**2nd December 2018**

**Advent Sunday**

[**Call to worship**](javascript:void(0))

As we begin our Advent journey,   
we come together in hope,   
to worship the one who brings hope to the whole world.   
We come together to worship the Lord.

[**A gathering prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Father God,   
as we begin this season of Advent,   
a season of watching and waiting,   
fill us with your hope   
that we might be bearers of hope to others.   
Amen.

[**A prayer of approach**](javascript:void(0))

God of hope,   
as we take our first steps on the Advent journey    
we take them with you, and for you;   
with one another, and for one another;   
and with Christians around the world.   
We follow the path of those who have gone before us,   
refreshing it for those who will come after us,   
and trusting you every step of the way, hopefully and joyfully.   
In Jesus’ name.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of adoration**](javascript:void(0))

Abundant God, Saviour Christ, life-giving Spirit,   
we praise you that each day and new season offers a fresh beginning, full of opportunity, hope and promise.   
May our love for you and those around us increase day-by-day;   
may your grace fill us and those around us more deeply;    
and may your kingdom come in us and through us.   
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we praise you.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**](javascript:void(0))

**A prayer of confession**

God of Advent,   
it hurts us to remember the mistakes we have made.   
We are sorry for the bad decisions that have ended   
our hopes and those of others:   
**forgive us and help us to choose well.**  
We are sorry when our misreading of situations    
has spolit our hopes and those of others:   
**forgive us and help us to act wisely.**  
We are sorry when resentment and jealously    
have poisoned our hopes and those of others:   
forgive us and help us to think carefully.    
In Jesus’ name.  
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord Jesus, child of Christmas and Saviour of all the world,   
trusting your promise of forgiveness,    
we lift our heads and take the next steps;   
we let go of old mistakes and embrace new opportunities;    
we come out of our darkness into your Advent light,   
and begin again, hopefully and confidently.   
In your name.  
**Amen!**

**Luke 21.25-36; 1 Thess 3.9-13**

The theme for the first Sunday in Advent is Hope.

Hope. Are you hopeful for yourself, our community, our world?

The war in the Holy Land has been absolutely devastating to so many and peace is still such a long way off. This week’s ceasefire in Lebanon has been greeted with sheer relief by those who live there but optimism over the current long-term outlook for peace is in short supply. As Christians, we have hope that Jesus is coming again, that God will bring his rule and reign to all of the Earth. While we wait for that, it is important to call out and celebrate any signs of peace, love and hope that we see.

Some in the world around us are tempted to give up all hope and to say the Earth is doomed and God-forsaken. The climate crisis deepens, with little coming out of COP29 to inspire hope that it can be averted, especially with that arch climate change denier Donald Trump about to seize control of one of the world’s biggest polluters the United States.

Our faith is that God is at work in the world and cares deeply about all who live there. As a result we praise God for any and all green shoots we see and pray for more - even (or especially) in the face of such pain and despair.

Domestic abuse has historically been something hidden, something that isn’t talked about. The church has sometimes made it harder for those being abused to leave their situations by emphasising Christian concepts of forgiveness and transformation in relationships where one side used such ideas to keep their partner under their control.

The change in the law this week[[1]](#endnote-1), with new strict new restraining orders on domestic abusers,is a first step towards a stated goal of halving violence against women and girls within a decade. There are legal changes happening but equally a need to educate and inform men and women about what has been happening and what still happens to far too many women. This is a dark situation, a topic that we often avoid discussing in church, but Jesus treated women as equals when his culture considered them objects. The church should be at the forefront of campaigning for protection for those at risk of harm and can, at the least, celebrate those steps being taken which should lead to fewer women being hurt or killed.

I’m A Celebrity Get Me Out of Here always takes up many many column inches in our newspapers each year with gossip about the celebrities taking part and rumours of arguments and spats off-camera. We should be delighted, therefore, that a Christian has taken a place in the jungle and is modelling compassion, care and a down-to-Earth faith. Revd Richard Coles might not be to everyone’s tastes but he is speaking about his faith openly and in a way which his fellow celebrities have connected with. Perhaps his openness will create opportunities for us in the coming weeks to share with our colleagues and friends how Jesus has been with us through dark times? Possibly the green shoots in the jungle will lead to the opening of conversations about faith with people who have previously seemed closed off to talking about faith? Let’s be on the lookout for signs that God is at work in those we meet this week.

On Friday our MPs had the debate about Assisted Dying. It was moving and intense and many MPs said it was the hardest decision they will make and we can only thank them for their efforts and concern about these sensitive issues.

Kim Leadbeater who proposed the bill told the story of one man who had bile duct cancer which obstructed his bowel, resulting in "an agonising death".

The Labour MP went on to say that everyone has stories like this one from their own constituencies.

How can we allow this and not a compassionate death, she asks.

You feel for anyone in that situation.

Liberal Democrat Tim Farron recognised that the motives of those in favour are "grounded in compassion".

"Neither side has a monopoly on compassion," he said, but insists his opposition to the bill is also "grounded in compassion".

