

Advent Greetings to you, wherever and whoever you are. We have set this time aside to begin our Advent journey. The world around us is greatly troubled. War, bad harvests, natural disasters and the Pandemic, all contribute to the suffering of millions of people. Many in our own country are experiencing real poverty for the first time in their lives. In normal times we would have been planning Christmas get-togethers, shopping for presents and special treats. You may manage to do some of that, but many of us are still unsure how much we shall be able to celebrate with others this Christmas.

Yet here we are to begin our journey through Advent, as the people of God. The troubles of these times have brought many people to a new understanding of what really matters in our lives. Whenever you share in this service, may it be a time of renewed hope, and an awareness of God's presence, as we anticipate his coming to earth as the Christ child.

### We sing our first [hymn 172 in StF Hills of the north, rejoice](#)

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|---|--|
| 1 Hills of the north, rejoice,<br>river and mountain-spring,<br>hark to the advent voice ;<br>valley and lowland, sing.<br>Christ comes in righteousness and love,<br>he brings salvation from above. | your seers have longed to know their Lord ;<br>to you he comes, the final Word.  |
| 2 Isles of the southern seas,<br>sing to the listening earth ;<br>carry on every breeze<br>hope of a world's new birth :<br>in Christ shall all be made anew ;<br>his word is sure, his promise true. | 4 Shores of the utmost west,<br>lands of the setting sun,<br>welcome the heavenly guest<br>in whom the dawn has come :<br>he brings a never-ending light,<br>who triumphed o'er our darkest night.   |
| 3 Lands of the east, arise !<br>He is your brightest morn ;<br>greet him with joyous eyes,<br>let praise his path adorn :   | 5 Shout, as you journey on ;<br>songs be in every mouth !<br>Lo, from the north they come,<br>from east and west and south :<br>in Jesus all shall find their rest,<br>in him the universe be blest. |

Charles Ernest Oakley (1832–1865) and Editors of *English Praise*, 1975

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## Prayer

Advent God, we worship you. We praise you because you come to us in love, and saving power in the person of Jesus, your Son. Prophets looked for his coming into the world, yet we know him as the One who brings light into our lives, and the lives of all those who look to him. Immanuel, the God who comes close, be with us in this time of worship. In the weeks of Advent, as we remember how a peasant girl became the mother of our Lord, encourage us as we remember the obedience of others. We shall be busy with many things in the coming weeks, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. Help us to keep focussed on what really matters, to welcome again the Christ child, and share with others the love, the light and the life which He gives to those who recognise Him as Immanuel, God with us. **Amen**

## The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,

For ever and ever. Amen

### **Short Talk (With video)**

You may have seen on the news how some people have been putting up their Christmas decorations extra early this year. I saw one family being interviewed who had done the whole of Christmas already. The tree was up and all the other decorations; the children had had presents and they had eaten a Christmas dinner together. They had done it all to cheer themselves up during the pandemic and the second lockdown. I always shudder when I see Christmas goods in the shops as early as September. I usually get decorations up and the tree decorated much nearer 25<sup>th</sup> December.



I thought I'd say a few words this morning about some of the decorations we usually have on our tree at home, what significance they have for me. ( I'm showing some on this miniature tree.) I have quite a lot of decorations to put on the tree, but I'm rather fond of these three wooden baubles. It's about ten years since we visited the village of Mathry in Pembrokeshire. We went there fairly often because there was a woodturner and furniture maker there, whose work we admired and sometimes were able to buy. We also bought these three to hang on the tree. This year, as I got them out, I remembered that Jesus grew up as the son of Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth. Jesus himself may well have learned the carpenter's trade before he began his public ministry, and many of the people of his home town of Nazareth rejected him because they saw him as only a carpenter. They could not begin to see him as the Son of God. Since I have three of these, and they are made of wood, I couldn't help thinking about Jesus as he hung on the cross between two others who were crucified with him. In a service at my home church, Christ Church Woodley, Graham Carpenter reminded us that "Christmas has no meaning without Easter." The baby of Bethlehem was destined to die, and rise from death, so that we might know the real life that only God can give us.

