



Journeying through Advent

with **New Daylight**

Daily Bible readings
and group study material

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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About the contributors

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Andy John has been Bishop of Bangor since 2008. He has a particular interest in the relationship between the gospel and culture (especially art and music).

Margaret Cundiff, who died in 2011, was one of the first women to be ordained in 1994. A priest, writer, broadcaster and chaplain, she was also a member of the Third Order of Franciscans.

Introduction

SALLY WELCH

Last year my parish church put on its first ever Christmas Tree Festival. Over 30 organisations and businesses, ranging from the local cafe to the Bowls Club, the Refugee Action Committee to our marvellous honey farmer took part. Christmas trees lined the nave and the chancel, and hundreds of people visited to admire the decorations and vote for their favourite tree. Concerts, parties and a final 'Songs of Praise' event added the finishing touches to a busy and successful weekend. Money was raised for the church roof, connections were established with local groups and people came and celebrated the start of Christmas with their local church.

So why then did I feel slightly unsettled by it all? Why did I have a sense that somehow something was missing? On reflection I realised that the Christmas Tree Festival, with its joy and its colour, its singing and its hospitality, had driven a great big, tinsel-bedecked truck right through our preparations for the birth of the Saviour of the world!

Advent is a sombre time in the church calendar – a season when flowers do not decorate churches, the liturgical colour is a mournful purple and the readings look forward with a degree of apprehension as well as anticipation. While all the rest of the world is covering itself in glitter and sparkle, immersed in an orgy of spending and over-indulging, the

church alone stands sober and still, determinedly counter-cultural. And it is right that this is so. By doing so, we can offer that most precious gift of all – that of time: time to pause and reflect on the nature of the event that changed the course of the world forever; time to decide how we will respond to this gift at once so small and yet with such potential; time to turn and face the world with love and hope, offering to others what has been offered to us with such generosity.

My prayer for us this Advent is that we use the time we have been given in this spacious season to look forward with hope to the kingdom which is God is preparing for us – a kingdom of righteousness, justice and peace, where our tears have no place because the King of love has wiped them all away, where the transformation first begun by a baby born in a stable is finally and completely realised and the world unites to sing.

This theme of hope is explored lovingly by many of the writers in this study guide. One of *New Daylight's* favourite writers, David Winter, begins by looking forward with the prophets as he explores the Advent antiphons, those names of Christ which echo through the centuries, bringing their promise of hope and justice. These names are translated into principles in the second and third letters of John, and Steve Aisthorpe shares with us practical examples of living in truth and love.

As we approach the shortest night, Amy Boucher Pye encourages us to look through God's eyes as the light of his love shines into the darkest corners of our world. That light is, of course, Christ – the light of all peoples, a light no

darkness can overcome, and Andy John brings our Advent studies to a close with his investigation into that most classic of Christmas passages, the first verses of the gospel of John. Finally Margaret Cundiff invites us to greet the new year with hope as we explore the reassurance and faith offered to us in some of our favourite psalms: 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.'

With every blessing this Advent season

Sally Mulvender

How to use this material in a group

This material can be used in a number of different ways by all sorts of groups. If your group is already meeting, it can provide the scripture or discussion input, reminding group members of the 'alternative Advent' to shopping, cooking and other preparations for Christmas. It can also form the basis for a weekly Advent group. Similar to a Lent group, this can provide members with space for reflection during a busy time and perhaps offer a springboard to a year-round study group.

If a new group is beginning, it is a good idea to include refreshments with each meeting – some groups find an evening meal with discussion round the table very popular, while others feel that drinks and biscuits or cake are more appropriate. This kind of hospitality can break down barriers and introduce people to each other in a relaxed way, which in turn will lead to a livelier, more fruitful discussion.

Remember to provide prospective members of the group with booklets well before the beginning of Advent. The reflections begin on 1 December and continue to Epiphany on 6 January.

The group leader may or may not also be the group host. Either or both of these roles may be fixed for the whole of Advent or rotate among the group.

If the group leader and host are different people, they should liaise beforehand to ensure arrangements are in place, the time and date are fixed and refreshments are available.

