

**Call to worship** (inspired by Isaiah 11:1-10)

We dream God's dream, of a world at peace  
Where enemies are reconciled, and children play in safety;  
Where the poor and powerless find justice.  
We remember God's promise of a Ruler of Peace,  
Filled with the Spirit of God, of wisdom and understanding,  
Of counsel and might, of justice and faithfulness.  
Come Lord Jesus! Open our lives to the Peace which you bring;  
let us turn to you and get ready!

**Hymn** Hark the glad sound! R&S 137 omit v3

**Light the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent candle**

This year our Advent reflections are based on colours, and this week's colour is red.

Holly berries and robins' breasts,  
Sunsets and fire, blood pulsing through our bodies,  
Blood spilled by senseless violence. Racing fire engines with shrieking sirens.  
Red, a symbol of life and death.

Let us pray.

Creator God we thank you for all red things that bring colour to our lives,  
For scarlet poinsettias and crimson roses, for bottles of ruby wine and flames curling round logs.

Thank you for firemen and aid workers who risk their lives at home and abroad.

We pray that you will give them strength and courage to cope with the dangerous situations that they face each day. And we think of the recent fire in Hong Kong.

Thank you for your love that sent your Son to die for us.

We pray for all those who are dying, for those who are mourning,  
for those who comfort the bereaved.

We thank you for the gift of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit,  
Sent to enlighten us as we seek to know your will,  
Sent to empower us to do your will in our small corner of the world. **Amen.**

**Sing** Like a candle flame Red Folder 59 (2 verses and chorus)

**Children's Time** – giving thoughtful gifts - <https://youtu.be/lcx7hBWeULM?si=-FGFEIxi9gQYcTw>

**Gifts – Offering + gifts for Homestart & HARP**

Gracious God, we are fortunate to have shelter, warmth, food and freedom.

As you give to us, so we respond, with our lives, our time, our hearts.

We offer our gifts, talents and money to be used for your purposes in your world.

May all we offer bring light and love as it is shared. May all we offer be a force for good.

May all we offer be a blessing. In your world, for your people, until your kingdom come. Amen

**Hymn** Make way, make way R&S 141

**We say the Grace as children leave for Sundayclub**

**Opening Prayer**

God of all creation we come to worship you with all our being: mind, body and soul.

As we gaze at the wonder of your world,

we are humbled by the beauty, diversity, pattern and connectivity of it all.

As we begin our journey to the birth of your Son, Jesus,

we come in anticipation on this familiar journey that leads us to know more about you,

revealed in the presence of a tiny child born into a hurting world where oppression was rife.

As we continue our journeys through life and particularly through Advent, we acknowledge the power of your Holy Spirit leading, sustaining, inspiring and enabling us. God of all that is, we come in awe, wonder and humility to worship.

So much has changed since Jesus was born and yet so much has stayed the same.

Our world is overrun with technological innovation and AI, with new ways of doing things, greater knowledge and amazing inventions and possibilities. And yet, when we look around us, so much stays the same.

The poor get marginalised, the hungry are not fed, those on the edges are refused a seat at the table; while the rich get richer, the powerful wield more power, and those at the centre call the shots.

We fail to call out injustices, we perpetuate poor practices, we focus on difference and sow seeds of division.

We think that things are other peoples' problems not ours.

We blame others and deflect responsibility. We refuse to account for our actions.

All because it is too hard, or we are too busy; or because we see it as someone else's job.

We take the path of least resistance – maybe posting on social media or sharing a meme.

Maybe highlighting the issue but seeing the solutions as someone else's problem.

Yet, as part of the global family our lives are all intertwined, our responsibilities are collective.

As we come today to hold before God the things done and not done, we do so as people seeking forgiveness for the wrongdoing in our own lives and the lives of those we know and love, as well as for the times that our actions or non-actions have hurt others who we may never meet, or our choices have perpetuated established patterns of oppression that are never challenged.

Whilst we journey through Advent once again, may we seek God's forgiveness for the institutional and personal sins we have committed and find ways to turn from them and seek renewal and change.

The birth of the Saviour of the world heralded a new beginning.

Jesus was born, lived, died, and rose again so we may start afresh each time we confess our sins.

God hears us and forgives us.

Let us forgive ourselves, forgive others and go in peace today and every day. Amen.

