

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 29 November 2020

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church, on this first Sunday in Advent.

Call to Worship (based on Isaiah 64 & Little Town of Bethlehem)

'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down'...

O that you would come, not in the hustle and bustle of shopping and cooking
but into the midst of loneliness and lockdown.

O that you would come not in deals on Black Fridays
but into the silence of Bethlehem's streets.

O that you would come not into bright lights and garish decorations
but into the COVID wards and care homes.

How silently the wondrous gift was given
of God made human and wrapped in swaddling.

No ear may hear his coming,
but the dear Christ enters in;
so let us prepare for that tear in heaven
that ushers your Advent in.

Hymn O come, O come Immanuel (R&S 126)

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear:

*Rejoice! Rejoice!
Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

First verse traditional, followed by a 'swing' version. Both from the Soundcloud of Revd Phil Nevard, used with permission. <https://soundcloud.com/revnev>

Lighting the first Advent Candle (based on 1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

Are we ready?

This question, put to us on this first Sunday in Advent,
is a very personal one.

Christ comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead,

Are we ready?

**Revive us, O Lord, God of heaven's countless hosts,
Let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

Are we ready?

Ready for the coming of Christ Jesus

with the mercy which is judgement

and the judgement which is mercy?

Are we ready?

**Revive us, O Lord, God of heaven's countless hosts,
Let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

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Micah 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf. (New Living Translation) Today, on the day of international solidarity with the Palestinian people, we light a candle for Bethlehem and all her people suffering in isolation.

Candle is lit

Candle lighting Prayer for the Oppressed Adapted from the [Kairos Christmas Alert 2020](#)

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God Who Hears the Cries of the Oppressed, may the season's lighting of candles and the singing of carols fill our hearts and move us to act in partnership with those who are suffering life's injustices. In the name of the One who, born in a stable, made his home among the oppressed, **Amen**.

Hymn The Candle Song (Like a candle flame) played by the CC Music Group
Please sing along at home

Like a candle flame
Flickering small in our darkness
Uncreated light
Shines through infant eyes

God is with us, alleluia (Men)
God is with us, alleluia (Women)
Come to save us, alleluia (Men)
Come to save us (Women)
Alleluia! (All)

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Advent Prayer for Palestine by Kenji Kuramitsu (<https://www.fosna.org/keepawake>)

God of branch and blaze, in this Advent season we pray for your justice and your peace. In this time of longing, shelter us from the harsh rays of sun and screens. Keep us under the shadow of your wing and give us an assurance of your love when it is most hard to feel your presence.

May your holy Spirit encourage every generation that languishes under violence wrought by human hands. We pray for an end to occupation in all lands, and especially for the people of Palestine. Bring an end to the terror, invasion, and incarceration that continues to haunt them.

Help us, too, to keep vigilant against the works of evil, in our own selves and in the world around us. Nurture the seeds of resistance and solidarity in our own hearts. Fill us with a love of God and neighbour.

We pray and wait in hope for your coming amongst us – for that peace and justice that we dare to call upon in the name of Christ Jesus. **Amen**.

Bible readings: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Isaiah 64:1-11

As I alluded to in this week's News & Chat, 2020 is the year that keeps on giving, and the lectionary readings for today, despite it being the first Sunday in Advent, are not on first reading terribly cheerful. In Isaiah 64:1-9, the writer is lamenting humanity's failure to do what is right, while also wondering why God continues to allow injustice and oppression. The prophet calls on God to act and dramatically make God's presence known so that the nations may know God as the sole Sovereign of the universe. But God only acts on behalf of those who 'gladly do right', that is, those who try to live godly lives. Being in relationship with God requires living in a way that aligns with God's character and commandments. The problem is that the people of God have not lived godly lives and have failed to fulfil their part of the covenant. We see this cycle of disobedience and punishment over and over throughout the Old Testament as a way to try to understand the suffering of the people of God, particularly in exile. Ultimately, the prophet prays for God to take unilateral

action and end the cycle of oppression and punishment and re-establish God's relationship with God's people. And God does. God does it throughout the Old Testament – again and again forgiving the people and re-establishing relationship.