He said to legalise assisted dying is to create the space for coercion and goes on to argue that there are no safeguards that will prevent it.

I know that speaking to people before the debate many were in favour because they didn’t want to be a burden on their families. There will be a lot of disappointment therefore in this bill because fear of being a burden will not be a reason to be granted assistance to die. The door has been opened a little on assisted dying and many will now want to push it wide open.

The whole debate, parliament at its best, has allowed people to talk about death and how we feel about death and preparing to die. I hope some good comes out of that and a deeper appreciation and care for all people going through that stage of life. Especially to improve palliative end of life care for all.

Yesterday was the first anniversary of my brother’s funeral. He died on the 14th November last year and his funeral was on the 30th November appropriately St Andrew’s Day. Although he was no saint, may I add.

My son and I went to see his and ours football team, Burnley, play at Stoke as a way of celebrating his life. Always a risky strategy going to a football game – in case your team loses.

Andrew died in a hospice, a good death you could argue. With us all around him at the time. His last speech to us he got all philosophical saying we are all dealt cards in life. His wife butted in at that point and said they got dealt the best hand. Andrew missed his cue at that point and should’ve said yes but instead paused for too long!

We all get dealt with different cards in life and no one knows for certain how things will work out and indeed what lies beyond death. It takes faith to believe there is nothing after death, as much as it takes faith to believe there is something. If there isn’t anything after death, then this is all there is and the cards we are dealt with can be too harsh. In the light of eternity those cards may take on a different perspective. That’s why I’d encourage all to consider the hope of Christ.

We never know what hand we get dealt with. And how that hand changes in life. One period it may be a tough hand. But then later fortunes may change.

We can all be tempted to despair and give up on a particular situation. It’s a spiritual challenge: how do you keep going. How do you find hope. Can you see signs of God’s work in an unexpected place? Will you pray and ask God to fill you with the Spirit – the spirit who is the comforter, the counsellor, the guide, the empowerer.

Advent is the time when we think about the Coming of Christ – God’s intervention into our mess, our sin, our fears, our hatreds. It is a time when we remember the coming of the Prince of Peace. It is also a time when we prepare for the Coming again of Christ, the judge of the living and the dead, to inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth.

There are powerful themes in Advent. Advent imagery is full of a sense of urgency: the days are surely coming (Jeremiah 33.14); there will be signs…now when these things begin…the kingdom of God is near…’ (Luke 21.25,28,31). God’s people are told to ‘be on guard’ (Luke 21.34), to be alert (Luke 21.36) and to attend to our hearts.

The world in which Jesus lived, times were troubled. The nature of God’s kingdom where the poor are fed and the rich are sent away empty can seem to be a long way away. It is however earthed in our daily decisions and choices. Advent brings us face to face with the challenge ‘stand up,’ and to be visible – to work for peace and justice.

People of God – we are called to wake up and to read the signs. We are called to recommit our energies to the things that have real value in the kingdom and to stand up. We are reminded that we are co-creators with God and not passive observers, whatever our age. Now is the time.

Now is the time for bold measures to tackle climate change – what will future generations say if we fail to act? Advent has a stern message for all who fail to see that ‘now’ shapes the future and in a very real sense the future therefore is also ‘now’. What is required of us? Simply that we stand up – that we become actively engaged.

Many people are pessimistic about the future. One theologian has observed (Neil Hamilton, who taught at Drew University for many years) how people in our time lose hope for the future. It happens whenever we let our culture call the shots on how the world is going to end. At this stage of technological advancement, the only way the culture can make sense of the future is through the picture of everything blowing up in a nuclear holocaust or over heating through global warming.

The world cannot know what we know, that everything has changed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, that the same Christ is coming to judge the world and give birth to a new creation. And so, people lose hope. As Hamilton puts it: This substitution of an image of nuclear holocaust or global warming for the coming of Christ is a parable of what happens to Christians when they cease to believe in their own eschatological heritage. (eschatological means the end things – what happens at the last). The culture supplies its own images for the end when we default by ceasing to believe in biblical images of God's triumph at the end.

The good news of the gospel is this: when all is said and done, God is going to win. So stand firm, keep alert. But that doesn’t mean passivism – doing nothing.

We are called to stay alert and be on guard. Those verbs are active. It doesn’t imply we sit back and do nothing and wait for the Lord to return. Some Christians particularly in America have a view of the rapture, the Second Coming of Christ, in which they welcome rather than try to avert a cataclysmic political conflict or environmental disaster, since they believe this must be a sign of the end and that Christians will be raptured to heaven and be with God forever, avoiding the suffering to come.

Their belief is based on a text from 1 Thessalonians 4.17 which says we who are alive will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord. The image Paul draws on here is one of the emperor’s coming on a royal visit to a city under his rule, and the elders of the city going out to welcome him and escort him to the gates of the city. The word ‘parousia’ Paul uses of Jesus’ coming would have been used of just such an imperial visit. In other words, when we meet the Lord in the air, we then turn to accompany him to the earth over which he is the rightful king, rather than turning to accompany us to heaven.