**Hymn** On Jordan's bank R&S 134

**Bible readings:**      **Isaiah 11:1-10**  
                                 **Matthew 3:1-12**

While today is only the second Sunday of Advent, it is probably the last chance we have for a proper reflection on Advent as next week is the Nativity service and the following week the Carol service and then Christmas will be here and in pretty much 48 hours will be all done and dusted with for another year!

So, I'm on a mission again (as I am most years) to revive the observance of Advent as a time of expectation and preparation and to put Christ back into Christmas! Christmas is our faith's other big festival alongside Easter. It is the beginning of the life of Christ, which culminates in his death. It is the most amazing, awesome thing that our God become one of us, born into poverty and humility, and soon afterward into violence, fleeing for his life into exile in Egypt. And yet society and many in the Church have made it into a circus show of gifts, food, nativity plays, something only for children. We live in a society that is no longer predominantly Christian, and we watch on as Christmas has become only a commercial event – buying more, cooking more, eating more – a stressful and sad time for many. Every

year Christmas seems to come earlier and earlier – many of our neighbours have had their Christmas lights up since mid-November, the Christmas adverts have likewise been on the TV for weeks, and mince pies and chocolate Santas have been in the shops for months. And there will no doubt be some people saying why aren't we singing any carols yet? But pause for a moment and think – would we expect to sing resurrection hymns before Lent was over? Why is Advent different? Why do we think a premature birth is OK, but not an early resurrection?

Advent is not only preparation for Christmas; it is preparation for the second coming of Christ. As we heard in last week's reading from Matthew, we don't know when that will be, and since we have been waiting for over 2000 years, we can perhaps feel confident that it won't happen in our lifetimes. Indeed, if we are doing OK for the most part, we probably wouldn't really want Jesus to come again just now and turn everything upside down. Or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, the birth of Jesus is not only a matter of glad tidings but also "frightening news for everyone who has a conscience."

I got two new books of reflections for Advent this year, one is by Bonhoeffer matching his reflections with Advent Bible readings and extracts from his letters from prison. And the other is a collection of various writers and theologians including Bonhoeffer. The Bible translator J. B. Phillips writes of the 'dangers of Advent' – foremost among them over-familiarity. We have heard the verses from Isaiah and the Christmas story itself so often that we lose sight of how amazing it is that God came to live among us. Phillips says, "By far the most important and significant event in the whole course of human history will be celebrated, with or without understanding, at the end of Advent." The miracle of God's incarnation "will be glossed over, brushed aside, or rendered impotent by over-familiarity." We know the saying, 'familiarity breeds contempt' and wherever there is familiarity there is potential danger. Our familiarity with Christmas is unlikely to breed contempt, but it may well produce indifference. "The true wonder and mystery may leave us unmoved", blinded to what lies at the heart of Christmastide. We can't help but be involved in the frantic buying of gifts, especially if we have children or grandchildren, the sending of cards, preparing special food, and we will no doubt enjoy the carols, family get-togethers, Christmas TV (or enjoy complaining about it) and the general magic of Christmas, but we may not realise that so much secular materialism and festivity has been heaped on Christmas that the historic fact on which it is founded has been almost "smothered out of existence." Amid all the stuff that surrounds Christmas we can forget that "God's insertion into human history was achieved with an almost frightening quietness and humility." It is a sad commentary on humanity that no one would give up their bed for a pregnant woman who had just travelled for days. Not

much has changed in that regard given the lack of welcome we give refugees in this country. At least during Advent, if not on Christmas Day itself, we should look at what actually happened and how it happened, rather than the cute images we're surrounded by. We should reflect on the humility of Christ's birth, how cold, dark, dirty and smelly that manger must have been – not the sanitised version in which the baby is surrounded by fluffy sheep and never cries. The nature of Jesus' birth is a forerunner for his life - exile, a short life as a travelling preacher, dependent on others for food and lodging, and a cruel and horrible death in an obscure corner of the Roman empire. Yet that baby still commands the allegiance of millions of people all over the world, even if the Church in the UK is slowly dying. In amongst all the festivities and extra trimmings we should try to maintain a sense of awe "almost a sense of fright at what God has done" and not let overfamiliarity blind us to the significance of what happened in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago.

