

BRF Advent Book

# An Advent Manifesto

Daily readings and reflections  
from Isaiah and Luke

A lit candle in a holder, with a small orange and other decorative items, set against a warm, bokeh background.

Martyn Percy

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*'An Advent Manifest* is medicine for the soul. A wonderful, easy to read, bite-sized, yet profound and Christ-centred collection of readings. At one and the same time it is both calming yet challenging, reassuring yet revolutionary. Martyn Percy has delivered a daily tonic for healing and well-being – both personal and societal – which brings ancient biblical wisdom to the complexity of our 21st-century lives and world.'

**Steve Chalke, founder, Oasis Charitable Trust**

'Refreshing, witty, readable, erudite: a biblical blast. I find myself longing for Advent.'

**Anne Atkins, novelist, writer and broadcaster**

'Advent starts with that glorious prayer: "Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord", asking God to use that holy season to help us bring forth good works. This thoughtful, beautifully written and theologically rigorous manifesto stands as an admirable addition to that tradition. Read, mark, inwardly digest it, and then go and live it as well.'

**Fergus Butler-Gallie, priest and author**

'There could hardly be a better introduction to Advent than that provided by Martyn Percy.'

**Frank Field, Member of the House of Lords and author of *The Politics of Paradise***

'Percy's deep dive into Advent allows for making a profound retreat while staying in place. A multi-course feast, the pilgrimage begins with an engaging introduction, preparing the ground for finding, as he does, "the politics of paradise and consequences of God's love" in the maelstrom of our world today. A rich journey continues with daily perspectives, poetic prayers and sharp prompts for contemplation that takes lectio from being a far-away mythical ideal to becoming the prayer's lived experience.'

**James G. Callaway, general secretary, Colleges and Universities of the Anglican Communion**

'Martyn Percy guides us in a programme of how to declutter the heart through the Advent season. This is a daily, Bible-based, spiritual commentary that will draw in many who struggle with the church and with issues of justice and fairness. *An Advent Manifesto* reminds us that the best politics are in the service of paradise and that part of our Christian call is to promote hope, inclusion and renewal of both the soul and of society.'

**Angela Tilby, priest, writer, broadcaster and columnist**

‘So often the season of Advent rushes by us, swamped by office parties, present-buying and the preparations for Christmas festivity. This book is the antidote to that. *An Advent Manifesto* creates the space in which you can, day-by-day, make spiritual preparation for the birth of the child who transforms history. Rooted in our everyday reality, but illuminated by stories and insights from a wide range of thinkers, it prompts us to a spiritual decluttering of heart, mind and soul – to make us ready for the event which will turn the world right-side-up.’

**Paul Vallely CMG, director, *The Tablet***

‘Martyn brings together his passion for justice, biblical scholarship, contemporary analysis and deep spirituality. In doing so he still manages to invite us into the conversation, encouraging us into the art of contemplation and to discover the familiar Advent and Christmas narratives afresh.’

**Maggie McLean, canon missionary, York Minster**

‘This is Advent with bite. Here is a lively theologian applying a well-stocked mind to the needs of the heart, and demonstrating that the needs of the heart are always related to the needs of others. The core of our faith is clearly focused on love and its social expression, justice, with the consequence that serious political change can never be distant from the manifesto of Advent. Martyn Percy has given us an eloquent book full of insight and memorable phrases, graced with apt references to contemporary culture and significant political events. He holds together both illuminating details of language and the insistent desires of the human heart with the result that we are fed with challenge, inspiration and hope for Advent and beyond.’

**John Pritchard, former bishop of Oxford**

‘In his wonderful *Advent Manifesto*, Martyn Percy invites us to journey through the Advent season, engaging with the familiar scriptures from different perspectives and looking through different lenses. Drawing on ancient patterns of worship, this book is meant to be read slowly with even the layout of the prayers compelling us to breathe in the words more deeply. As one would expect, *An Advent Manifesto* is intellectually stimulating and offers many new insights, but ultimately, Martyn Percy is giving us a chance to be still, to reconnect with the peace that passes understanding and, above all, to encounter the love of God made manifest in Jesus, while challenging us to find that love today in our world and in our own lives.’

**Christina Rees, Member of Parliament**

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Martyn Percy





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Advent is the season where, no matter how hard you try,  
the words don't stretch far enough to explain the mystery of  
God, the annunciation, a birth, angels, shepherds and mystics  
from the east.

For Peter, Jonathan, Tom, Heather, Isabel, Iain and Morag,  
and Emma, Ben and Joe – always.

*Deo Gratias*



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## Introduction

Advent, by tradition, invites us to contemplate some unexpected arrivals and returns. The arrival is a seemingly unremarkable and inauspicious event – a child conceived out of wedlock to a young woman, and born in a room shared with livestock, as there was no other living space available. The shepherds, and then the angels, herald the arrival of Jesus. Then the wise men turn up, as though there wasn't enough to manage. They are the late arrivals, having got lost on the way, but then receiving directions from Herod – they will doubtless remember to put less faith in maps and sat nav, and more in the guiding star provided. But that's (wise) men for you. They don't like asking for directions, can't read maps, don't need guiding, and yet always think they know where they are going.

As for returns, Advent asks us to contemplate two. The first is the second coming of Christ. Jesus speaks of this in the gospels, and the New Testament echoes and confirms that there will be a time when history is wrapped up and the reign of God restored. The second kind of return is our own. Rather like Lent, Christians down the centuries have used the time of Advent to reflect, pray, repent and return to Christ. It is a season for patience and penitence, as we await the coming of God. First as a newborn infant, and second, in power and glory, in order to return us fully to God and creation to its promise.

Somewhere between the arrival and return, we find God's Advent Manifesto. I say 'somewhere' here, but really mean 'everywhere'. The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims, practises and preaches is a consistent prophetic, political and practical call to change the world around. Much like any political or ideological manifesto in any age, the programme of repentance, reform and renewal is announced. There will be retrieval, restoration and resurrection. And also like any political

or ideological manifesto, there will be those who long to see it bear fruit and those determined to kill it off in any way possible. We see the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and teachers of the law doing their best to dilute, distort and destroy the manifesto Jesus represents. We see the prevailing powers – lawyers, politicians, military, local government and regional despotic rulers – easily falling prey to manipulation by others. Or pursuing their own agenda.

The Advent Manifesto could be said to lie at the pivotal tipping point of the Christian scriptures. In some respects, one could say that the Christian scriptures are bookended by gardens of paradise. Genesis tells of Eden and the stories of creation – an idyll to begin with, but lost through disobedience. The end of Revelation restores God’s creation to its fullness – a place where there will be no more death or crying, with leaves for the healing of nations and paradise regained.