I also want to show you are these heart shaped tree decorations. They were given to me many years ago by a friend. She had made them herself and they're perfect for our tree because red and gold are always my main colours. But the heart shape of them is particularly significant. I've no doubt that they were made and given as an act of love, but also that they remind me of God's love for us. In the words of Christina Rossetti's hymn,

"Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, Love divine;

Love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead, love incarnate, love divine;

Worship we our Jesus. but wherewith for sacred sign?"

### [We shall sing Of the Father's love begotten 181 in StF; 79 in H&P](#)

1 Of the Father's love begotten  
ere the worlds began to be,  
he is Alpha and Omega,  
he the source, the ending he,  
of the things that are, that have been,  
and that future years shall see,  
evermore and evermore.

2 By his word was all created ;  
he commanded, it was done ;  
earth and sky and boundless ocean,  
universe of three in one ;  
all that sees the moon's soft radiance,  
all that breathes beneath the sun,  
evermore and evermore.

3 This is he whom seers in old time  
chanted of with one accord,

whom the voices of the prophets  
promised in their faithful word ;  
now he shines, the long-expected ;  
let creation praise its Lord,  
evermore and evermore.

4 O you heights of heaven, adore him ;  
angel hosts, his praises sing ;  
all dominions, bow before him,  
and extol our God and King ;  
let no tongue on earth be silent,  
every voice in concert sing,  
evermore and evermore !

*Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348–c. 413)*

*translated by John Mason Neale (1811–1866) and Henry Williams  
Baker (1821–1877)*

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We'll now have our **Bible readings**.

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

14 "The days are coming" declares the Lord, "when I will fulfil the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.

15" "In those days and at that time I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line; He will do what is just and right in the land.

16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord our Righteousness.'

MARK 13:24-37

<sup>24</sup> "But in those days, following that distress,

" "the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;

<sup>25</sup> the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

<sup>26</sup> “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

<sup>28</sup> “Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. <sup>30</sup> I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

### *The Day and Hour Unknown*

<sup>32</sup> “No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. <sup>34</sup> It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

<sup>35</sup> “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. <sup>36</sup> If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. <sup>37</sup> What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’ ”

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

<sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— <sup>6</sup> because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

## **Waiting and Watching**

A year or two ago I received through the post a ‘Countdown to Christmas’ calendar. It gave me some fairly general reminders such as ‘Dec. 16<sup>th</sup> Tree! Buy One! Dec. 17<sup>th</sup> Decorate Tree.’ There were no days of the week written on this countdown, just dates, so there was no reference to Sundays or weekends. Certainly there was no recognition that Sundays in December should be anything other than shopping days. As I glanced through it and came to the Sunday before Christmas, then Christmas Eve and Christmas Day I thought there must surely be some acknowledgement that some people will be going to church at Christmas. But I was disappointed. This particular countdown was concerned only with being organised and in good shape, so that so that I’d be ready for all the indulgence and parties of the Christmas season. It left me feeling very sad. No wonder Christmas can be such a burden to people, when all that lies at the heart of it is left out.

Today, as Christians, we begin the season of Advent – our Christmas countdown. It’s a time of anticipation, a time of preparation. Advent for us is about getting ready for the birth of Jesus. In this first week, we are looking at the way God’s people, down the centuries, have anticipated how God will ultimately bring about justice and peace in the world. Our readings were about ‘the last

days' and the return of Jesus, the Son of Man, to the earth. In later weeks we'll be seeing how the birth of Jesus was part of that grand scheme. So as we begin the Advent season I want us to reflect on three things. This first Sunday of Advent is traditionally about waiting and watching, in a state of readiness, and so, using our three readings I'd like to explore this idea as we begin again the Advent season. We'll see how the waiting and watching begins with **God's promise** to his people. Then we'll look at the **circumstances of the waiting** and how we deal with them. Finally we'll consider what the **fulfilment of God's promise** will mean for the people of God.

So, we begin with God's promise to his people as it was given through the prophet Jeremiah. It might help to remind ourselves of the situation at that time. Jerusalem had been besieged by the army of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the siege had been going on for some years. Throughout this time Jeremiah had spoken of God's judgement and punishment of his people because they had not kept their part of the Covenant – they had not lived as people of God. In fact, Jeremiah was under house arrest – confined to the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace by King Zedekiah. During this time a cousin of Jeremiah, called Hanamel, offered him the chance to purchase a field so that it stayed within the family. Remember, this is while the city is under siege and expecting to be totally overrun by the enemy.