Psalm 80 is a communal lament. In spite of how disgraceful their past condition or how dire their present circumstances, God is the Shepherd of the people. God is their king and their hope for light and life. Though a sorrowful prayer, Psalm 80 is also a prayer of faith and hope. It declares that God guides and gathers like a shepherd, God's face still shines on the people, even in the face of circumstances that seem to say otherwise. And God is still guiding and holding us even through the long months of the pandemic and all its restrictions. The language used in Psalm 80 seems to imply that the people believe that God is unengaged and disinterested and maybe even absent. Though they believe that God is responsible for their current situation, they continue to pray for God's help. The belief that both calamity and good fortune come from the hand of God is a foundational tenant of ancient Jewish prayer and is the paradox of the psalms of laments. We no longer believe that God causes disaster and bad things to happen, but it can be hard not to slip into questioning, where is God in this nightmare when the problems seem never-ending and there is no stability in sight. During the season of Advent, the season of preparation and repentance, Psalm 80 is a reminder to us that our lives depend on God's grace. Let your light shine on us, O God, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80 and Isaiah might have been written specifically for the Palestinians and the inhabitants of Bethlehem, so perfectly do their words express their situation. 'Our holy and beautiful house where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all of our pleasant places have become ruins.' When people think of Palestine, they tend to think of Muslims, but there are Christians there too. There are Christians living in Bethlehem the birthplace of Jesus and so in some respects the birthplace of Christianity. It must be hard for them not to ask, as in a psalm of lament, why they are still living under oppression and apartheid, why they are still in exile, why they are essentially living in a prison camp. And so, we come to our Gospel reading.

Mark 13:24-26, 33 – "Beware keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come...
Keep awake."

Each of today's readings point to a God who chooses to partner with humanity to bring about the coming of the kingdom of God. Taken together, they are a reminder to keep awake and continue to pursue God's mission. Isaiah reminds us to keep awake and remain aware of humanity's constant fight between doing what is right or taking the easy route. It would be easier to take part in Black Friday, for example, rather than look for more sustainable gifts to give, or think about not buying stuff at all and giving charity gifts. It would be easy to think, I can invite one more person than I'm

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allowed on Christmas Day, what difference will that make – but what if everyone did that? It would be easier to keep silent about the plight of the Palestinian people for fear of being accused of anti-Semitism. It can be incredibly easy to participate in the perpetuation of injustice and oppression simply by staying silent, or by looking for the cheapest deal without thinking about the people on the other side of the world who may have been working in near slavery to produce it. If we do not keep awake, we could find ourselves sleepwalking into complicity with death-dealing systems that are antithetical to who and what we have been called to be as the people of God. (This can't be summed up much better in my opinion, than in this clip from the BBC drama *Years and Years* : <https://youtu.be/IX0kwVLPmD4>)

The psalmist reminds us to “keep awake” and remember that lament and hope are two sides of the same coin. We lament because we know that there is a better way and that things do not have to be the way they are. Mark's Gospel reminds us to keep awake in the time between Christ's birth and his second coming, for we do not know when that will be – it's a bit like the pandemic – at the beginning, we thought it would only be a few weeks, and now it is looking like it will be over a year until we start to come out of it to something remotely resembling normalcy as we used to know it. The disciples were expecting the Second Coming in their lifetimes and it is now over 2000 years later... Christianity has a lot to teach us about patience.

I said that today's readings weren't very cheerful on first reading, and I expect you are wondering if or when I am going to find something less miserable to say! Well, here it is - each of the lectionary texts for the first week of Advent remind us that there is something, or someone, who is more powerful than empire, than oppressive regimes, than modern day slavery, than disease, and that something is God. God brings about transformation. God holds out his hand to renew our relationship, God listens to our laments and complaints and shines his light on us.