The return of Christ therefore restores something that has been lost. As Milton’s poetry testifies, paradise is regained. However, Advent does not leave Christians simply waiting in hope, biding our time. It invites us to return as well – to turn again to the Lord and to see the season of Advent as one of penitence, preparation and politics.

I use that last word – politics – in its best sense. Politics is the business of who receives what, when, where and how. Christianity is a political faith. The first shall be last, and the last first. The foolish, wise. The greatest, the least. Christianity, in its fullness, is the world turned upside down. But business is also about resource allocation, and even families can struggle to apportion things fairly. So is there more to the politics of the kingdom of God than simply levelling-up (to borrow a term), or the redistribution of resources?

Of course there is. Christian faith began as a different kind of politics. The revelation of God in Jesus is that God loved the world so much (utterly, completely and fully) that he gave us of himself in Christ (John 3:16). The Word made flesh is God reaching out, deep into our humanity, to draw us into his eternal compassion, endless love and

divinity. The politics of God are all about love. It is about abundant generosity, faithfulness, patience and intense compassion. Yes, there is a place for discipline, anger and rebuke. But the kindness, mercy, tenderness and grace of God are what flow from the divine heart to the brokenness of humanity. Love.

The Advent Manifesto is that this love – the love of God in Jesus Christ – will return again in power and glory. Meanwhile, we are asked to return that love to others and to God. This return bears interest. The more we invest in the work of furthering God's kingdom of comprehensive and total love for others and for our world, the closer we draw to Jesus: for God so loved the world, he gave his only Son. There were no preconditions to this gift. There was never any hint of partiality or favouritism. God already 'so loved the world' that he gave us Jesus. That same Jesus bids us to continue the work of God, until he comes again. That is the Advent message – God's manifesto.

Our return to Christ in the season of Advent is, by tradition, an inner spiritual decluttering of our heart, mind and soul. It is also an outward-facing turn to the world, and an invitation – no, actually, obligation – to take a full part in the establishment of God's kingdom. This can only mean a reassessment of the world around us and asking the simplest questions. If Jesus returned tomorrow, what would be put right immediately or simply swept away? What tables might be overturned? Who would Jesus eat with? What would he have to say about our religion? Who would Jesus hang out with?

If you can see the answers to those questions now, already, why are you waiting? If the light and love of Christ would establish something new, or equally remove the impediments to truth and justice being revealed, what is it that prevents you from working on that today? Politics, you see, is the art and science of governing. How does any government rule, serve, consult, direct, support, liberate, inspire, control and release? The politics of Jesus are an exquisite study in powerful, beautiful and hauntingly persuasive exercise of *government*. We await the fullness of that return to power.

A manifesto normally refers to a political programme or promises that set out some new, future state. We are all well-versed in political manifestos that promise much and deliver little. Or offer bread and circuses for the few and neglect the needs of the many. The politics of Jesus are different. Jesus, as the body language of God, exemplifies God's reign. Jesus sees the unseen, hears the unheard, speaks for the voiceless, draws near to and embraces untouchables and the marginalised. His politics transcend his roots. He spends time with Gentiles and consorts with sinners. To all, he is the love of God for them. In so being and doing, he makes political enemies and he makes his death inevitable. Within the great salvation story, his unjust trial and execution are overturned by God's boundary-breaking resurrection and Jesus' ascension. God is not held by our boundaries, and this work begins with preparation for the reality of the incarnation. Advent.

The start date for Advent varies. With the way our calendar works, the first Sunday of Advent can fall anytime between 27 November and 3 December. That is why many Advent calendars, especially those that are reusable, plump for the middle and begin on 1 December. I have opted for a pattern of reflections that, like any reusable Advent calendar, can work in any year in the future.

For the four weeks of Advent, beginning on the Monday leading up to the first Sunday in Advent, each weekday has a reflection. For each weekend, there is a longer meditation that can be used on both Saturday and Sunday. The Advent antiphons are included and the twelve days of Christmas are also covered, taking the reader to Epiphany. (Readers are given Philippians 2 to meditate on as well for these twelve days, and, as Luke does not mention the magi, I have used some verses from Matthew for Epiphany.) And, just in case you have any spare or slack time, there are some further reflections to take us through Candlemas.

Each daily reflection comes with a prayer and some suggestions for further contemplation. Of course, the scriptures can speak for themselves. The task of the would-be commentator is one of framing, lighting and presentation. As will be apparent in this book, we are presenting the

scriptures in their freshness and have made a conscious and deliberate choice not to embellish or re-flavour them. The assumption of this book is that the scriptures have their own power and range, and that when they are engaged with as the living word of God – as texts that always carry the capacity to transform the reader – we are drawing near to how God continues to speak to us.

## **Advent in the world and the church**

This book was conceived at a time of enormous global turmoil. Government buildings in Washington DC had been stormed by supporters of Donald Trump. Black Lives Matter ferments with regular eruptions of protest. The world was gripped by a global pandemic that was seeing millions die. The European Union was squabbling over vaccines. Europe is at war for the first time in 70 years, with the very survival of Ukraine under threat. There are grain and gas shortages, which are driving up the cost of living. ‘Food security’ is now an issue, with a war pushing the price of fuel, food and fertiliser so high that nations are starving.

As though that was not enough to contend with, the politics of liberal democracies seem to be failing. Populism and extremism are becoming mainstream. Campaigns for equal rights – ethnicity, disability, sexuality and gender – are experiencing unprecedented pushback and encountering renewed hostility and oppression. In a world of turmoil and turbulence, there seems to be a decline in reason and responsibility, and ever-increasing privileging of unaccountable power and passionate intensity.

In the midst of this, war, famine and the growing political repression are leading to a rise in refugees and asylum seekers. Meanwhile, the church is beset with internal wrangling on sexuality, gender, declining numbers and collapses in revenue. There is a serious growing crisis of mental health among clergy, and a marked fragmentation in ecclesial systems of governance, with the institution experienced as increasingly irrelevant in the public sphere.

It is against this background that I thought I might try to write a book about the second coming of Christ. It is an Advent book, but also a reminder to me as much as it might be to any reader, that the life, work, focus, deeds and words of Jesus are about ushering in the kingdom of God, not propping up the church. Put another way, seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness and some of these other things may be added to you (Matthew 6:33). Matthew's beatitudes continue with a caveat for us to heed: 'For each day has enough worries of its own.' Quite so. We are called to abide in the uncertainty and trouble of life. There is no other life to live with.

Sometimes the church can seem to seek almost every available prop and lever of support it can, leaving the kingdom of God largely to itself and certainly forgetting about the righteousness of God. So we should not lose sight of our sin (it is within us, so not always easy to spot and call out, though others will see it). Our Advent must be framed in the context of the inexhaustible mercy and redemption of God.

