own life's journey?

READING: ISAIAH 46:1-13

'I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.' **Isaiah 46:4b**

As we near Christmas, we may start to feel heavy under the pressure of giving all our time, money and patience to make a glittering 'Christmas Card' celebration in a few days. For some of us, we already opted out of the whole thing this year because the weight of it was just too much at the moment.

Bel and Nebo in today's reading, were great gods of Babylon. Idols. Instead of being a help to those who worshipped them, they were a heavy burden that took much money and effort to build. They were literally heavy lumps of gold, carried by the people they were supposed to offer some sort of hope or help to. Instead of helping those people, the idols made their journey harder.

The LORD reminds the Israelites that He is their God And He CARRIES THEM! He always has and He always will. Not only will He carry them, but He will rescue them from under the burden of these false and useless gods. God shows not the 'sinfulness' of carrying these dead weight idols around, but the silliness of it.

God reminds Israel, and us, that He has carried us through difficult and impossible situations before, we can trust Him. God is so powerful that He is strong to carry us no matter how heavy we feel.

The theme of our reflections this year is 'a little child will lead them'. Childlike wonder at Christmas is one of the most beautiful, carefree and light things. This joyful, lightness of spirit is at the heart of Christmas, but not because of expensive gifts or harmonious families, lovingly singing carols around a piano. Why not put the those expectations down for a moment today and choose to allow the beauty of the promise of the presence of God with us, in Jesus, carry us through this season with great Joy.

What weighs down heavy on you today? Talk honestly to Jesus about it now.

Take a moment to wonder at the simple but powerful message of Hope in Jesus, at Christmas. God is with us. What a gift!

Remind yourself that God has made you and promised to carry you, sustain you and rescue you. What might trusting that promise that look like for you today?

The Revd Claire Cooke, Tutor at St Mellitus College

READING: ISAIAH 47:1,3-15

'Come down and sit in the dust, virgin daughter Babylon! Sit on the ground without a throne, daughter Chaldea! For you shall no more be called tender and delicate [...] Our Redeemer – the Lord of hosts is his name – is the Holy One of Israel.' **Isaiah 47:1,4**

What do you fear? I write this having just returned from visiting the USA, where there are a remarkable variety of creatures to fear – venomous snakes, skittering cockroaches and poisonous spiders for starters! And there are two ways that we can respond to such fears. We can make our peace with our 'enemy' – telling ourselves that we don't need to be afraid of them at all, or we can be terrified by them – fleeing at the sight of a spider's web.

These two responses were present in Israel too. The enemy Isaiah wrote of was not creatures, but the Babylonian empire. Isaiah's warnings that exile was coming at the hand of the mighty Babylonians left the Israelites quivering with fear. How would they respond? Would they make peace with the Babylonians, deciding that exile wasn't going to be that bad after all, or would they remain terrified forever, viewing Babylonia as the greatest enemy ever known?

But God wanted the Israelites to respond in neither way to the discipline of exile. And so, through Isaiah, he lets them overhear an imaginary sermon to the Babylonians. For this arrogant superpower was no more than a tool of the Holy One of Israel, and would one day face his judgement. The right answer to the fear of Babylon was neither peace nor terror, but to fear the greater power of the Lord, and so to sit humbly before him.

But what about us? Never mind spiders and snakes, the ultimate fear for most people is the fear of death. Can Isaiah's pretend sermon help us face that great unknown better? We can respond to death in the same two ways – by making peace, declaring confidently that 'death is nothing at all', or by living in fear of death all our days and seeking to avoid it at any cost through any possible life-prolonging hope. But the LORD wants us to respond differently – to fear his greater power and to sit humbly under him. And in Jesus, he used his great power to defeat death forever, swallowing it up at the cross.

The purpose of our visit to the USA was not merely the wildlife, but sadly for the funder of my 12 year old nephew Samuel, who died of cancer. Samuel neither thought death nothing – he admitted to being afraid. But nor did he dread it. He looked to the one who had gone through death ahead of him, Jesus, and died with peace. May the LORD give us that same faith that my nephew had.