Introduction Make sure each person has a copy of the booklet and that spares are available for those who do not. Introduce newcomers to the group and make them feel welcome. Remind everyone that they do not have to contribute to the discussion if they don't want to, but that conversation will be livelier if they do!

Opening prayer Use a prayer within the traditions of the group; this will help put people at ease, and those who are familiar with the traditions will lend confidence to those who are not. A song or hymn can be sung.

Discussion If the group is large, split into twos or threes to discuss reactions to the week's reflections. Allow time for each person to share, if they wish. If discussion is slow to start, suggest that each member offers one word or sentence that sums up their reaction.

Forum As one group, try to discern some themes that are common to most members. If it helps, write these down and circulate them among the group.

Reflection Each set of study questions relates to one day's reading. You may wish to read that day's reflection aloud together first. Study the group questions, and spend some time in silence so that individuals can reflect on the theme

personally. Come together to discuss the questions. Again, if the group is large it is helpful to split into smaller groups.

Plenary The leader draws together the themes arising from the discussion, and sees whether they mirror those from the week's reflections. Again, these can be noted for later distribution.

Prayer It can be helpful to begin your prayer time with silence, in order to meditate on the results of the discussion. This can be followed by open prayer. Be flexible, allowing time for each person to contribute if they wish.

Closing prayer.



The Advent antiphons

DAVID WINTER

The call of Moses

Exodus 3:3–6 (NRSV)

Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Reflection

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, oppressed by cruel taskmasters and forced to build Pharaoh’s treasure houses. In their suffering, they had cried out to God and he had heard their cries. Now, in an astonishing sequence of events – which began with the birth of Moses and culminates here, at Mount Horeb – God puts into operation his great plan to rescue his people and bring them to their promised land.

This moment at the burning bush is a turning point not just for the Hebrew people, but also in the whole story of God’s dealings with the human race. The voice that called Moses was none other than that of Yahweh, the eternal, personal,

all-powerful ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. From that moment, the destiny of the Hebrew people changed. Redemption, freedom, the law, covenant and promises of God would all be theirs. Ahead lay rivers to cross and tests that they could not have imagined, but beyond it all lay the promised land, ‘flowing with milk and honey’. On that journey, their God would be with them every step of the way.

What was true for them, the people of the old covenant, is just as true for us, the people of the new one. Our God is not helpless or insensitive to our needs; he is silently planning for us in love. That is the truth of Bethlehem, but it is also the great Advent truth. With God, nothing is ever finally hopeless.



**O come, O come, Adonai, who in thy glorious majesty
from Sinai's mountain, clothed in awe, gavest thy folk
the ancient law. Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come
to thee, O Israel.**

DAVID WINTER

The stock of Jesse

Isaiah 11:1-3 (NRSV)

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear.

Reflection

Years ago, when I was rector of a Cotswold village, there was a carving of a Jesse tree in the north aisle of our beautiful Norman church. Its idea was, of course, based on these verses – the ‘shoot’ from the ‘stock of Jesse’ was his descendant, the father of the shepherd boy David, who became Israel’s greatest king. As we look ahead to Christmas, the connection with Bethlehem becomes obvious, because there a ‘shoot’ from Jesse’s stock was born – Jesus, a descendant of David. So Christians have always read this passage as a prophecy of the birth of the Messiah, Jesus.

These words emphasise the role of the Holy Spirit in the character and life of Jesus. His first public utterance, in the synagogue at Nazareth, began with words from this same prophet:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ (Luke 4:18). Here, we are reminded of some of the Spirit’s particular gifts – wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and fear (in the sense of reverence).

‘Wisdom’, in the language of the Bible, is much more than a concept or abstract principle. God is pure wisdom and Jesus was wisdom incarnate – perfect wisdom in human form. The Old Testament asserts several times that ‘the fear of the Lord... is wisdom’ (for example, Job 28:28), but only in Jesus did that reverence of the Father reach perfection. His wisdom gave him understanding, in the deepest sense, and also knowledge – he ‘knew all people... for he himself knew what was in everyone’ (John 2:24–25). That in turn gave him the gift of counsel, for when he spoke it was on the basis of knowledge, not guesswork.