However, Jeremiah recognised the hand of God in this opportunity, so he bought the field, and took great care to keep the title deeds safe for the future. From this experience, Jeremiah prophesied the future restoration of Judah, after a time of deportation and exile. This future restoration would be centred in a descendent of King David, referred to as "The Lord, our Righteousness", who would also restore true worship. It was important to the Jews to have both a king, and a priesthood, to make them a people. In this future restoration God would also make a new Covenant with his people, by which each person would know God for himself. In time, the Christian Church would recognise Jesus as the one who fulfilled this prophecy. Only Jesus perfectly filled the role of King and Priest forever, with the church as the new Jerusalem. Only Jesus could set up the new Covenant.

This time of Advent is about God's promise, through men such as Jeremiah, to send a Messiah who would establish the new Covenant –so that the people of God would be able to live His way. So first of all we remember **God's promises** to his people and look forward to the birth of Jesus who so completely fulfilled those promises.

The passage we had read from Mark's gospel is a particularly difficult one. In it Jesus spoke about the end of the age when He would come in great power and glory. It's clear from our reading of the New Testament that the early Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetime, and the fact that he didn't has always been something of a problem for the church. However, there are two main ideas that we need to understand from this passage. One is that we need to look out for the signs that God's Kingdom is being established, because God's promises **will** be realised, no matter how bad things may seem. The other is that we need to be watchful and always ready for the Lord's return.

Jesus wanted his disciples to looking out for signs that God was at work in the world; that the kingdom of God was near. He was talking about the "coming of the Son of Man", about his coming again to gather together his faithful disciples. In the earlier verses of this chapter Jesus warned his disciples that they would face persecution and that the world would experience great calamities and suffering. He warned them against continually speculating **when** he would return. Jesus' words were not intended to leave his disciples resting in comfort, but to stir them into action. His return would be a time of gathering in the faithful, but also of leaving behind those who opposed God's ways. It would be a time of separation and judgement. Jesus told his disciples, that the most important thing about the getting ready, was that it has to be done now. Tomorrow won't do. There is a need for urgency. Disciples must live in a state of readiness. Why is that? Because no-one knows when the Son of Man will return. Even the Son himself doesn't have this knowledge – only the Father knows. Our task is not to speculate on when Jesus will come again but to be always

ready and always hopeful as we wait for God's kingdom. Jesus spoke of the buds on the fig tree giving a sign that summer was near – surely a sign of hope of the good things that would follow. We are to look out for the signs that God is present and active in our world.

There is an urgency about being ready, but what does being ready involve? Jesus said it was like a master leaving his household in the care of his servants. Each servant has his own job to do. One servant's task is to keep watch at the door for his master's return. So being ready, or keeping watch, is about each servant faithfully doing what the master asks. Last week's lectionary reading was one in which Jesus told his disciples how he expected his followers to treat others.

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” For the disciples of Jesus, being ready meant faithfully caring for any who were in need of help.

The establishment of God's Kingdom has always been concerned with justice for all people, with caring for the poor, and for the outcast. What use are all our celebrations at Christmas time if we are not reaching out to share with others? It's a time of great enjoyment as we celebrate the greatest gift given to the world, but we need to avoid indulgence that brings misery to others. Certainly as Christians this has to be a time of reaching out and sharing God's love with others in any way we can.

So this time of advent is about faithfully waiting for the Lord's return as we look for signs that God is at work in the world, and as we ourselves act to make that kingdom a reality for others.

Thirdly, what does the fulfilment of God's promises mean for the people of God? In the beginning of his letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul speaks warmly of their faith and all that they have received in Christ. He writes that they have been enriched in every way and are not lacking in any spiritual gift. He is confident that they will remain strong as Christians, and that they will be found blameless when Jesus returns. They sound like 'super saints' these Corinthians whom Paul is addressing. Yet the following chapters of this letter reveal that the Christians in Corinth are experiencing all kinds of problems and divisions. What then is the basis of Paul's confidence in their ultimate position before God? Paul is sure that God, who has begun the good work in these Christians, will bring it to completion. God is faithful to those who are truly committed to Him. That is the reason for Paul's confidence.