God's love has consequences. As love arrived in the person of Jesus, unbidden and unmerited, so our love for others – especially 'the least' – must be unbidden too. Any love given is only ever unmerited, in the same way that none of us can earn or deserve God's love. So, we love because God first loved us (1 John 4). We didn't start this chain reaction. God is the originator. Love has come; it has arrived in Jesus. What will you return to God for this free, undeserved, infinite and inexhaustible gift?

This book is very much about the politics of paradise and the consequences of God's love for us all. It takes as its cue one of the fundamental cores of liberation theology and many other kinds of liberation theologies – that all good religion worthy of the name of religion and faith is inherently political. If politics is about who gets what, when, where and how, the kingdom of God, if nothing else, is about precisely the same. The poor, the lame, the hungry, the marginalised and the stigmatised all receive God's kingdom first.



The politics of Jesus Christ and of the kingdom of God are radical and represent a world turned upside down. It is the very inverse and reverse of what the church often stands for. I don't know about you, but as I've got older, I've tended to sense that the continuance of the church may not be God's primary concern. What does matter about the church is that it is faithful to the politics, values and practices of Jesus. To be sure, no church is perfect, and no Christian can or should attempt the high ground, claiming to be standing alone on the foundation of Christ and that the rest of the denomination or local congregation has departed from the True Faith.

We need churches to pass on the virtues and values that God, through the Holy Spirit and after the example of Christ, has seen fit to entrust to his followers for the last 2,000 years. If we look for a church that is perfect, we will subdivide into oblivion. The poet and theologian Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said that if you prefer Christianity to Christ, you'll end up loving yourself more than anything or anyone else. A gathering with a membership of one (or a handful of people who congenially agree with your outlooks) is a cosy club, not a church.

We need the church. It keeps us in check. It keeps us humble. It maddens us and inspires us in equal measure. All religious communities are temporary constructions. All will be by definition imperfect and sinful. Try to love it for what it is, and what it might still be doing after you have passed away.

That said, the church is a temporary housing project for the sick, marginalised, refugees and the displaced. Church is not forever. The radical revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the establishment of a kingdom in which divinity and humanity, and the gap between them, are dissolved, and the earthly and heavenly city are brought together in one body. Every human has a right – a human right and a religious right – to have a foretaste and an anticipation of the just and gentle reign of God. If the church cannot witness to the kingdom of God in its life and mission, it will be irrelevant, and worse: something that the Spirit of Jesus will oppose and undermine.

Two thousand years on, we may have reached a moment in Christian history that demands an entirely new Reformation. Put another way, the ushering in of the new Advent in which we understand the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ to be the fundamental core of our Christian calling. As liberation theologians have been telling us for more than half a century, God's reign, justice, peace and dissent is often best worked outside the structures of institutional church, and in the apparatus and avenues of the wider world, where there are thousands of ways of serving Jesus, building the kingdom of God, and enabling the love and power of the Holy Spirit to liberate and free humanity.

## Arriving in Advent

I hope you will enter this Advent with an openness to what God is asking of you. Every reader of this text will be in some way or other called by God. They will have a vocation, and religion is, if nothing else, surrender – that is, surrender to God on unconditional terms. What Jesus asks of us is always too much, and yet it is never enough. As Brother Roger of Taizé used to say: 'He does not ask for too much of you, but he does ask for everything.'

The structure of this book engages with two of the great hymns of Christmas: the Magnificat and Benedictus. It is also rooted in poets, prophets and the theology and devotional writing of Howard Thurman, the black theologian and mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.

I am not anticipating that any reader has a detailed knowledge of any of these writers, but in the course of what follows, it will become apparent that many of the resonances I draw on are much in debt to these pioneering prophets of our age. Advent is a time of waiting, of hoping, of becoming, of preparation and of penitence. It is a time of prophetic anticipation.

Christmas is coming, but the birth of the Messiah was the beginning of a new age. It is nothing other than the beginning of the kingdom of

God, installed in an infant who through his childhood and adulthood would show us something of the face and heart of God, for our aching world in all its brokenness and injustice. Jesus *is* God's manifesto: the Word made flesh.

Advent is a time to prepare for our reformation. Like the shepherds, the wise men and the angels, we are asked to leave our lives behind and gather round the crib at Bethlehem and see where those radiant faces will send us with joy and with purpose. But we are not to linger long.

Our word 'advent' has secular as well as sacred meanings. An advent is the arrival of a notable person, thing or event, such as 'the advent of colour television' or 'the advent of Wi-Fi'. It simply means 'arrival' or 'approach', and the term for Christians means two things. First, the coming of the light of the world – Jesus born in Bethlehem, the Word made flesh now dwelling among us. Second, it means the return of Christ. Just as there has been a first coming, so will there be a second: the return.

Some Christians struggle with both of these doctrines. The idea of God becoming human – flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone – and entering into our frailty was a scandal to ancient worldviews, and confounds what we know about biology as modern people (i.e. reproduction, DNA, etc). However, the early Christian church was always clear that 'that which is not assumed is not healed'. God, by fully abiding in humanity and being at home among us, makes it possible for us to be at home and abide in divinity.

But what about a returning Jesus? One of the early lesser-known Christian heresies was from Eutyches, who taught that Jesus' ascension was a spiritual event, not a physical one. The heresy was attractive 2,000 years ago, even without the aid of complex telescopes, as few wished to ponder the thought of Jesus flying past Mars and turning right at Jupiter before taking a hard left at Saturn. Modern cosmologists, such as the late Carl Sagan, point out that if Jesus has ascended at the speed of light, our most powerful telescopes would still be able to see him.

The ascension – spiritual, physical, symbolic: does it matter? Yes, it does. As the early church father Origen said, when Jesus returned to his Father, the angels at the gates of heaven were startled, and almost denied Jesus' admission, because 'the corporeal shall not pass into the incorporeal'. But Christian orthodoxy says this must be so. Because Jesus ascends to his Father with his wounds in his post-resurrection body, which is both transformed, yet the same.

Why does this matter? Obviously, Jesus returns to heaven with our humanity, and his. God does not dispense with the flesh, heartache, suffering and frailty of humanity. It is returned to the Father in the person of Jesus, and remains abiding in God, 'until he, Jesus, comes again in glory' (see Matthew 16:27). As Hebrews 7:25 says: 'He is able always to save those who draw near to God through him, since he lives forever to intercede for us.' Jesus continues to be incarnate, and our humanity abides within the love of this divinity.

My own politics of Advent is rooted in the continuity represented in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus. The actual body of Jesus is important insofar that he embodies the love of God made manifest in Christ. Jesus sees the unseen, hears the unheard, touches the untouchable, embraces the shunned, speaks to those who are silenced... and lets the silenced speak. We see this time and time again in the gospels.