Christ came into the world as a brown-skinned, Palestinian-Jew who preached a message of hope that was bigger and grander than anyone could imagine: the coming of the kingdom of God. The kingdom that would bring about more than just the saving of souls. God, in and through Jesus Christ would radically transform the social order and God would do it in partnership with humanity, despite our faults and failures. So, this Advent, keep awake, keep the light of Christ lit in your hearts and

your homes and keep the hope represented by the first Advent candle burning until Christ comes again, God incarnate to dwell among us. Amen

Hymn O Little town of Bethlehem (R&S 145)

I'm not, in general, a big fan of singing carols until much nearer to Christmas, but I think since 2020 has been such a terrible year, we have licence to indulge ourselves a bit. Also, I wanted to include a hymn about Bethlehem.

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie?
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by:
yet in thy dark street shineth
the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven:
no ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord, Immanuel.

Prayers of intercession for Palestine (<http://www.sabeel-kairos.org.uk>)

Merciful and Loving God, Creator of the universe and human beings, You chose Palestine as the cradle of religions and showed us the way through the Incarnated Christ to do your will. Jesus Christ taught us the things that make for peace but some of your children, created in your image, still refuse to know how to love and respect each other in this land.

Heavenly Father, you who hears the cries of your people around the troubled world, look down upon the people of Palestine. Restore justice with mercy and wipe out the tears of the bereaved, the dispossessed, the homeless, the prisoners and the oppressed. Fill the hearts of all rulers with humility to recognize that your vision of a harmonious living in this land, your land, can be achieved only when all walls are destroyed, oppression and violence ended so that human beings can live in dignity. Help us to humbly work together to make of Palestine, once again, a model of co-living among peoples of all faiths, so that the message of real peace that was proclaimed in this land will be experienced throughout the whole region as love that fulfils justice prevails.

God of peace, **hear our prayer.**

(from Nora Carmi, Palestine)

God of all creation and all peoples, we pray for the people of Israel.

We pray for the peacemakers, for the seekers of justice, for the people of good will who risk friends, reputations, and even jobs to stand in solidarity with those on the other side of the wall. We pray for those who have lost friends and loved ones to violence. We pray for an equal measure of safety, of security, of opportunity and freedom for Israeli and Palestinian children alike, for in the beginning you made us all in your own image. We pray for the courage to continue working together with all of our neighbours toward a world of justice, peace, and equality. God of peace, **hear our prayer.**

(from Carrie Smith, USA/Jerusalem)

O God of all lands, we lift before you all communities and peoples who are stateless or alienated from their ancestral lands. We especially cry out to you to assist in the just struggle against powers and principalities that would limit or deny sovereignty to indigenous peoples in favour of settler-colonial theft. Be with the peoples of Palestine, the First Nations of Canada, the Aboriginal communities of what is now Australia, and the landless of Brazil, reminding them that you provide strength for the journey and homecoming after the exile.

God of peace, **hear our prayer.**

(from Robert Smith, USA/Jerusalem)

Look with mercy, gracious God, upon people everywhere who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Rouse us from our complacency and help us to eliminate cruelty wherever it is found. Strengthen those who seek equality for all. Grant that everyone may enjoy a fair portion of the abundance of the earth; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Offertory

We give thanks for all the gifts given for our Christmas Appeal and dedicate them to your service. May they bring joy and a little relief into what will be a very different Christmas. God, may your light shine into the darkness of winter and bring us hope, through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Hymn The Voice of God goes out to all the world (R&S 131) recorded by Thora

The voice of God goes out to all the world;
His glory speaks across the universe.
The great King's herald cries from star to star:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

The Lord has said: 'Receive my messenger,
My promise to the world, my pledge made flesh,
A lamp to every nation, light from light':
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

The broken reed he will not trample down,
Nor set his heel upon the dying flame.
He binds the wounds, and health is in his hand:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Anointed with the Spirit and with power,
He comes to crown with comfort all the weak,
To show the face of justice to the poor:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

His touch will bless the eyes that darkness held,
The lame shall run, the halting tongue shall sing,
And prisoners laugh in light and liberty:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Blessing

Follow, where the Spirit of Hope leads you
Listen, as the child of Peace cries for you
Rejoice, as the Love of God embraces you
and go now, with Hope, Peace and Love in your hearts
and the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever with you. **Amen**

(A World of Blessing, ed. Geoff Duncan)