**O come, thou root of Jesse! Draw the quarry from
the lion’s claw; from those dread caverns of the grave,
from nether hell thy people save. Rejoice, rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.**

DAVID WINTER

Righteousness and justice

Isaiah 11:3–5 (NRSV)

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Reflection

‘Righteousness’ and ‘faithfulness’ are to be the two distinguishing virtues of the Messiah. ‘Righteousness’ simply means ‘doing what is right’, which means, in effect, doing what God requires of us. It is not only one of the most common words in the Old Testament, but also on the lips of Jesus. He himself came to ‘fulfil all righteousness’ (Matthew 3:15) and called his followers to ‘strive first’ for God’s righteousness, to make it a priority (Matthew 6:33). Indeed, he warned them that ‘unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:20). The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was concerned with ritual, law and outward show. True righteousness is concerned with behaviour – what we do and what we are.

This is a picture of God's righteous one, and it is interesting that this behaviour necessarily involves not only doing good (exercising faithfulness and doing what God requires) but also opposing evil. Sometimes we shy away from the latter – 'Who am I,' we ask ourselves, 'to denounce what is wrong in others when I am only too conscious of my own failings?' Yet the two are indivisible. Sometimes our role is to do what is right ourselves. Sometimes our role is to oppose what is wrong, whoever is responsible for it. This is not a matter of personal whim, either, deciding on the basis of what my eyes see or my ears hear, but on the basis of God's standards – 'righteousness and equity', fairness, justice. That is God's model and we can see it best in Jesus, and will see it again when he comes as judge.



**Son of David, you stand as a sign among the nations;
rulers will keep silence before you for whom the nations
long; come and save us without delay.**

DAVID WINTER

True security

Isaiah 22:21–23 (NRSV)

And [I] will clothe [Eliakim] with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honour to his ancestral house.

Reflection

It is often said that religion is a crutch. Well, if you've broken your ankle you're grateful for one!

Where human beings are concerned, most of us have moments of insecurity and fear when we feel the need for some source of comfort and reassurance beyond ourselves. In this powerful prophecy from Isaiah, we hear God's warning to the faithless steward Shebna that his responsibilities will be stripped from him and given to 'my servant Eliakim', who would then be a father to the nation and bear final responsibility in making judgement (using the 'key' of authority to open and shut the kingdom). In this way, he would restore the Davidic tradition, which recent events had sorely tarnished. These words are

echoed in Jesus' commission to Peter and the apostles (Matthew 16:19), who in his name would open (or close) the gates of the kingdom of heaven by preaching the gospel and calling for a response.

Eliakim (who was not to be king, but the king's steward) would also be a secure 'peg' on which could be hung all the honours of the house of David. Some responsibility! I think this passage is included in Advent readings because it speaks of the enormous expectations attached to the tradition of David, expectations that could only be fulfilled when Jesus, the greatest son of David, came to us. In him is true security, a safe 'peg' on which to hang our anxieties, and he is the one who unlocked, in his death and resurrection, the kingdom, not of David but of heaven itself.



**O come, thou Lord of David's key! The royal door fling
wide and free; safeguard for us the heavenward road,
and bar the way to death's abode. Rejoice, rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.**

DAVID WINTER

Sceptre and star

Numbers 24:15–17 (NRSV)

So [Balaam] uttered his oracle, saying: ‘The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is clear, the oracle of one who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered: I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near – a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites.’

Reflection

Balaam is a strange figure of a prophet in this story, because he was not a Jew, a man of the covenant, but one of the mysterious and honoured ‘God-fearers’ who feature a good deal in the Old Testament. He claimed to speak what ‘the LORD’ – the capital letters in most translations tell us that he was referring to *Yahweh* – was telling him. This despite being urged by the enemy King Balak to curse the Israelites.

Far from cursing them, Balaam offered this remarkable oracle – a visionary prophecy. In it he is given a vision of ‘the Almighty’ – perceived, apparently, while he was lying on the ground but with his eyes open. He saw a person who was yet to be (‘I see

him, but not now'), a shining star, bringing light and fulfilling promises, and a sceptre, denoting kingship. To the Jewish people, this has always spoken of the great King David, who would lead the nation into its glory days. To Christians down the ages, it has been a promise of one even greater than David, through his descendant. David was always seen as coming from and uniting Israel and 'Jacob' (Judea).

