

Call to Worship (inspired by Jeremiah 33:14-16)

The time is surely coming when our love for one another
and all of God's children will increase.

We would live into that time with hope and joy.

The day is surely coming when God will strengthen our hearts
with humility and holiness.

We would anticipate that day as we reach out to serve all of those in need.

The days are surely coming when we will walk the paths
of faithfulness and steadfast love.

We begin this journey, knowing that all of God's promises will be fulfilled.

written by Thom Shuman

HYMN O come, O come, Emmanuel MP 493 (omit v2)

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!...

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice!...

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice!

For our Advent candle lighting prayers this year we are using material from the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) – Churches Working together for Peace, which is the URC, Methodist and Baptist churches. There is a different focus and symbol each week:

1. The globe, our planet represents hope and a renewing of the environment.
2. The dove represents actively working for peace.
3. The piggy-bank represents working for a just economy for all.
4. The woman and child represents the marginalised, like Mary, Joseph and Jesus brought to the centre.

Advent Candle Lighting

From the prophet Isaiah:

'Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" – the Advent God of creation.

The first candle is lit

As we light our first candle, we give thanks to God for the gift of this bounteous creation, celebrating its diverse life and wondrous beauty. We know that all created life should be enabled to flourish as God intended, and yet often our actions do not treat it with value. As we face the climate crisis, we lament the ways in which creation has been stifled and altered by our actions. And yet, we also give thanks for the hope we find in the Creator as we wait for God to visit us again.

Sing verse 1 and refrain of Like a candle flame MP 420 © Graham Kendrick

Prayers

We pray for all who work to renew the environment, to reverse the years of neglect and abuse and bring hope, love and light to the world. We commit ourselves to play our part in protecting this most precious of gifts and to 'lift up our voices mightily' to call on all to do more to care for creation.

Righteous one, to you alone we lift our souls;
in you alone we place our trust;
for you alone we wait all day long.
For you are the God of our salvation,
abounding in mercy and steadfast love.
Help us remain alert and watchful for the coming of your promised one -
the one who comes with power and glory,
the one drawing near to bring our salvation. **Amen.**

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Offering

You are reminded to send in your gifts for the work of the church.
Holy One, receive our gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

Last Sunday was Christ the King Sunday and we heard about what sort of king Jesus is (at least we did in Rayleigh...). This week we hear more about what sort of person the long-expected Messiah will be – “he will execute justice and righteousness”.

In this passage from Jeremiah, his world is in a state of collapse and Jeremiah himself is in prison for preaching that God will destroy Jerusalem because of the people's unfaithfulness. In fact, the whole book of Jeremiah is about exile and despair, but these two verses have been called a 'little book of comfort' as they tell us about the new thing that God will do. Jeremiah only talks about the justice and righteousness which will come from the Branch which springs up for the house of David; other messiah texts like Isaiah 11:2-9 extol the coming king's wisdom, counsel, and strength. Interestingly, this Advent we do not get any passages from Isaiah in the lectionary, although those are the readings we are most familiar with and are most used to hearing in the run-up to Christmas. Since that is all he mentions, Jeremiah's emphasis on justice and righteousness is clearly important.

Throughout the Bible, the phrase “justice and righteousness” refers to the maintenance of what we might today call social justice, a concern to establish equitable social and economic conditions for the well-being of all in society. In the ancient world, justice was not an abstract concept. It was always a personal practice of care and attention to the needs of others, in particular the vulnerable ones such as widows, orphans, and strangers. The king was the highest example of this ideal because he was the agent of divine justice and righteousness.

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And that leads us into the reading from Luke in which we are told about the signs that will come. The nations will be confused by the roaring of the waves and be breathless with fear and foreboding, before we get the parable from Jesus about the new shoots on the fig tree and on all the trees. When buds begin to form on barren trees, we are confident that winter is ending and summer will arrive. Why? Because we have previously lived through changes of seasons – real and metaphorical. All of us, except the very young, can remember what happened in years gone by and can compare what is happening now with things that have happened in the past, either in our own lives or in society. There has been much talk recently of how the recent petrol shortages, rising prices and lack of goods in the shops are reminiscent of the 70s, though if you are a *Guardian* reader, you will have read last weekend how the current situation is quite different and less promising than the 70s. Sadly though, the promise of spring - the new buds - does not always come. Sometimes they are killed by unexpected freezing temperatures, or drought, or are swept away by the roaring waves of a hundred-year flood that comes for the third year running. Fires rage through forests and woods, darkening the sun and sending ash and smoke even thousands of miles away. Hillsides are cleared for the sake of a better view, corporations fell rainforests in order to improve their profits, and nations install border-walls that cut through orchards and separate trees from the people who care for them. The devastation is enough to take one's breath away - that is the meaning of the Greek word translated as "faint" in verse 26: People will faint - stop breathing - from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Nonetheless, the apocalyptic vision shared by Jesus is assurance that even, or perhaps especially, in the face of devastation, whether it is caused by nature's fury or by human action leading to climate change, the reign of God cannot be stopped. No matter how much it appears that the world is coming un-done, God's way endures. In Luke 21, Jesus reminds his followers that God is not constrained by human time represented by calendar and clock. In God's *kairos* time, past and future are woven together for the sake of today. Even the parable of the fig tree and all the trees suggests that the past can help to make sense of the future. When the new shoots, form on trees, we know that spring is coming, because we have seen it before. The new shoot on the branch of Jesse and David, heralds the new thing God will do in sending his only Son to live among us.