Our preparation for the coming of Christ, the celebration of the Incarnation and the anticipation of the second coming, needs to be realistic and practical – we need to be God's hands on earth until the second coming. Our preparation needs to be, not buying gifts, or ordering food, making shopping lists, writing cards, and wrapping presents, though all those things are part of the season too; our preparation could be more Christian if it involved giving charity gifts, talking to the homeless and giving them a hot drink or food. Our preparation needs to be inviting friends and neighbours to our Carol service – the one service a year they might actually attend, being the voice in the wilderness to the majority of people in the UK now who say they are not part of any religion. It might be delaying your family Christmas dinner by an hour and coming to church on Christmas Day – to remember the reason for the season.

In our reading from Isaiah, we have the idyllic image of peace that we hear so often – the wolf shall live with the lamb, the cow and the bear shall eat together, and children will safely play with snakes. We've heard it so many times we probably don't pay much attention to it anymore. Isaiah gives an image of a truly righteous leader. Against the lived reality of war, the prophet proclaims peace. Against the nightmares of the age, he offers a dream! There is hope of a new beginning represented by a shoot springing from disaster and destruction. As Christians we read this text, particularly in Advent, and we think of Jesus as the ideal ruler who is predicted. Yet the Jewish people who heard this passage yearned for a new world where justice and righteousness would reign.

In Matthew we hear about John the Baptist, the voice crying out in the wilderness. Even by the standards of his day, John was a bit of a strange character. He lived on the fringes of society; he ate locusts and wild honey and wore clothes made of camel's hair. He might fit

in well today with those who lie on roads to campaign against the use of fossil fuels, or who live in trees to prevent road or airport construction. He'd probably be a voice in the wilderness crying out for climate justice. He was also political – he condemned the king. He announced that it was time to repent as the people were forgetting God and the long-promised time of justice that the people had been yearning for. He was a protester, a firebrand and Jesus was the prophet who followed after, hammering home the message of the end of entitlement and power.

John the Baptist in 21st century Britain, might well be homeless, have a mental illness or be neurodivergent. He was definitely an outsider on the fringes of society. In the Christmas story – the story of God coming as a vulnerable child, born into poverty and violence - there is a place for people who are different. The radical protester is a necessary part of a society facing a crisis – and now we are facing many crises - the climate, a cost-of-living crisis, an energy crisis, a war in Europe crisis, not to mention the almost total destruction of Gaza and the violence of settlers in the occupied West Bank. We need those brave and different people to cry out in the wilderness so that the body of main opinion will change.

The Church gives us these readings in Advent when we think of the coming kingdom inaugurated by Jesus; our Isaiah reading is taken to speak of Jesus but we are tempted to divorce both Isaiah's prophecy and John the Baptist's preaching from their political contexts. Maybe we do that so we don't have to think too much about what repentance, critique of today's rulers, and righteousness might mean for us! Our Isaiah passage offers hope in the midst of the ever-present threat of war. Our passage from Matthew offers radical hope, a hope of God's kingdom breaking in, a hope tinged with action – that axe poised to bring down the fruitless. An audacious hopeful prophet told crowds to repent. Audacious prophets like Isaiah, John and Jesus, were not afraid to critique the powers of the day. Our world is still crying out for that type of audacious prophet and that kind of hope and a promise of meaningful change which our politicians can never provide.

For the majority of us, December flies by in a flurry of activity and any Advent reflection falls by the wayside. Even those who genuinely love Christmas often miss the point and are content with familiar traditions. Yet Advent marks something momentous – God coming among us, as one of us and Christmas is not merely a birthday celebration but a yearly opportunity to consider the future and the coming of God's kingdom. So, let's take a little time in what is left of this Advent to really reflect on the meaning of Christmas, and like John the Baptist prepare the way of the Lord.

**Hymn** Put peace into each other's hands R&S 635

### LORD'S SUPPER

Thank you, scandalous God, for giving yourself to the world  
not in the powerful and the extraordinary, but in weakness and the familiar:  
in a baby; in bread and wine.

Thank you for offering, at journey's end, a new beginning;  
for setting, in the poverty of a stable, the richest jewel of your love;  
for revealing, in a particular place, your light for all nations...