Everything about Jesus' movements and travels has a political dimension. He dwells and saunters in Gentile territory; he associates with sinners and outcasts; he loiters in places and with people where others would hurry by. Whatever doctrines you hold to in relation to the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, the second coming of Christ is stamped with the character of a political manifesto, and a revolutionary one at that. The first will be last, and the last first. The lowly will be raised up; the lofty cast down. God's rule turns the world upside down, and as this is the way God wants the world to be, Advent is tuning in to the world turned the right way up.

## A note to the reader

The approach taken in this Advent book is one of offering scriptural food for thought, to savour, nourish and dwell on during the working week. At the weekend, mindful that Saturday is the liminal day of anticipation and waiting and Sunday is for the resurrection, the scriptures set before us invite us to God's banquet – to feast on the word.

For this reason, I have deliberately not jumped around with new and completely different Bible passages every day. In fact, all you will read is some passages from Isaiah and the first few chapters of Luke. That is it. Over many years, I have found books that 'sprinkle' scripture left, right and centre tend to tempt us into a kind of spiritual snacking, and I am not at all sure this is good for the spiritual diets that are meant to sustain us each and every day. Without proper spiritual discipline, we can find ourselves simply consuming those scriptures we like most and ignoring the rest. Memo to self: there are no bad foods – only bad diets.

So I have set aside this snacking approach for three reasons.

First, the use of short Bible passages can often be little more than a gloss or a kind of air cover for thinking what you wanted to think in any case. The church is riddled with this proof-texting and sampling, and it can trivialise the scriptures. A psalm that mentions 'safe' a few times is not a wise choice for a training day on safeguarding. The scriptures are difficult, edgy and untamed. We need to spend time with them to appreciate the different ways in which one passage, story or lesson can open up our minds and hearts.

Second, there is the temptation to offer far too many Bible passages. That only makes for a stew of scriptures – the variety all collapsing into one rather bland taste. Again, I know this approach can be popular. Who doesn't like a warming stew with lots of different ingredients? But if not done carefully, then the Bible becomes a kind of buffet, in which writers and readers pick their favourite morsels to serve and eat. As the restaurant critic Jay Rayner once said, buffets are often places where

food goes to die. Ingredients and dishes that don't belong together sitting side by side start to look and taste the same. Something for everyone, and yet, somehow the meal is no longer common. Sometimes, less is more. In terms of food, this is an intentional set menu, not an endless set of choices from which to pick and choose. In Advent, the scriptures choose us.

Third, Advent is a penitential season. Less is more. So – spoiler alert – there are not many scriptural passages chosen for reflection in this book. It is my hope that by limiting what we read and reflect on in Advent, we will be nourished by savouring these handfuls of familiar scriptures in more depth. Here, I am issuing an invitation to the food God sets before us. Don't get too caught up with what my reflections on the scriptures say or don't say. Instead, let the scriptures do their work in you. Let them be tasted, savoured, eaten, chewed, swallowed and digested. Feel the word incarnating inside your body, soul, mind and heart. Note what it is doing to you. This book is merely a few plates of food and a table. There are no knives or forks. There is a dish and a cup to drink from. Let the scriptures be your food and refreshment.

## Meditation: sacred reading

Some readers will recognise the approach I am adopting as the *lectio divina*. Now, this ‘method’ of reading the scriptures is not one thing. It is, like Advent, an approach or an arrival at a text. What the encounter does to the reader and how it guides us next will vary from culture to culture, across generations, and land differently with groups, individuals and communities, varying according to circumstances.

The phrase *lectio divina* is Latin for ‘sacred reading’. Over the centuries, the practice engages us in the slow perusal – the cogitating, chewing, savouring of the word of God, *lectio divina* submits the reader to scripture, and asks us to humbly and attentively wait upon God.

Reading the scriptures in this way is undertaken not with the intention of gaining information, but rather absorbing the text as an offering. As the scriptures are food for thought, and food for the soul, the first aspect of *lectio divina* is that it connects us to the living God who is the bread of life, the vine, the water of life, the manna in the wilderness and the feast of the kingdom.

The second aspect of *lectio divina* is to note how we are nourished and sustained by what God has set before us, and to act on how we are changed by the scriptures with which God has fed us. This can be personal and communal. Feasting on the word is meant to be something that is shared, social and political, not just personally nutritional.

Basic to this practice is a union with God in faith which, in turn, is sustained by further reading. There is no special method, plan or technique to *lectio divina*. So a word to the wise reader at this juncture. There is not a ‘right way’ to do this. Nor can I offer you a timeframe for each day. It is not up to me. It is up to what God does with you through the

medium of scripture and patient, attentive devotion. The *lectio divina* is an open-ended invitation to challenge, comfort, pruning and growth.

For most modern folk, this is an alien and uncomfortable exercise. I know that too. We live in ordered days with segments of time allocated to tasks, demands and people. The *lectio divina* isn't your friend here. But please stay with this, and wait upon God. It is well worth the effort. The fruits gained from lingering over a single word or phrase without having your eye on the next meeting or demand is where we begin.

Thus, and rather like food, nourishment and eating, some days the meals are fast and taken on the run. Other days, lingering and slow appreciation is all that will work. The *lectio divina* is a prayerful and attentive type of reading, and it helps us penetrate beyond the letter of text to see how the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through these inspired words, in the here and now.

In more modern idiom, one might say that *lectio divina* is a kind of 'mindful' approach to reading scriptures. So, try to avoid rushing through a given text, and instead savour the word as you absorb it. When we enter into that space or state, we begin to savour the divine presence both in the text of the scriptures... and, yes, in oneself too. Because God is also at home in you.

If, like me, you are curious about the origins of such practices as *lectio divina*, you may find this outline of its history useful to bear in mind. Originally a monastic practice, *lectio divina* is not meant as an intellectual study of the Bible, but as a means of communion with God. The practice consists of four parts:

- 1 *Lectio*: Read a passage of scripture. This will normally be a very short passage, and sometimes just one verse. The reading of it is meant to be slow and intentional. If you are doing it alone, try to experiment with reading it out loud, or privately spoken, and also silently to yourself. It is fine to mix, match and blend these approaches. Most people read a passage several times through.



- 2 *Meditatio*: Next, meditate on the scripture. This means dwelling with and pondering over the passage, seeking to hear from the Holy Spirit. Do not analyse the passage. But do try to see what perspectives and angles the narrative offers. For example, if it were a miracle story in the gospels, who can see what? Where do people stand? What do they say? Who does not speak, and why might that be? Let your imagination colour in the passage.
- 3 *Oratio*: This step consists of prayer. After having read and meditated on the passage, we bring it to God in prayer. This is not a moment for words or formulae. Try to be still and silent, and let the scripture sink into your heart, mind and soul.
- 4 *Contemplatio*: The process concludes with contemplation. This is a type of listening, prompted by questions and observations, and can lead us into a form of restful or ‘soaking’ prayer. We seek to simply dwell in God’s presence, with the Word made flesh renewing our body, mind and spirit.