The Revd Dr Duncan Bell, Associate Vicar of St Andrew's, Leyland

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING: ISAIAH 48:1-11

'I declared them to you from long ago, before they came to pass I announced them to you, So that you would not say, 'My idol did them, my carved image and my cast image commanded them.' **Isaiah 48:5**

Growing up my bedroom wall was always covered in the latest posters of my favourite pop singers or actors, often taken from the pages of Smash Hits magazine. There was a lot of George Michael, Spandau Ballet, Adam Ant, along with their records constantly playing. In years gone by they would have been described as idols, people looked up to and admired for their talents, whoever it was that may have adorned your walls. As we grow up and grow in faith, these people are replaced by role models, people who reveal the faith, who lead us closer to God, and we are called to lose the distraction of idols and listen to the word of God.

Three times in this passage God calls the people to hear the words God is speaking and that they need to pay attention to what God is saying to them. God outlines how previously the people were told of the former things in advance of them happening—God promises they would be freed from slavery in Egypt and God brings this about. God tells them this so they would know it was God and not some other idol they might mistakenly worship. God then speaks of new things which will take place, the people would now be rescued from Babylon. God tells them this so they know that when it happens, despite their waywardness and hard hearts, that it is to God they need to give praise and glory. Finally God chooses to reveal the future restoration of the people not because God is showing how great God is, but to show that God is one who keeps the promises made.

We are now very close to Christmas Day, the day when God keeps that wonderful promise of sending Jesus into the world. God sends his Son as a baby into our world, a promise made and kept to bring about the redemption and salvation of God's people. It is very easy at this time to be distracted by the idols of all the other stuff that Christmas brings—but God has spoken the word, made the promise and so when we celebrate Jesus birth we know this is of God, and God alone. And for that we give God all the praise and glory.

The Revd Canon Fleur Green, Vicar of St Peter's Darwen

READING: ISAIAH 49:9-13

'Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.' **Isaiah 49:13**

Most of us will remember an experience of falling over as a child. You think you have this walking thing cracked and then topple over. Usually, it does not hurt that much. However, most of us have done it—you look around and see who is looking. If it is someone who cares for you, you let out a wail and they make a fuss of you. You soak up the attention and look mournfully at your grazed knee. Five minutes later you have forgotten about it and all is well.

Being comforted is a special thing. It speaks that someone cares, and wants you to be alright. In today's passage God again comforts his people, has compassion on his suffering ones. Yet we know from experience that God's comfort is not just about making us feel alright when we stumble. The Comforter is sent by God to lead us into a new Truth. In this Truth prisoners know their release, those in darkness are revealed in light. The world order is not the same and the Hope and Light of the World are revealed. Today's passage is replete with phrases which express God's capacity to make the difficult easier. I'm not sure when you last climbed a mountain. When you look at them, they can appear daunting, if grand. So, the thought that passage is eased by making them more easily passable, roads would be welcome to most. I may love the sight of Helvellyn, but I confess these days to being pleased to be able to find a flat road around it!

As we enter these last few days of Advent, we are called to complete our preparations. Those preparations are to accept God's comforting embrace. To welcome the One who has come to change human existence forever. To accept God's provision for us even in times that look harsh. My prayer for these days is that we will be prepared to take stock of where and why we need God's comfort and accept it. Where might we be the one bringing comfort? How and where are we called to follow the Way at present? Finally, think of at least one person you know who really needs to hear the good news of God's salvation. How can you best help them to hear this as we approach the celebration of the birth of the Holy Comforter and the Wonderful Counsellor? In a world that needs to know the Prince of Peace so much, be the person of hope who brings good news to that person today and over this holy time.

The Venerable David Picken, Archdeacon of Lancaster

Being comforted is a special thing. It speaks that someone cares, and wants you to be alright.

READING: ISAIAH 49:14-50:1

‘Thus says the Lord, “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued; for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children... Then shall all flesh know that I am the Lord, your Saviour, and your Redeemer”’

Isaiah 49:25-26

Imagine you were one of the exiles to whom the prophet speaks in these verses, dispirited, dejected, far from home, knowing your homeland has been laid waste and the temple destroyed.

And yet, here you are, listening to a prophet paint a picture of the most amazing reversal of fortunes. God has not forgotten this small group of exiles in a foreign land, indeed their names are written on the palms of God’s hands (v16). Their enemies who had overwhelmed them will suddenly find that God is fighting on the side of his people and bringing them back to their own land. Those trying to destroy their buildings will find that with God’s help buildings are put up faster than they can tear them down (v17). God’s people will have grown so numerous that it will be standing room only (vv19-20), and even the kings and queens of the nations will find themselves pressed into service as foster fathers and nursing mothers to carry home the children of this godly population explosion (vv22-23).