For us today, it is a prophetic word about the one who came and is yet to come. He will indeed come with authority, but also as a bright and shining light, a star to lighten the cosmic scene. A star led the magi to Bethlehem. Perhaps an even brighter star will lead us eventually into the kingdom of heaven.



**O come, O come, thou dayspring bright! Pour on our souls
thy healing light; dispel the long night's lingering gloom,
and pierce the shadows of the tomb. Rejoice, rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.**

DAVID WINTER

Freedom and release

Jeremiah 30:7–9 (NRSV)

Alas! that day is so great there is none like it; it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be rescued from it. On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will break the yoke from off his neck, and I will burst his bonds, and strangers shall no more make a servant of him. But they shall serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.

Reflection

We move on, in this panorama of prophecy, to the great prophet Jeremiah. He was not a man to pull punches! Having laid it on the line for the people of Judea (Jacob) – they were going into captivity, for their sin and wilfulness – he now assures them that God does not forget his covenant promises. The day of punishment will be dreadful indeed, but there will also be a wonderful day of redemption and freedom.

When that day comes, it will not be the bringer of a partial or conditional release. The yoke of foreign bondage will indeed be broken. The prisoners' chains will be snapped; they will no longer be slaves and captives. However, this is not simply release from evil – it is delivery into a great good. At last they will be free to serve God and live under the reign of someone the prophet calls 'David'.

All through these prophecies, the name recurs. Clearly this is no longer the historical King David, who reigned and then died, leaving only an honoured memory. This is the whole Davidic principle, the idea that God would one day send his people a king like David – just, victorious, God-fearing. Thus, the people awaited a literal descendant of the great king, but one who would be imbued with divine power – a messiah indeed.

They did not know it then, but the event would be delayed for several centuries yet, and I suppose we could say that we still wait, expectantly, for its complete fulfilment. David's 'son' came to set us free, and he will come again to bring in that godly reign of justice and peace promised so long ago.



O come, desire of nations! Show thy kingly reign on earth below; thou cornerstone, uniting all, restore the ruin of our fall. Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

DAVID WINTER

The God who comes to save us

Jeremiah 30:10–11a (NRSV)

But as for you, have no fear, my servant Jacob, says the Lord, and do not be dismayed, O Israel; for I am going to save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and no one shall make him afraid. For I am with you, says the Lord, to save you.

Reflection

One of the great themes of the Bible is that God is with us, as well as above us. Most religions recognise the power and otherness of God, but Judaism and Christianity are unique in the concept of God being near us, with us. In the Old Testament, God heard his people's cries and appeared to Moses at the burning bush. He explained that he had 'come down to deliver them from the Egyptians' (Exodus 3:8). In fact, Moses and Aaron were to be the human instruments of that rescue, but they were aware of God's presence with them and so were the Israelites as they set out across the Red Sea on their journey to the promised land. The signs of that presence were the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night.

At other times, too, God drew near to his people, sometimes in moments of crisis and sometimes to encourage and support

them. Isaiah speaks of a baby who would be born and called 'Immanuel', which means 'God is with us' (Isaiah 7:14).

Here, Jeremiah also promises the people that the Lord would be 'with them to save them' in their time of fear and distress. In other words, this is no distant, remote deity, firing off commands from a far-away heaven, but a God who comes to his people. That is also a great theme of the New Testament. Jesus is described as 'the one who is to come' (Luke 7:19), the promised 'Emmanuel' (Matthew 1:23). In our earthly journey he will be with us to the end of time (Matthew 28:20), but he also says that he will come again to bring in the final reign of God and all the blessings of his kingdom.



**Jesus, you are our Emmanuel, the hope of the nations
and their Saviour; come and save us, O Lord.**

DAVID WINTER



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Five weeks of Advent material for church groups and individuals, offering themed reflections by well-loved contributors from the **New Daylight** archive alongside specially written questions for group discussion.

Week 1: The Advent antiphons – David Winter

Week 2: 2 and 3 John – Steve Aisthorpe

Week 3: Light in the darkness – Amy Boucher Pye

Week 4: Word incarnate: John 1:1–16 – Andy John

Week 5: Psalms of hope – Margaret Cundiff

With an introduction by **New Daylight** editor Sally Welch.



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