This fourfold pattern is our daily bread: a small portion of scripture; a brief meditation; some prayer; and finally, contemplation. Some critics of *lectio divina* opine that it elevates an experience of God rather the sovereignty of God’s word and, in so doing, idolises personal experience of God – including any ‘spiritual high’ or some sort of special revelation – rather than focusing on a true relationship with God. That is a danger, of course. However, I name it here because if we find ourselves drifting into such a place, then the practice becomes a different means to an end, and our hearts are in the wrong place. Honesty is best.

*Lectio divina* is only meant to be a helpful spiritual discipline. It is not there to provide us with elevated, puffed-up notions of our newfound wisdom or revelatory experience. There is much to be said for intentionally slowing down to spend time with God. Psalm 46:10 says: ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’ Perhaps begin each and every day with this verse, said quietly over and over again.

If you read the rest of the psalm, you'll also see that the rest of the known world at the time – at least to the composer-writer – was in total chaos and meltdown. The psalm begins with a rather unpromising observation that God is our refuge and strength, and an ever-present help in trouble. So, trouble is a (God) given. No need to fear, however, even though the earth is collapsing and the mountains are falling into the heart of the sea (vv. 1–2).

Yet you might be astonished at how that one verse can slow your heart rate, calm you and fill you with a different sense of what the day might hold, even before it begins. In *lectio divina* we truly contemplate the word and seek to be in God's presence. It is only through God's word, the saving presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit that we know the truth and are therefore set free (John 8:32).

In all this, try not to fret about where this is all heading. You cannot know, and nor can I. Like chewing on tasty morsels of food, sometimes it is only after some time that a surprising flavour bursts out, or one that connotes deep comfort and sustenance. Food can be bitter, sweet, bland, savoury, plain, complicated. Just as we have favourite foods and dishes which never fail to comfort us, so it is with the scriptures – the word of God is for consuming and inwardly digesting. 'Taste and see that the Lord is good' (Psalm 34:8). The scriptures are food – some manna in the desert of our modernity. Savour what you can.

As Jewish poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen says, sometimes our weakness, hunger or emptiness is what it takes to fill us. How does the light get into our lives? As Cohen says in 'Anthem' (1992), everything is cracked; there is no other way for light to get through. All this book brings to this work of the Holy Spirit consists of scriptures, simply served. I have taken a leaf out of Benedictine spirituality, although I confess it is a slight liberty with the tradition. However, for our purposes here, this will take us on the journey through Advent to the Epiphany.

## Canticles

You may not be familiar with canticles and their use in morning and evening prayers. Normally, these two services – Matins and Evensong – have an Old and New Testament reading, and a psalm. However, one of the unique features of the Benedictine Office is their creation of canticles to be said or chanted, which rework scripture passages as though they were psalms. A canticle was meant for slow, melodic and meditative chanting, and as you will see I have deliberately broken up the scripture passages into lines or verses from a psalm or song. I am mindful of St Augustine of Hippo’s phrase ‘The one who sings prays twice’, and the intention of setting the scriptures out like this is to enable them to be used sparingly, yet piercingly.

There is method in setting out the scriptures like this, line-by-line. It takes us away from head-knowledge, and puts the scriptures into heart-knowledge. It asks different questions of our bodies, including movement, liberation, motivation and dance. Most revolutions in history have had their anthems, chants and hymns to lift the faithful. Why should Christianity be any different? With any manifesto, there are normally slogans and songs.

In particular, the seven traditional canticles are used at the third service of the day, which is Matins. We are taking a similar approach here with our passages for *lectio divina*. Based on the Benedictine tradition, we are taking these seven canticles as our preparation:

- Annunciation
- Visitation
- Magnificat
- Benedictus
- Christmas
- Beatitudes
- Epiphany

On Saturdays and Sundays, we will be using seven passages from Isaiah that are familiar to our use, reading and hearing, as we prepare for Christmas. The choice of seven is no accident; as will become apparent, the weeks that take us through Advent to Christmas and up to Epiphany are a reference to the seven services (sometimes these are known as ‘offices’ or *opus Dei* – the work of God).

The seven daily liturgies are: Vigils, Nocturns (later known as Matins – usually 2.00 am in winter, 3.00 am in summer), Lauds (first light), Prime (first hour), Terce (third hour), Sext (sixth hour), None (ninth hour), Vespers (evening office) and Compline (before sleep). At the risk of offending insomniacs, I have opted for the model of Matins for these meditations.

Each of these offices is in tune with the daylight and the darkness, and as Advent is a season of light, shining in the darkness, using this prayerful routine of devotion, which is more than 1,500 years old, presents a further supportive framework for our *lectio divina*. Such prayerful rhythms can only help us.

The poet David Whyte talks about the possibilities of silence in his short and superb collection of semantic-lyrical essays. Whyte reminds us that:

The object in meditation and all of our contemplative disciplines is silence. But... that silence is in order for you to perceive something other than yourself – what you’ve arranged as yourself to actually perceive this frontier between what you call yourself and what you call other than yourself, whether that’s a person or a landscape.<sup>1</sup>

I have set some of his prose to verse, and to help us reflect on the inner silence the *lectio divina* beckons us into:

*Silence is something from which we wish to turn away;  
an intimation of the end...  
Real silence orphans us from certainty;*

*leads us beyond the well-known and confronts us with the unknown  
Belief or unbelief or any previously rehearsed story  
meets the wind in the trees, the distant horn in the busy harbour,  
or the watching eye and listening ear of a loved one.*

*In silence, essence speaks to us of essence itself  
and asks for a kind of unilateral disarmament;  
our own essential nature slowly emerging  
as the defended periphery atomises and falls apart.  
As the busy edge dissolves  
we begin to join the conversation through the portal of a present  
unknowing, robust vulnerability, revealing in the way we listen,  
a different ear,  
a more perceptive eye,  
an imagination refusing to come too early to a conclusion,  
and belonging to a different person than the one who first entered  
the quiet.*

*Out of that quiet emerges the sheer incarnational presence of the  
world,  
a presence that seems to demand a moving internal symmetry  
in the one breathing and listening  
equal to its own breathing and listening elemental powers.*

*To become deeply silent is not to become still,  
but to become tidal and seasonal  
a coming and going that has its own inimitable, essential  
character,  
a story not fully told, like the background of the sea, or the rain  
falling  
or the river going on, out of sight, out of our lives.*

*[We] live on equal terms with the fleeting and the eternal,  
the hardly touchable and the fully possible,  
a full bodily appearance and disappearance,  
a rested giving in and giving up...*

In closing, and before we begin, it may be helpful to recall that these meditations, reflections and scriptures were chosen because of their political and social consequences. In some respects, I treat each canticle as a manifesto – God’s proclamation of a kingdom to come. These canticles announce the good news of the gospel, but like all manifestoes they do not leave the world unchanged. Indeed, the life and ministry of Jesus is forever turning the world upside down, and our personhood inside out.