The first Sunday of Advent. We begin our countdown to Christmas when we celebrate God's promise to send the Messiah to set up a new covenant between God and his people, the promise realised in the first Christmas. We wait for the time when God's kingdom will be fully established, and we watch prayerfully for the signs that God is already at work in our world. And each day, we realise God's promise in our own lives as we allow his love to fill us, giving us a new relationship with God and with all people. As we prepare to celebrate the fact that God chose to come and live among us in the person of Jesus, may we be ready to meet Him in our daily lives, whenever He comes, and in whatever form He takes. Amen.

### **Hymn 188 StF; 246 in H&P**

[There's a light upon the mountain THE HILLSIDE SINGERS UK 1 - YouTube](#)

There's a light upon the mountains,  
and the day is at the spring,  
When our eyes shall see the beauty  
and the glory of the King;  
Weary was our heart with waiting,  
and the night-watch seemed so long;  
But his triumph day is breaking,

and we hail it with a song.

There's a hush of expectation,  
and a quiet in the air;  
And the breath of God is moving  
in the fervent breath of prayer:  
For the suffering, dying Jesus  
is the Christ upon the throne;  
And the travail of our spirit  
is the travail of his own.

He is breaking down the barriers,  
he is casting up the way;  
He is calling for his angels  
to build up the gates of day:  
But his angels here are human,  
not the shining hosts above;  
But the drum-beats of his army  
are the heart-beats of our love.

Hark! We hear a distant music,  
and it comes with fuller swell;  
'tis the triumph-song of Jesus,  
of our King, Emmanuel:  
Zion, go now forth to meet him;  
and, my soul, be swift to bring  
all your finest and your noblest  
for the triumph of our King!

Henry Burton

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord, we pray for your world. When you made it, it was good, beautiful and perfect. We are sorry for the ways in which we spoil your world by the things we do and the choices we make. We thank you for those who remind us that cannot go on using and misusing the earth's resources. Help us to be willing to change the way we live so that the earth will be sustained for future generations.

Lord in your mercy.

### **Hear our prayer**

Lord, we pray for those for whom daily living is a struggle. Those, in the poorest countries, who must work long hours for little reward, and barely have enough to feed their families. Those who have fled their own land and are desperately seeking shelter in another country. Those who have spent months and even years in a refugee camp. We pray for your strength and guidance for the agencies which are trying to help them. We pray for those, in our own country, who have no work because of Covid19, and don't know how they'll pay the bills and feed their families. Open our eyes to help in any way we can.

Lord in your mercy.

### **Hear our prayer**

We pray for young people and old who are living alone and trying to cope by themselves with the restrictions of Covid19. We thank you for the individuals and agencies who are seeking to help them. Help us to reach out to those in need in our own community.

Lord in your mercy.

### Hear our prayer

We pray for those we know to be in any kind of need,

For those who are lonely, for those who feel old and forgotten, for those who feel sad and uncertain,

For those who are ill, and those who care for them and love them, and for those who grieve the loss of a loved one.

May we all take our share in showing the love of God to those he sends us each day.

Lord in your mercy.

### Hear our prayer

In the name of Jesus, whose healing touch reached out to those in need. Amen

### [Hymn Long ago prophets knew StF 178](#)

1 Long ago, prophets knew  
Christ would come, born a Jew,  
come to make all things new ;  
bear his people's burden,  
freely love and pardon :

*Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring !  
Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing !  
When he comes,  
when he comes,  
who will make him welcome ?*

2 God in time, God in man,  
this is God's timeless plan :  
he will come, as a man,  
born himself of woman,  
God divinely human :

3 Mary, hail ! Though afraid,  
she believed, she obeyed.

In her womb, God is laid ;  
till the time expected,  
nurtured and protected :

4 Journey ends ! Where afar  
Bethlem shines, like a star,  
stable door stands ajar.  
Unborn Son of Mary,  
Saviour, do not tarry !  
*Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring !  
Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing !  
Jesus comes !  
Jesus comes !  
We will make him welcome !*

Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000)

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### Blessing (Hebrews 13:20)

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen