



For some years now, we have offered readings and resources for Advent. It began when Europe, not for the first time, was going through a significant financial crisis. At the time, news bulletins and even prayers of intercession expressed the fear that our economic systems could collapse at any moment.

Yet alongside this, as would often be the case at this time of year, Christian worship frequently included the song of Mary (Magnificat), which includes such disturbing phrases as:

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*

This was intriguing and terrifying! Intriguing because many seemed to see no connection between the words of Mary and the events that were unfolding before them; terrifying because if this was the sign of God's Kingdom coming, we were living in a nation that was likely to bear a significant cost. Mary rejoiced at the prospect of the rich being sent away empty, yet the Church in the West seemed pretty intent on avoiding it! The key themes of Advent ask disturbing questions about how much our commitment to God's Kingdom depends on being an undisturbed citizen of a secure and prosperous earthly kingdom.

Advent is often portrayed as little more than a countdown to Christmas. While we might expect this of commercial retailers and popular broadcasters, God's people can be complicit by offering little more ourselves. While Advent is rooted in those immediate events before Christ's birth - through them, it invites us to embrace far deeper and more profound narratives. The historic reality of nativity is the fulfilment of centuries of promise and took place outside the earthly corridors of power and repositories of wealth. It is when we recognise this, that its true message of hope emerges.

Once again we are embracing the season of Advent in the midst of earthly chaos, particularly in the UK. The future direction of our nation has seldom felt so uncertain. Will we or won't we remain in the European Union – what difference will it make if we do or we don't? Good deal; bad deal; no deal; hard Brexit; soft Brexit – every term is laced with speculation, threat and uncertainty. This is the context in which we, as God's people, light our Advent candles, declaring a faith that both embraces and transcends the realities that surround us. Yet the prevailing expectation is to demand certainty and solution, rather than wonder if God is seeking to say something through the chaos.

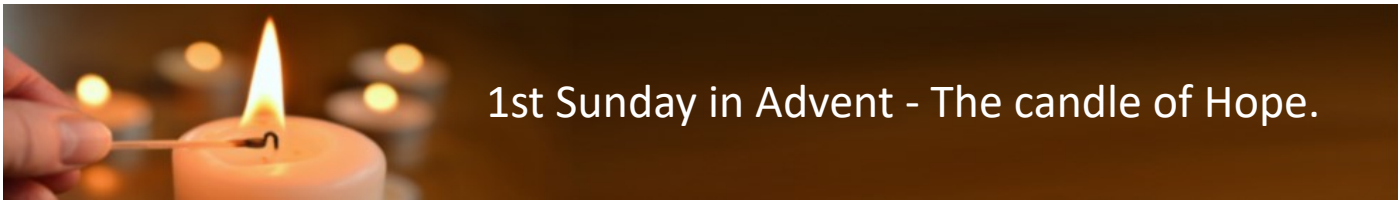
As ever, the more we acknowledge the tensions that prevail, the more profoundly we recognise the depth and power of our message. For it was in the midst of a world no less riven by strife and uncertainty, that a young couple faithfully journeyed to Bethlehem, delivered their child in a forgotten animal shelter and fled for their lives as refugees. God's greatest act of salvation was accomplished in a way that many would hardly notice.

The words of Psalm 46 seem to have a particular relevance at this time, almost mocking the frenzied speculation that prevails by simply declaring:

*Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts . . .
. . . 'Be still, and know that I am God;*

These sentiments lie behind the readings and reflections that are offered. They particularly seek to portray the lighting of an Advent candle as deliberate intention to be still – it might even be described as an act of defiance, given the frenzied tone and volume of current political narratives.

But this is no mere escapism or burying of heads in sand. Rather it is creating the opportunity to take a longer-term view and remember that the narrative of salvation was forged and transmitted across centuries, not decades. It is an invitation to recognise that often it was not simply despite the plotting and policy making of this world's power-brokers, but through them, that God's Salvation was accomplished. We have good reason to remain a people of hope!



1st Sunday in Advent - The candle of Hope.

Traditionally, in the first week of Advent, we celebrate those whose early lives and stories shaped the key messages and truths of our faith. We are invited to delve deep into history and allow these ancient narratives to throw their own perspective as we ponder the future of a forty-year partnership of nations.

History is a long-term reality; God is and God has always been at its heart. The message of Advent is that God has not gone away – God is always present, God is constant.

The lighting of a candle will be a familiar act, evoking memories and reaching back even beyond the lifetimes of those who gather. The reflection that follows seeks to invite worshippers to use that familiarity to draw hope and perspective by recognising again the timelessness of our faith story.

This familiar lighting of Advent's first flame,
Releases again the memories of seasons past;
A task repeated not because of mere tradition,
But to re-declare a timeless message of hope.



Uncertainty and fear may hold nations in their grip,
While rulers and power-seekers argue and accuse.
But we choose to remember that our future rests
Not in any earthly treaty, but God's eternal purpose.

In the midst of this world's turmoil and uproar
We receive God's invitation to be still
To re-call and re-tell the timeless stories
Whose truths have breathed hope into every era of history

In this moment we grasp the opportunity
Not to work out solutions or be convinced of any plan
But be stilled by the knowledge of who our God is
For in the midst of similar turmoil and ambition – God was found as one of us.

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2nd Sunday in Advent - The candle of Love.