Jesus prays for God’s kingdom and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. This is not about spiritual escapism of the earth’s realities – but being alert and being on guard to take our active part in God’s redemptive purposes in the world. Putting the world to right – overcoming evil with good.

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives:   On May 19th, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought."

Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to be lights as we watch and wait. Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle. In places of conflict and fear: be a peacemaker.

May God help us to stand up and be counted for peace and justice.

[**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**](javascript:void(0))

God of all hope and all seasons,   
we praise you for your promise that the darkest night will pass    
and the dawn bring new hope and light;    
the fiercest storm will subside    
and your grace will bring stillness and calm;   
the deepest wounds will heal and your love    
will bring acceptance and courage;    
the season of waiting will end and    
you will meet us wonderfully and joyfully.   
We thank you for everything and everyone    
who draws us closer to you.  
**Amen.**

[**Prayers of intercession**](javascript:void(0))

Heavenly Father, as Advent begins and we turn our minds to preparations for Christmas, we pray especially today for those whose lives have been turned upside down by recent weather events; for those who have lost loved ones in storms and floods; for those who have lost their homes or have been temporarily displaced; and for those whose livelihoods have been destroyed or seriously disrupted.

As we face the challenges of climate change, we pray for all those in charge of our councils and our country, who have difficult decisions to make on the way forward; and we thank you for the hope held out by COP29 – the hope of nations working together to tackle the causes of climate breakdown.

Lord, as we turn our minds towards Bethlehem at the beginning of Advent, we thank you for the ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, and for the hope it brings of greater peace in the region. As we prepare to welcome the Prince of Peace, we hold in our hearts the hope for hostilities to cease the world over.

Father, for Christians, the new year begins today, with thoughts of a journey to Bethlehem, and hope in the form of a new baby, Jesus, who would change the world; but we have ahead of us four hectic, challenging weeks. December is a difficult time for many people, but especially for those who are lonely, with no family or friends to gather round the table, and those who are struggling to pay for presents to put under the tree. Many reflect on the past at this time, and become sad because of loved ones lost to them, or situations in life which haven’t worked out. May your Church in each community, and we as Christians, be aware of the needs of those around us, and respond with love, holding out hope through friendship and a helping hand. Bless the special efforts made by individual congregations at this time, to be a beacon of hope and Christian love in their communities.

As we anticipate the joys of Christmas at this, the beginning of Advent, we pray for those who will find this year especially difficult, because of recent bereavement. May they know the hope held out in the promises of your Son, that they shall see their loved ones again. We ask also for a blessing of hope for those who suffer in body or in mind, or both; hope of healing and strength.

Lord, we live in times of change and great uncertainty, when faith is challenged and the Church is often found lacking; but in this season when even those who have strayed far from you, or those who have never learned of you, hear about the infant Jesus, may there be a response to the invitation held out by your Church worldwide – an invitation to celebrate the coming of light at the darkest time of the year, and to find hope for the way ahead.

Lord of a creation now scarred and struggling,  
**Let there always be hope.**

Lord of a fallen world where faith falters,  
**Let there always be hope.**

Lord of light in times of darkness,  
**Let there always be hope.**

Lord of life, overcoming death and destruction,  
**Let there always be hope.**

**Our hope is in you.  
Amen**

[**A prayer for all ages together**](javascript:void(0))

Lord, thank you for the signs of hope we see in the world today.   
Thank you that, even when things seem hopeless,   
with you there is always hope.   
Help us to be people who look for hope and share it with others.   
**Amen.**

[**A sending out prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Let us go out in hope to share God’s hope with others,   
that we might bring light into the dark corners of the world.   
**Amen.**

**Share the Word**

**Gospel acclamation**

The dawn is breaking,  
the light promised for all time  
is coming into the world.  
Hear again the promises of God  
and God’s story of love, joy, hope and peace for all people.

**Sacrament**

**Introduction to the Peace**

Now is the time to make peace with God,  
with your neighbour and with the whole of creation,  
made and loved by God.

**Short preface for a Thanksgiving prayer**

We give you thanks and praise  
because, although the darkness surrounds us,  
the light of your Word shines to show us the way.  
May we, by our prayers and actions,  
love as you have loved us;  
hope in a new beginning  
and, with urgency and humble trust,  
build the joyful future that you have made possible  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

**Go with God**

**A post-Communion prayer**

You have brought us out of darkness  
into your wonderful light.  
May we, who have seen your brightness,  
live as children of light,  
reflecting your love, joy, hope and peace  
to a world in darkness. Amen.

**Amen**.

**Prayers of blessing**

Set us free, O God,  
from all that prevents us from serving you.  
Open our ears to hear your voice.  
Open our hands to care for others.  
Open our eyes and keep us watching and waiting for you.  
**Amen.**

Shine on us, O God,  
with the power of your love;  
and, as you have filled us with heavenly food,  
may we feed all who hunger for hope.  
**Amen.**

Send us out, O God,  
carrying the light of your promises  
and the joy of the bright future to which you call us  
to people who sit in darkness.  
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/nov/27/jess-phillips-on-new-anti-domestic-violence-measures-i-feel-hopeful-today> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)