Jesus’ kingdom project is a work in progress. Advent is the season for waiting, preparing and working for its fulness. And as will become apparent, each of the weeks we are working with are linked together by waiting. The Annunciation, Visitation, Magnificat, Benedictus, Christmas, Beatitudes and Candlemas all pivot on waiting in patience, but with anticipation. A birth, a new dawn and the hope of things to come. Here, I make no apology for treating the beatitudes as one might New Year’s resolutions. Instead of setting personal goals, try praying the beatitudes differently.

Hope from beyond, sent to the present, is what Advent asks us to reckon with. Hope consists of God’s jump leads sent from the future through time and space, wired right into our present pains, panics and predicaments. The hope is this: that the love of God now returns to govern us all. This is the season anticipating God’s reign of love to come. Now, in Advent, we are to engage in the preparations for this and undertake the work of God. How can the light of Christ illuminate this present darkness? How can the manifest love of God in Jesus overcome our world?

## Week one

# Annunciation

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice full of grace! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and pondered what this greeting could mean.

But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. Look! You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob forever and his reign will have no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?' In answer the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God.'

'And see, your cousin Elizabeth also, in her old age, has conceived a son, and she who was said to be barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.'

Mary said, 'Here I am, the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.' And the angel left her.

LUKE 1:26-38

## Monday before Advent

**In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice full of grace! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and pondered what this greeting could mean.**

LUKE 1:26–29

A sign saying 'Do not disturb' is a familiar sight in most hotels. The three words can mean anything from 'I am asleep' to 'We are busy' (no further details will be provided). But the Advent message has three words for Christians: 'Now, be disturbed.'

Advent calls us to prepare ourselves for God's light shining in our lives. There may well be injustices in the world that need challenging, but we can challenge them better when we have looked at the things we can do and we can change where we are and who we are. There is plenty of unfairness across the globe, and anything we can do to mitigate it may be a drop in the ocean, but it is a beginning. There are many who are in need of comfort, of the oil of gladness and the mantle of praise, and we can do our bit in being God's eyes and hands and presence where we can. Charity does begin at home, but it should never stay there for long.

Across the world we see protest movements, uprisings and the status quo challenged. Even the most necessary revolutions, spawned by a hunger for justice and a desire for serious political change that overthrows corrupt regimes, rights wrongs and enables new freedoms, can still lead to bitter and internecine fighting and oppression.



Climate change, wars and violence, increasing financial crises and food shortages sharpen the demand for global justice and fairness. Why do the rich appear to flourish and those who have little seem increasingly to have less? Alongside this are debates about welfare and the public sector. How do we sustain those with nothing and reward those whose work our taxes pay for... and in doing so how do we know who deserves what?

Meanwhile others are challenging us to wake up and recognise the deep ecological crisis we are in. Our profligate use of the earth's resources is increasingly unsustainable; global warming will shape the near future and affect some of the poorest countries disproportionately. Campaigners ask us to think about fairness, justice and proper stewardship.

There are many voices out there challenging us to think about justice and fairness, asking how can we find good news for the oppressed. Paul tells us not to despise the words of the prophets, but to test everything and hold fast to what is good and resist evil (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).

We are called upon to attend to the cacophony of discontent and to pray for discernment. We have a responsibility to educate ourselves so that we can begin to understand the objections raised and the challenges and questions posed – not simply to react to the headlines. We also have a responsibility to pray that we might discern God's voice and that we might then speak God's words.

This Advent, let us make some time to examine our lives, preparing for the light of Christ and trusting, like Mary, that we only learn our calling by being disturbed. Advent is echoing Mary's 'yes' to God. Let Jesus be born in you, and through God's grace, allow your heart and mind to be renewed. Our decluttering and cleansing will mean that Christ's light will not only comfort and enrich us but also will shine through us, bringing light, hope and comfort to our world.

## Prayer

*Advent God,  
we journey with you,  
to Bethlehem's stable  
and a new-born king,  
ears attuned  
to the song of angels,  
eyes alert  
for Bethlehem's star.  
Forgive us  
if on our journey  
we are distracted  
by the tempting offers  
of this world.  
Keep our hearts aflame  
with the hope  
of Christmas  
and the promise  
of a Saviour.  
Amen.*

## Contemplation

*How might the Holy Spirit seek to disturb us today? Can we sense the prompt and prod of Christ?*

*Let us pray for an attentiveness to what and who God seeks us to attend to.*

## Tuesday

**But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. Look! You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.’**

LUKE 1:30–33

At Christmas, you’ll receive lots of cards depicting paintings of the birth of Jesus. Possibly the wise men too. Or perhaps the shepherds. But I have never seen a Christmas card depicting an event mentioned once in Matthew’s gospel, and rather implied by Luke: the marriage of Mary and Joseph.

It is a strange subject for a painting, and on which the gospels have no comment to make. A painting of the marriage of Mary and Joseph is something that almost no artist has portrayed. Because, I am guessing, it is such an awkward subject. I mean, it won’t exactly be a joyous occasion, with a best man and proud father of the bride. It is all done in haste, and one imagines a version of the minimalist Registry Office ceremony. But there must have been some witnesses. And I wonder what they thought? And what Mary and Joseph even said?

Apart from the complicated business of growing up, Jesus’ path and destiny is already marked out. The more spiritually alert folk – his mother, the wise men, Simeon and the shepherds – all seem to know what is happening. Salvation is coming through this one child: adore-while-you-wait. It will cost God all, and you nothing. You cannot help God – but he has come to help you. It all seems, well – too easy? Perhaps too divorced from the messy and genuine contingencies of birth?

And yet the gospels give us a much more subtle picture to attend to. The bringing of salvation to the world, beginning in Bethlehem, turns out to be a work in which the cost is surprisingly shared out among many, not just left on the shoulders of one tiny infant. Mary must say 'yes'; the annunciation is her sacrifice. But Joseph must swallow his pride also and agree to be complicit in God's opaque plot for human destiny. Jesus escapes the wrath of Herod, but thousands of infants do not – they and their parents pay a heavy price for the coming of the Christ-child. Others, such as John the Baptist, lose their lives for Jesus before he can sacrifice his. God's salvation incurs debts.

The bearing of grace, then ('God's Riches At Christ's Expense', as the Sunday school mnemonic goes), is not actually quite right. Salvation, even one wholly initiated by God in Christ, costs other people too. In bringing heaven to earth, Jesus' is not the only sacrifice. In short, God cannot do it alone – Mary's womb is needed, as is her 'yes'; and this is so right the way through to the unknown helpers on the refugee trail to reach the asylum of Egypt.