In the second week of Advent, many traditions place their focus on the words of the prophets - God's message of love made known through those appointed as its heralds.

Never in human history have words been so accessible as they are today. Tweets and posts can spread across the world on a viral scale, and with this ability come claims and counter claims of fake news, post truth, false accusations and cyber-meddling.

Our access to words and ideas is unbridled – the key challenge is to learn how to listen, how to discern, how to make sense of this relentless barrage of data. The prophets remind us that God speaks and has spoken into the events and cycles of history, and those who are truly wise are those who listen for and listen to God's voice.

The lighting of the advent candle is an opportunity for those who worship to be reminded that God can speak through the present events of history, and to be urged to give attention to what God might be saying. In the stillness, we can be invited to re-tune to the voice of our Creator and Saviour.

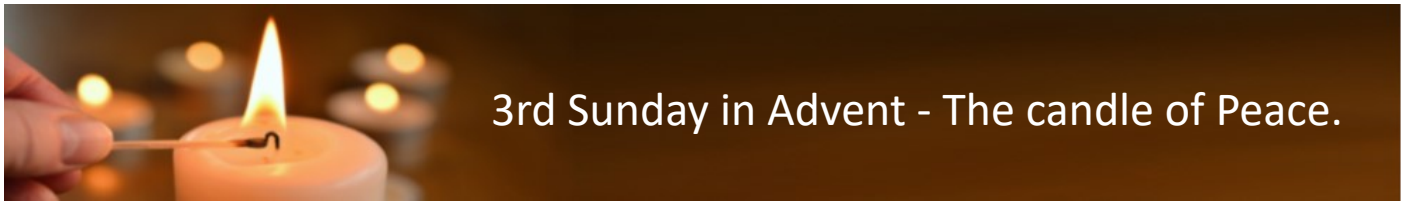
Another flame announces its message of hope,
Amidst a world where thousands of voices demand to be heard,
Claiming that theirs is the way; that they have the solution,
That their truth is the right truth.



But this faithful flame invites us to listen for another voice;
One that may not choose to demand a hearing in every public square;
To tune our ears to the voice of our creator;
To listen out for God's melodies of hope;
Despite the screams of despair,
That seek to drown their every note.

God can speak, and God is speaking;
Speaking in the midst of a nation's anguish and struggle;
Speaking when hopes are dashed and spirits crushed;
Speaking where fear abounds, fuelled by uncertainty;
Speaking within and through every circumstance,
For in such ways and places, our God has always spoken.

And when our arguments are exhausted,
Our debates have run their course,
Our media outlets have nothing left to say,
God's word will stand; God's truth will remain.



3rd Sunday in Advent - The candle of Peace.

The third week of advent is one in which many traditions turn their focus on John the Baptist, the “voice from the wilderness” that heralds Christ’s coming. John’s arrival is a tangible sign that God’s salvation is immanent, but his location in the wilderness is a reminder that those signs of hope may not be so apparent in the obvious and popular places.

This is what we seek to capture in the lighting of this week’s candle. There will be signs of hope and goodness in our world, and the flame is our commission to believe and seek them out. Whether or not they are noticed and celebrated, we see in our world the mark of its Creator and Saviour. This is not to ignore or dismiss the struggle of this world, but to see them in a different perspective. We pause to re-focus our attention on this reality.

In this familiar moment,
Another flame bursts into radiant life,
Defying the narratives of despair,
By reminding us that deeper truths still prevail.



Every day the sun rises as the earth again traces her orbit.
Even when disrupted, the cycles of nature defiantly fight on,
Every day new life is born;
New hands will join in love;
New expressions of human kindness will emerge;
Belief in the good will remain unquenched.

We choose to see the good;
We choose to seek the wholesome;
We choose to remember,
That when every deal has failed,
Every border has been crossed;
Every earthly empire has fallen;
Every treaty has been forgotten,
And every ruler’s dominion is no more.
God will be;
Hope will remain;
And eternity will still be just beginning.

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4th Sunday in Advent - The candle of Joy.

In many Christian traditions the focus of Advent returns to those events that surround Jesus' birth. The joy it invites us to embrace could, in some ways, also be described as an act of defiance. The events on which we choose to focus would have been seen as unimportant and of little relevance at the time.

Even Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem is presented, not as some pilgrimage of faith initiated through God's command, but the consequence of an imposed decree from an occupying emperor. The only serious attention that they are likely to have roused, was the neighbourhood gossip fuelled by a pregnancy that preceded a marriage.

Today, we may sense that we have caught glimpses of God at work, but even if we have not, we can recognise how often God's purposes are accomplished in unseen and unnoticed ways. And so this candle sheds light, not so much on what we sense to the signs of God at work, but our faith that God's purposes continue unabated.

When light comes, darkness is dispelled.
We cannot make darkness, we can only block out light.,
And so we bring another flame into this circle of hope
To declare that, whether seen or unseen, God's eternal light is shining.

The curtains of despair might sometimes be drawn,
Yet even a shadow reminds us that somewhere there is light.
When circumstances make no sense and our eyes see only darkness,
Hearts of faith believe the light is not extinguished, but hidden.

And as this flame is kindled, we remember
How once, while rulers debated,
And emperors gave their decrees;
When inns were too crowded,
To provide for those in greatest need;
And a young couple's struggle,
Caused only village gossip,

Salvation was dawning
Through those very circumstances
That seemed to defy it.