What is more, God’s mighty intervention in history will mean that all flesh will come to know the Lord as Saviour, Redeemer and Mighty One. Three days before Christmas we cannot read these titles without recognising them as titles also given to Jesus himself. How could those despondent exiles by the waters of Babylon know that one day, long after Babylon had become a deserted ruin, the God they cried out to for rescue would be worshipped in every country of the world, and that nearly a third of the population of the planet would be baptised in the name of the Saviour, the Redeemer, the Mighty One?

Perhaps you today are wrestling with a difficult situation with no sign of a resolution, or in a barren place with no sign of a breakthrough. Take heart! Ask God to give you an Isaiah-shaped vision of how your situation can be transformed by God’s intervention. Begin to picture your situation through God’s eyes. Give thanks for that glimpse of glory, and begin to pray in faith, knowing that you are not forgotten. Your name is indeed written on the palm of God’s hand so that he is constantly reminded of you, and he will act.

The Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn

READING: ISAIAH 51:1-11

‘Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn.’ Isaiah 51:1

We are on the brink of the Christmas season. We are on the brink of the inbreaking of heaven, when God became man. Today’s passage from Isaiah invites us to look back even earlier and look forward even further: calling both times into the present moment. Jesus is the same, today yesterday and forever (Hebrews 13.8).

Look back to Abraham: *“to the rock from which you were cut, and the quarry from which you were hewn”* (v1-2). We are invited to remember how God called him as only one man and made him many.

Look forward to the future restoration of creation: *“He will make her deserts like Eden, and her wastelands like the garden of the Lord”* (v3) when *“gladness and joy will overtake them”* (v11)

These ripples of divine influence are like a tiny pebble being dropped in the pond of the universe. Through Abraham, there became many descendants like stars in the sky and sand on the seashore. Through the birth of Jesus, heaven breaks into the whole of creation: *“thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”*

The start of God’s work is always fragile: a 99 year old man having faith he would become a father; a virgin saying yes to the power of the Most High overshadowing her and a tiny baby born in a stable whose *“kingdom will never end”*. God’s work is unstoppable. *“My salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.”* (v6)

Why not take time today to lift your eyes up to the distant horizon. Christmas preparations – food, presents, family, services – can absorb our eyes and attention into the tiny details. But dawn is breaking on the horizon, the light of heaven is breaking in *“to guide our feet into the path of peace”* (Luke 1.79)

Julian of Norwich invites us with eloquence into the things of heaven: *“Remember this faithfully for truly it is God’s will that we should hope as securely for the bliss of heaven while we are here as we shall enjoy it securely while we are there. And the more pleasure and joy we take in this security, with reverence and humility, the more it pleases him”*.

May you know much pleasure and joy in the security of God today.

The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster

READING: ISAIAH 52:7-10

'The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.' **Isaiah 52:10**

The stocking hanging on the mantelpiece. The sherry ready for Santa. The presents sitting wrapped under the tree. The smell of the coal fire. The stressful noises emanating from the kitchen. Most of us have the most vivid memories of Christmas Eve, spent in my case at my grandparents' house in Doncaster. The sense of anticipation, of excitement, was almost tangible.

Isaiah's prophecy oozes that same sense of anticipation and excitement. Something amazing is about to happen, something so fabulously wonderful that it will leave his hearers in dumbstruck awe. And here the prophet uses a rather peculiar phrase to describe what that is to be. 'The Lord will bare his holy arm.'

In eastern countries at the time of Isaiah, most men wore long, flowing garments. If you were a troop going into battle you would need first to push back your garment and bare your arm so that it was ready to wield the sword. So the prophet pictures God as a mighty warrior about to win a huge victory for his people.

Tomorrow is Christmas day. What we will see is at first glance the very opposite of a warrior prepared for battle. We will gaze upon a bare body, a naked, new born baby. That child, Jesus, is God's revelation of himself. That is the object of all our anticipation and excitement. 'Is that it?' we might be forgiven for asking. 'A vulnerable little newborn!'