Whatever you think of the Christmas stories, we are left with more questions than answers. How did Mary and Joseph explain to their friends the circumstances of Jesus' birth? What was the best man's speech like at their wedding? We hear nothing of the father of the bride – what might he have said? What did Joseph say to Jesus, every time the infant Jesus said 'Dad...?' We cannot know. But the absence of knowledge (which is never compensated for by the fullness of doctrine) is to miss the point.

The Christmas story is both poetry and prose, truth and mystery, knowledge and faith. The theologian Mark Oakley expresses it like this: trying to make sense of how the God who we hope to apprehend actually apprehends us. Like Mary, we don't find God; God finds us. And like Mary, we have felt that we have been brushed with a powerful, feathered encounter.

## Prayer

*In this Advent of expectation  
draw us together in unity,  
that our praise and worship  
might echo in these walls  
and also through our lives.*

*In this Advent of expectation  
draw us together in mission,  
that the hope within  
might be the song we sing  
and the melody of our lives.*

*In this Advent of expectation  
draw us together in service,  
that the path we follow  
might lead us from a stable  
to a glimpse of eternity.*

## Contemplation

*What are the choices and journeys God asks us to take but that we would rather avoid? When the God of surprises speaks to us, how do we answer?*

*Let us pray for courage and humility to walk the way of Christ.*

## Wednesday

**Mary said to the angel, ‘But how can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?’ In answer the angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God.**

LUKE 1:34–35

Advent, to be sure, is a time of preparation. For some that is simply a form of spiritual patience that bides its time before Christmas. For others, the season is about decluttering, simplifying and clarifying: the refiner’s fire, purifier, fuller’s soap... the paths made straight, the rough made smooth, the hills and mountains made low.

Advent, then, is a time of preparing to receive God afresh, and of making space for him who is to come to be received once more. But Advent also warns us that we don’t know the day, hour or manner of his coming. And Christmas, the culmination of Advent, sends a defenceless infant born in a stable when most are expecting a king of royal birth. Plenty, then, to think about, as we try to discern the will of God in what can sometimes seem like very mixed messages.

This is why Advent asks for something different from us other than just waiting for what you expect or desire. It is something deeper, and all about developing a wisdom and spiritual patience that can cope with the real and full range of surprises that God sometimes sends us.

In reflecting on the annunciation story, what particularly strikes me is the sense of God’s message breaking in to the personal space of each of these people with results that were literally life-changing. The message that the angels brought was of new life developing in the very core of

these people. The ordinary human experience of pregnancy is heightened by the conception of the virgin (Mary) or the barren (Elizabeth). God's promise of life is seen to be something that indwells us, that is both part of us and yet separate from us; that is both dependent on us and yet has a life of its own.

It has always fascinated me that you rarely see images of the pregnant Mary despite this being our key Advent image. Mary is the one who gestates the Word of God, who allows it to grow in her being, to gain sustenance from herself until the time is right to birth it, and learns to nurture it in nourishing and intimate ways.

Advent, then, is the season of promise. A king will come, but not the kind of king that most folk expect. God's messages, then, are sometimes plain, but we are too complex and our churches too occluded to perceive them. Sometimes they are subtle, and we are too simple to perceive their wisdom.

Advent asks us to be patient, to wait, watch and listen. And to try to develop a wisdom and discernment that gets beyond the ordinary and into the extraordinary; from the temporal to the eternal. As Jesus arrived, so he will return. Wait and watch.

## Prayer

*God of hope, who brought love into this world,  
be the love that dwells between us.*

*God of hope, who brought peace into this world,  
be the peace that dwells between us.*

*God of hope, who brought joy into this world,  
be the joy that dwells between us.*

*God of hope, the rock we stand upon,  
be the centre, the focus of our lives  
always, and particularly this Advent time.*

## Contemplation

*How can we prepare for God's purpose to be made manifest in our lives?  
Is our 'yes' to God a full surrender of our wills?*

*Let us pray for watchfulness and the patient activism of Advent.*



## Thursday

**‘And see, your cousin Elizabeth also, in her old age, has conceived a son, and she who was said to be barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.’**

LUKE 1:36–37

Mary was a young woman, betrothed in marriage: in that liminal state between her parent’s household and her future husband’s. The angel comes unexpectedly and unbidden. There is no sense that Mary was praying for an angel, or expected some kind of mission from God. Her first reaction is fear and confusion, a confusion that grew deeper as God’s message was outlined and ends with submissive acceptance of the will of God for her. The angel brings a message that will radically alter her life. Not only does the angel invade her personal space through his very appearing, but the message invades her personal space in an altogether more intimate way, as it brings the news of a new life that will grow in her – in her very womb. This is a life that will change her and change the world.

Early paintings of the annunciation show the Spirit descending upon Mary and entering her ear, depicting this not only as the moment of annunciation but also as the moment of conception. It is, we have to admit, a somewhat troubling image of a young innocent girl, apprehended by an angel, who leaves her impregnated with the Word of God. We prize Mary’s affirmative ‘yes’, but the story also leaves us slightly disturbed about how much choice she actually had. Overwhelmed by God, her life is changed beyond belief, and her wonderful discipleship is worked out in her handling of this divine intervention.

For in the gradually revealed leavening that is the incarnation, we might reflect on how God, the Lord Almighty, has chosen to speak

to us. In a culture where clarity and certainty are so obviously craved, God reminds us that he has indeed sent us a message. But it is not one that is easy to read. For it is not a text, nor is it a clear and obvious call that maps out the future with precision and transparency.

It is, rather, the gift of a child. God comes among us, not as an articulate adult with some ideas and a plan, but in a form that is utterly defenceless and vulnerable. Yet it is precisely in this most unexpected incarnation that the wisdom of God is revealed. Here, we come face to face with God, who has come among us as a tiny child. And so we will have to put time and energy into that relationship if we are ever to hear him speak his first words. God's wisdom is this: he comes to us in a way that draws us in to the mystery of creation and the great surprise of the unexpected miracle.

So may we, as we share in this Advent together, also join with Mary and Elizabeth in saying 'yes' to God; 'yes' to a promise, but one you cannot yet see. Truly, my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

## Prayer

*God of hope,  
be with us in our Advent journey  
to the stable and beyond;  
be with us in our meeting  
and in our travelling together;  
be with us in our worship  
and our praying together;  
be with us in our Advent journey  
to the stable and beyond,  
our God of hope.*

## Contemplation

*What happens when God confounds us and overwhelms us – in prayer, joy, compassion, creation? Can we say with Mary our ‘Yes!’ to God?*

*Let us pray for all those who are called to hand their lives over to God – that they may be given grace, strength, wisdom and love.*

## Friday

**Mary said, 'Here I am, the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.' And the angel left her.**

LUKE 1:38

The theologian Mark Oakley often writes and reflects using poetry. His reasoning is simple enough: poetry captures something that cannot be explained. A poem is an arrangement of words where the sum is always greater than the parts. I cannot explain Mary's pregnancy. Or Elizabeth's. Nor can you. Come to think of, explaining any pregnancy is not as simple as it appears. Poems give us meanings and inferences that outstrip the words.

