



## Opening Responses for Advent

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

**Let there be light!**

On those living in the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

**Let there be light!**

The true light has come into the world to dispel the darkness.

**Let there be light!**

## Prayer of Approach

The people groaned amid the gathering darkness, longing for the 'something' that would change everything, for the dawning of the new day after the long night of exile, for the boiling over of God's life from eternity into time.

The people thirsted and ached for streams of living water, for signs of new life springing up in the deserts of despair, for the change that would free them to be 'at home' with God, but without really knowing what that would mean.

The people preferred their own darkness and shadows to the fire on the earth God's truth brings raining down, but God promised to dwell with them as Emmanuel, Love inhabited humanly, made vulnerable and defenceless.

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

God of Advent,  
give us the courage to leave our darkness behind  
and the faith to draw near to you,  
stepping into the light of your truth, love and hope.  
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,  
the radical answer to Israel's longings,  
and the wellspring of everlasting life. **Amen**

## 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

In your experience, is waiting always something passive, or can we use times of waiting actively to engage with God?

## Prayers of Renewal

God of light,  
you call us out of the darkness both  
of ignorance of your love  
and mistrust of your ways.  
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,  
you call us out of the darkness both  
of indifference towards the needs of others  
and the undervaluing of ourselves.  
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,  
you call us out of the darkness both  
of unjust ways of ordering the world  
and the blind pursuit of self-interest.  
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light and hope,  
**make us ready to meet with you. Amen**

**Readings**    Jeremiah 33:14 – 16  
                    Luke 21:25 – 36

## **Sermon**

Imagine sitting in a darkened space, with only the light of a flickering candle to illuminate the room. The candlelight represents your hope for the future, and the darkness the dreadful anticipation brought on by waiting to see how events seemingly outside of your control play themselves out. Once upon a time, this dark room was filled not just with radiant light but intoxicating music, as the presence of the living God swept you up into the divine dance of deeply passionate radical love. Now, however, the silence is thick with tension as you cling on tightly to the remaining hope fragile candlelight gives, as bitter drafts threaten to extinguish the last visible reminder of God's faithfulness.

This image goes some way to capture the mood of the beleaguered prophet Jeremiah as he languished in prison on the orders of a king, in Zedekiah, who did not wish to hear his warnings about the fate of Jerusalem. The faithlessness and lack of concern for justice among God's people in Judah had enabled the stench of death to penetrate Jerusalem's once proud walls, and with the brutal armies of Babylon camped on their doorstep, things were going to get much worse for them before getting any better (Jeremiah 33:5 – 9). Yet, despite the terror of God's turning away from Judah, the candle Jeremiah relied upon kept burning, and the faint haunting melody of God's love song could just about be heard above the gathering gloom.

Now, while his dire prophetic warnings would indeed come to pass, the promises which the light and music signified still persisted. Their essence is captured within the poetry of the Advent hymn, *O Come, O Come, Immanuel*, which voices the deep longing of God's people for the *something* that would change *everything*. Exiled in a strange land and despairing at the ruination of their homeland, beleaguered

Israel nonetheless found reasons for renewing hope in God. During the season of Advent, we're reminded of Hebrew prophecies which anticipate God doing something truly new, especially through words spoken by Isaiah and Jeremiah. As the latter recognised, even from the confines of his prison cell, a righteous Branch would spring from the line of David – Israel's most famous monarch, and Jesus's direct ancestor – bringing justice, righteousness and safety within the land (Jeremiah 33:14 – 16). These verses look to God's promise to dwell with Israel – they would be at home with God, themselves, and each other, and would know God as Immanuel, meaning 'God with us'. It all sounds idyllic, but holding onto this vision wouldn't prove easy in the testing times following their return from Babylon...

I reckon this reading speaks powerfully into our current context, with all of its uncertainty and question marks. This time last year, I spoke about the trials of those first nine months of the Covid-19 pandemic, and how difficult it is to hold fast to knowledge of God being with us, when it feels like everything is falling apart. Perhaps God's promises as spoken by Jeremiah reflect our longing for renewed hope, as we look toward our return from the 'exile' of lockdowns and restrictions. For me, what is remarkable is that somebody caught up within such a vulnerable situation, with no obvious means of escape should the armies of Babylon storm the city, should be able to see the light and hear the music of God clearly enough not just to proclaim it in words, but to act on it by purchasing land (Jeremiah 32:8 – 15). It may strike us as an act of foolishness to invest funds when disaster is imminent and inevitable, but it is also a profound act of hope and trust in God.