Yet this child has a power that renders futile the mightiest army with the most awesome arsenal of weapons. This child's body will one day be bared again, upon the cross, as he wins the greatest battle of them all.

This child, Jesus, is God. So as he endures death, he destroys it. As he dies because of our sins, he eradicates their power. As he rises to new life, he draws us who believe in him into the joy of the eternal banquet. All the enemies of humanity will be defeated once and for all by this child whom Mary lays, so gently, into the manger straw.

Give your heart anew this Christmas to the little baby of Bethlehem. For he will be victorious, and in him all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Burnley

READING: ISAIAH 11:1-10

'On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.' **Isaiah 11:10**

We come today to the end our journey through the remarkable prophecies of Isaiah and find ourselves on Christmas Day.

There is much that should amaze us on Christmas Day as we kneel before the new-born Jesus as the Saviour of the world:

First, God's promise in Isaiah 11.1-10 through the Prophet 700 years before His birth was kept. Many must have wondered over the years if God had forgotten or that the Prophet had got it wrong about a descendant of David being a King, who would be fruitful, would judge the nations and would usher in an age where the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord. Christmas Day teaches us that God keeps His promises and can be trusted. Our trust in the Scriptures should grow to the extent that we say with Mary: let it be to me, according to Your Word.

Secondly, it is extraordinary that Jesus is described in Isaiah 11.1 as a shoot out of a stump. It is a picture of weakness and vulnerability. Nothing good ever came from Nazareth. He started life as a vulnerable baby, a refugee fleeing the violence of Herod. And His end was not far different, arrested, tried, condemned and crucified. God emptied Himself. The incarnation, the moment the Word was made flesh, should never cease to amaze, especially as He knew the cross was His destiny and the means whereby He would as the Lamb of God take away the sin of the world.

Thirdly, from such unpromising and small beginnings we see the unfolding of God's salvation and restoration plan for the world. Jesus has indeed been a fruitful branch. He quoted from Isaiah 11.2, when He was in the synagogue in Nazareth and claimed the Scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing, thereby attributing the prophecy of Isaiah 11 to Himself. The Spirit of the Lord would indeed rest upon Him. Righteousness and faithfulness would characterise His ministry and prepare the way for the arrival of that new creation, in which there is harmony, peace and justice and when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

C S Lewis: Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, is of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.

The Rt Revd Julian Henderson, Bishop of Blackburn

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WHAT'S NEXT?

We really hope you've enjoyed walking through Advent with this booklet. If you're wondering how you can continue with this pattern of daily reading there are a whole host of resources available to you. For ease of access, many resources are now available either online or as apps. A few suggestions are:

DAILY PRAYER

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

Daily Prayer is available free as an app or on the Church of England Website and gives complete services for Morning, Evening and Night Prayer in both contemporary (Common Worship) and traditional (Book of Common Prayer) forms.

LECTIO 365 <https://www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional>

Lectio 365 is a devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day and is inspired by Lectio Divina, a way of meditating on the Bible that's been used by Christians for centuries. Written by leaders from the 24-7 Prayer movement, and produced in partnership with CWR, this resource helps you engage with Scripture to inspire prayer.

BIOY <https://www.bibleinoneyear.org>

With Bible In One Year each day you will receive a Psalm or Proverbs reading, a New Testament reading and an Old Testament reading. It also provides daily audio and written commentary to walk you through each day's reading, to provide fresh understanding of the texts.

SACRED SPACE www.sacredspace.ie

Sacred Space is inspired by the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and gives a thought for the day, a daily Bible passage and some guided reflections.

BIBLE PODLETS <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/podcasts/bible-podlets/>

Bible Podlets is a Bible study and discussion podcast for primary aged children to do with adults. Each episode has fun games/activities, an engaging Bible reading in the form of a news story and deep discussion with places to pause and talk together about the topic. Discussion notes are available to download from the Resources Area of the website.

Alternatively, if you would prefer a hard copy resource, Christian bookshops hold a large stock of Bible reading material, from daily reading notes to study books on particular themes or books of the Bible.

If you'd like further advice or suggestions, please do email Ruth Hassall at the Diocesan Offices ruth.hassall@blackburn.anglican.org





All texts in this booklet are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

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