Advent is the season where, no matter how hard you try, the words don't stretch far enough to explain the mystery of God, the annunciation, a birth, angels, shepherds and mystics from the east. As Oakley says, our churches perhaps need to be more unapologetically poetic, able to let her words mean as much as possible and more – rather than reduced to the least. To let words nurture people who wish to fall deeply into the mystery of God as much as those who seek to analyse and solve that mystery.

God speaks to us in riddles, parables, nature, nurture, poems, prose, prophecy and propositions. So we need to meet head-on the great curse of literalism that prowls around our churches, and wake up to truth as not being the same thing as eliminating ambiguity. Rituals and liturgies are poetry in motion. God is rather averse, even shy, of everything being spelled out.

Revelation – and here I include the scriptures – does not come to us as some kind of instruction manual. We worship a God who does not reveal

propositionally, but rather personally, and in Jesus. God is present in the subtle camouflaging of metaphors, images, questions, silences, spaces, guesses and epiphanies that speak of an eternal love that draws ever-near to us. A love, indeed, that we cannot explain. It just is.

As Oakley says, it is this God we are called to reflect; resisting closure, raising expectations, opening up a generosity of spirit not a meanness of pious restriction. Do we make God small? Literalism is the highway to reducing God to the level of our own rationality. Literalism is as flat and shallow as it is falsely self-confident.

But poetry resists closure, resists paraphrase and defies summary. As has been said, a poem is never finished, only ever abandoned. This constant process of becoming resembles the life of the soul in relationship and conversation with God: never finished, never closed, always stretching our contours into fresh wisdom and being. Our language as Christians must be a language of real and true longing. If we allow our language to become shallow, our discipleship will soon follow.

So I am back to one, simple, three-letter word that sits in the middle of the annunciation. It is the only word you ever need with God, and yet we pass by it daily, without a second thought. The word means so little, yet so much. It is the first word you need in your dictionary if you are to be a disciple. The word is 'yes'. Yes to God. Yes to change. Yes to love. Yes to an unknown future. Yes to God, because there is no greater 'amen'.

## Prayer

*This Advent-time,  
we remember Mary and Joseph,  
giving thanks for their faithfulness,  
courage and obedience,  
stepping out into the unknown  
in the strength of your Spirit,*

*playing their part  
in the fulfilment of your plan  
to bring your prodigal people  
home again.*

*We pray that their example  
might be the pattern of our lives,  
that when your gentle whisper  
breaks through the clamour of this world  
and into our small corner,  
we might be ready to listen,  
and having listened, to act.*

## Contemplation

*Where, when and how do we hear God calling to us today? Is our 'yes' to God one of service that leads to freedom?*

*Let us pray for those who are nurturing vocations to serve the world, church and local community – that they may be blessed with grace and wisdom.*

## Canticle

Thus says the Lord, the redeemer of Israel, Israel's Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, to the servant of despots:

'Kings will stand up when they see, and princes do homage, because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who chose you.'

Thus says the Lord, 'At the time of my good pleasure I answer you, on the day of salvation I help you.'

I have formed you and have appointed you as a covenant for the people, to restore the land, to return desolated properties, to say to prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'

Along the roadside they will graze and every bare height will be their pasture.

They will never hunger or thirst, scorching wind and sun will never plague them; for he who pities them will lead them, will guide them to springs of water.

I shall turn all my mountains into a road and my highways will be raised up.

Look! Here they come from afar; look, these from the north and the west, those from the land of Syene.'

Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth! Mountains, break into joyful cries! For the Lord has consoled his people, is taking pity on his afflicted ones.

ISAIAH 49:7-13

The importance of resisting evil is played out in a lot of films by the Coen brothers. Many of their movies feature two archetypes: people of simple goodness who succumb to temptation, and psychopaths. The latter type is beyond the comprehension of most people, but they recur

with such frequency in our stories that we can identify them well. What we need as a church is to be less naïve, but still curious and searching. Jesus did not set up a cosy established church, but something more akin to what the former Bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway called ‘an underground guerrilla movement’.

Jesus is a countercultural force in our lifetime, as he was in his own. The question for Advent is: can his message rise again in me, and in you? If we really want to understand the moral, political and social crises of our lives and times, it seems to me that we must start instead with the very small things.

‘Crisis’ is a Greek word which originally described the moment in the evolution of an illness on which everything else hinged: when death and recovery were held for a moment in the balance. The slightest nudge towards one or the other might determine the outcome. The church is a field hospital, as Pope Francis says: it should be, at its best, an intensive care unit. Care is something we do for others, but it is also an emotional attitude of attentive compassion, of kindness, and delivering it is as much a privilege as it is a burden and a responsibility, and to receive it too. We need to be attentive to carers of all kinds, and for the kindness of all carers.

Christian faith is more about resilience and trust than it is about protection and safety. It’s not a transaction in which God rewards his followers in return for abiding by God’s instructions. Simplistic populous claims of certainty bring comfort to people who may be confused or frightened by rapid demographic, cultural or social change. We need bold preaching of simple truth and our collective responsibility to one another.

I draw inspiration from the civil rights activist John Lewis (1940–2020), who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. One of his great epitaphs was ‘If not us, then who? And if not now, then when?’ He was part of a generation who were incredibly courageous in their dedication to non-violent direct action. He was at the head of the march on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, being beaten and battered repeatedly.



What a lot of people don't appreciate was that he and his fellow protesters would put on their Sunday best to go out to these places, in order to get on their knees and pray: knowing that they would be met with violence. Lewis grew up in a small rural community. No one had gone to college; few had graduated from high school. And yet the call from Dr King to non-violent resistance stands as a potent Advent sign of what we can do if we stand up and are counted, even if we are beaten down. Advent is here.

## Prayer

*Almighty God,  
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness  
and to put on the armour of light,  
now in the time of this mortal life,  
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;  
that on the last day,  
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the  
living and the dead,  
we may rise to the life immortal;  
through him who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.*

Anglican Collect for the First Sunday of Advent

## Contemplation

*How does the truth find us and change us? What kinds of darkness are scattered by the light of truth pouring in our lives?*

*Let us pray for those who dwell in darkness and long for the light of truth, justice and redemption.*

*Let us pray that we may live simply, so others may simply live.*

## The message of the kingdom of God: an ecology of equality and peace and an economy of justice.

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