That same hope in the midst of adversity is there in our Gospel text. To put this passage into context, Jesus and his disciples had arrived in Jerusalem for the Festival of Passover, and he was teaching both his friends and the crowds who gathered around him. Someone had remarked upon the many gifts adorning the Temple complex and its costly stonework, which was in the middle of being vastly expanded

by Herod the Great (John 2:20), prompting Jesus to reply that not a single stone would be left standing, in a probable reference to Rome destroying it in 70 CE. The disciples asked him when the destruction would happen, and what the signs of this would be (Luke 21:1 – 7), launching us headlong into one of the most challenging sections the third Gospel offers, with implicit rejection of imperial oppression and the promise to make the powers and principalities of that epoch and beyond faint with fear (21:26).

Some of the imagery seen in what has become known as the 'Lukan Apocalypse' is dramatic and cosmic, taken from prophetic warnings like Isaiah 13:10, and the coming of the Son of Man upon the clouds derives from Daniel 7:13 – 14. Other images are much more readily relatable. In Luke 21:29 – 33, for example, Jesus looks towards the fig tree putting out its leaves as a sign that summer's near, revealing the *predictable imminence* of his coming. Conversely, the warnings in 21:34 – 36 to avoid being weighed down by distractions that blind us to the 'inbreaking' of God's Kingdom illuminate the *unpredictable suddenness* of God's actions. Holding together these two dynamics (*predictable imminence* and *unpredictable suddenness*) in creative tension reminds us that we need to be alert for One who *is* coming, even as we cannot say precisely *when* this renewal will happen.

This brings us back, then, to the expectant waiting period of Advent. When God comes to dwell with us, as Immanuel, when the love and life of God boils over from divine eternity into created time, this does not happen by virtue of God rending the heavens asunder. Instead, when the light and music of God come to us in a unique way, in the very person of Jesus, God does it *humanly*. God respects our world by working within it, by establishing relationships, and by filling it out from within. Most importantly, God takes the risk of defenceless love in order to make all the difference in the world. This means – despite what much religious language and practice might make one believe! – God doesn't need bribing or pestering into caring or into being 'for

us'. In the same way that candle flames are not diminished by being passed from one person to another, so God held nothing back when the Word became flesh (John 1:14). Hence, Jesus is God from God, Light from Light. Moreover, Advent is about getting ourselves ready to encounter a God who changes everything by letting go, doing so with a defencelessness which, if we take it seriously, ought to be as deeply frightening as it is deeply joyful...

If this is going to happen, as Rowan Williams (to whom much of the Advent imagery here is indebted) notes, we need to take some time to slow down and see ourselves as reflected in the divine mirror that enables our *honest* seeing. Just as Jeremiah pulled no punches as to the causes of those bitter drafts threatening to extinguish the last visible reminder of God's faithfulness, so being drawn into the divine dance and seeing our way by the light of God involves being refined in the fires of God's love. After all, although God loves us just as we are, God loves us too much to leave us where we are. Thus, Advent challenges us to get ourselves ready to hear the Christmas story as *if for the first time*, and to be transformed in that process. Moreover, just as God works humanly, so we (as disciples of Christ) are called to work humanly, as we seek to embody God's love. Israel's longing for the 'something' that would change everything was fulfilled in the unplanned, overwhelming coming into the world of Jesus Christ, as a vulnerable baby born to ordinary parents within a backwater of the Roman Empire. Mary took a chance on God's defenceless love and if we use Advent well, taking the time and letting our defences down enough, we too could make a big difference. It is true that we do not and cannot know the 'when' or the 'how' of God's coming anew into our world, but we do know *who* is coming. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, and contrary to how it might feel when the darkness ensnares us, the light of God can never be extinguished. Amen

### **Space for Quiet Reflection**

## Prayers of Intercession

God of Advent hope,  
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world  
as a vulnerable baby and through defenceless love,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who've lost loved ones during this past year,  
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,  
and all who have been made homeless during this period.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,  
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures build up.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who dread the lead up to Christmas time,  
especially those who'll reluctantly spend this season alone.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who fear that you have left the building,  
that they might discover anew your love and care.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are scared to risk giving a little love;  
may we set off cascades of grace and reveal your love to all.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

## Lord's Prayer

## Final Prayer

Let us pray:

God of overflowing love,  
whose body language cannot help but speak grace,  
whose life and light boils over into our broken world,  
not rending the heavens, but filling out that world from within;  
we thank you that you identify so completely with us  
that in Jesus Christ, you became one of us.

We thank you that we don't have to persuade you to care,  
or flatter or manipulate you into being interested in us.  
For you know our longings and desires and contradictions,  
and you change everything through your defenceless love.

Help us to take the time we need this Advent  
to be surprised and frightened and astonished  
by the wonder of the Word made flesh –  
God from God, and Light from Light.

**Amen**

## Blessing

Journey onward in the light of faith, and shine brightly.  
Step forward in the strength of faith, and be bold.  
And as you go, remember that you do so  
with the blessing of God the Father,  
the peace of Jesus the Son  
and the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**