The season of Advent is a reminder that God is doing a new thing. The message on this first Sunday of Advent paints a hope-filled picture for "all who live on the face of the whole earth" (Luke 21:34). When the present reality includes wars and political tumult (distress among nations), climate catastrophe (signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and the

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roaring of sea and waves), global pandemic (breathless from fear and foreboding), price rises, hate crimes, racist ideologies, terrorist bombs, or anything else that traps people in fear or despair, it is then that we look for the coming of the Son of Humanity, the Christ whose promised future makes all the difference for today.

The news recently has sounded a bit like the end of the world, and it pretty much has since the start of the pandemic in early 2020 with the pictures of doctors and nurses in full PPE and mass graves. COP26 was a disappointment; more and more refugees are crossing the channel in small boats, dying and being treated with no humanity, and being used as collateral in the dispute between Belarus and the rest of Europe; there are rising cases of Covid 19 across Europe with other countries imposing lockdowns again and mandatory vaccinations, and requiring documents to prove you have been vaccinated, while our government blithely does nothing – the Prime Minister doesn't even set the example of wearing a face mask. There are riots across Europe about the restrictions and examples every day of society's never-ending question – what do you value most - personal freedom or community spirit to protect others and the national health service? Will you keep the law to protect others? Or will you break the law to demand change like some climate activists? Do you remember where we started with Jeremiah? Justice and righteousness refers to the maintenance of social justice. In the ancient world, justice was not an abstract concept. It was always a personal practice of care and attention to the needs of others, in particular the vulnerable ones such as widows, orphans, and strangers. It seems as though in many places people have lost what was once a given for humanity – that you take care of others as well as yourself, especially the most vulnerable.

Advent is sometimes thought of as a 'countdown' to Christmas, or as a kind of waiting room, while we light candles and open calendar days, read the same old readings, sing the same carols, listen to the same music and scurry around to buy presents and make Christmas food orders, but God's redemption doesn't end with Christmas Day, it starts with Christmas. It starts with an innocent child born into poverty, with no guarantees that he would survive infancy. God's redemption doesn't end with Christmas Day, but when Christ returns; when we truly have a kingdom of justice and righteousness – that is what we hope for in Advent; that is what we, as Christians, look forward to. Jeremiah's emphasis on God's action to cause the Branch to spring up is a sign of God's characteristic faithfulness to Israel and to us. God is doing a new thing, here and now with us, this Advent and this coming Christmas.

Hymn The voice of God... (Tune *Woodlands*, at MP 631)

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 fresh,
a lamp to every nation, light from light':
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.

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Advent Prayer and Prayers of Intercession

URC Prayer Handbook p71

O God, the days are surely coming when all your promises will be fulfilled to your faithful children. We pray for the church, and especially our church family here, that we might fulfill our promises to you, and be forgiven for all our failures. Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

In your time, O Lord, a righteous branch sprang up and you brought justice and righteousness in every land. We pray for our nation, and all nations, that your peace would be manifest in every corner of the earth. Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

In your Kingdom, O Lord, you bring your people safety and comfort. We pray for the sick, the suffering, and those in distress of any kind, especially those known to us; that you would heal all injuries, comfort all grief, and settle all wrongs. Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

In the fullness of time, O God, you sent your son and his name was Emmanuel: God With Us. We thank you for your Presence with us, and we pray that you might be always present with those whom we love but see no longer, and those who are unable to physically come to church. Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

Come among us O God, and hear our prayers; so that as we celebrate the coming of your Son among us, we might come to adore him and follow his example of a life of service and humility. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Make way, make way MP457 (words on next page)

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Make way, make way for Christ the King
in splendour arrives
fling wide the gates and welcome him
into your lives

*Make way! Make way
For the King of kings, King of kings!
Make way! Make way!
And let His kingdom in*

He comes the broken hearts to heal
the prisoners to free
the deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance
The blind shall see.

Make way! Make way

And those who mourn with heavy hearts
who weep and sigh,
with laughter, joy and royal crown
he'll beautify.

Make way! Make way

We call you now to worship him
as Lord of all
to have no other gods but him;
their thrones must fall.

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Advent Blessing

Follow where the Spirit of Hope leads us
Listen as the Child of Peace cries for us
Rejoice as the Love of God embraces us
And let us go with Hope, Peace and Love in our hearts,
And the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever within us. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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