Thank you for bringing us to Bethlehem, House of Bread,  
where the empty are filled, and the filled are emptied;  
where the poor find riches, and the rich recognise their poverty;  
where all who kneel and hold out their hands are unstintingly fed.

Lord God, you come to us in the simplicity of a baby,  
yet are greater by far than our imagining.

Lord Christ, you hide your ways from the proud,  
yet reveal your truth to those of a childlike spirit;  
Lord Spirit, you overthrow the powerful,  
yet empower the humble and open of heart. Come to us Lord.

Come to us now in your vulnerable strength  
as we remember Jesus, who brought wholeness and life  
through his death and resurrection.

On the night before he died, he took bread and wine, blessed them  
and gave them to his friends, saying,  
this is my body, this is my blood,  
eat and drink to remember me.

Come freshly to us, Living God:

Bring in your Kingdom of justice and love, **Your Kingdom come**;  
Forgive us, that we may learn to repent, **Your Kingdom come**;  
Heal us, that we may be whole in your service, **Your Kingdom come**;  
Teach us, that we may be surprised into truth, **Your Kingdom come**;  
For you are the God who longs to set us free to love and serve you wholeheartedly.

**Your Kingdom come in us, Lord, and transform the world to your praise and glory.**  
**Amen**

Draw near with faith. Be strengthened by the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in a stable to be the living bread and died on a cross having poured out his love so we may drink from God's cup of forgiveness. Eat and drink. Take Jesus into your hearts.

As you take the bread, hold it in prayer and remember how the body of Jesus was born, lived and was broken for you, and then we will eat together, united in the one body.

As you take the wine, hold it in prayer and remember how Jesus poured out his love for you and meets your needs when he lives in your heart.

### **Post Communion Prayer**

O Lord our God, make us watchful and keep us faithful  
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord; that, when he shall appear,  
he may not find us sleeping but active in Your service  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

### **Prayers of intercession**

Prepare, for the day of God's coming draws near!  
Prepare for peace. Holy God may the divisions between us be erased.  
May we, people of all backgrounds, walk with one another.  
listen to one another; bear one another's burdens.  
May we be peacemakers in everything we say and do.  
We give you thanks for how uniquely and distinctly each human being has been made,  
for all our characteristics and differences which make us who we are.

Prepare for hope. Merciful God, when we look around,  
the promises of your Kingdom seem so distant.  
Grant us tenacity: to bring light where there is darkness;  
peace where there is strife, comfort where there is despair.  
Let the light of your presence shine in us,  
so that all may know that the darkness will not win.

Almighty God, you stripped yourself entirely to come into this world.  
Weak, fragile, and dependent, you gave yourself into the care of an unwed teenager.  
In following you, may we become as vulnerable.  
May we strip away all that protects us, all that we hide behind, and let it burn like chaff.  
May our actions bear fruit that glorifies you, eternal God, love incarnate.  
Lord, we pray too for places where the Church is met with indifference, or misunderstanding  
where we are feeble and failing, where our witness is no longer heard.  
Yet we also acknowledge that the church has often fallen short of your dream that all are welcome,  
We have often not welcomed those who are different, or through ignorance have made them feel  
unwelcome – forgive us Lord and help us to be better.

We pray for our world, for places at war or torn apart by violence,  
where creation groans with eager longing for a redemption long denied,  
where the temperatures and seas rise, and where the poorest are hit the hardest.  
We pray for those who suffer from the cruel economic systems we perpetuate,  
for those worried about how they will pay their bills this winter,  
for those worried about what they will eat, if they will eat.  
We give thanks for all those who are willing to be abused and maligned  
to bring us to awareness of the crisis in your good creation.

We pray for your healing presence amongst those we love and worry about  
and name now in the silence of our hearts....

Holy One, Master of both the light and the darkness,  
send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.  
May those of us who have so much to do find quiet spaces to hear your voice.  
May those who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us.  
May those whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.  
To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"  
In this season of Advent, suspended between hope and fulfilment,  
may we never forget the gift of your Son. May we be overwhelmed by your mercy.  
May we be honest about the darkness within us, and perceptive of the light around us.  
May we make straight the path for the Lord, that together we may see God's glory revealed. Amen  
**Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn** Come, thou long-expected Jesus R&S 138 (tune at 663)

**Blessing** (Romans 15:5-6, 13)

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, in this Advent season and beyond. Amen

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