

Church Urban Fund Advent Appeal
A Series of Meditations
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Advent, (from the Latin, adventus: coming), comprises the four weeks before Christmas, and is a season of expectant waiting and of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. During Advent, we accompany John into the desert to face the wilderness of our own inner landscape to prepare ourselves to welcome Christ into our hearts anew at Christmas. The wilderness can represent broken promises or failed relationships but most importantly the wilderness at Advent reminds us of our failure to be credible disciples of Jesus.

At advent we are invited to ask ourselves:

What can I do for the Kingdom of God?
Where is Christ to be found in our broken world?

ADVENT - A TIME OF PREPARATION

By tradition and history, John the Baptist is associated with Advent. At the turn of the church year, John announces the coming of the Lord. John is the image and voice of Advent; the pre-eminent prophet (Lk 7:24-28): 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' (Mark 1:1-8 c.f. Isa. 40: 1-11). John called people out of the Temple, out of the cities and marketplace to the margins of power and life.

John's task was to prepare the way for the Lord, to point forward to the one who was to follow and his message was a message of repentance (Jn 3:30). His arrest is seen in the gospels as a decisive event for Jesus' ministry. John asks from prison whether Jesus was 'the one' (Matt 11:2-6), and the signs of the Kingdom given to John include the blind seeing, the lame walking, lepers cleansed, and the poor receiving the good news. These 'signs' were social and political.

Question: Charles Finney, the nineteenth century American evangelist, refused the sacraments to slave owners and scandalized society by training the first black people and women for the ministry - what are the signs of the Kingdom in our society and how are we preparing for Christ's presence?

ADVENT - A TIME TO WAIT

All the figures who appear at the beginning of Luke's Gospel are waiting: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna, and John the Baptist. The Roman Catholic priest Alfred Delp, wrote a series of Advent meditations from his prison cell in Nazi Germany. Delp believed that Advent was a time for waiting. Advent can be a time in which the seed of the kingdom is planted, even in adversity, and it is this seed which can "germinate" at Christmas, which grows through Lent, to blossom at Easter and finally bring forth abundant fruit at Pentecost. We wait with hope trusting in God's promises and we wait actively.

When Christians feed the hungry in the name of Jesus, or work for peace and reconciliation, or bring help to asylum seekers, or work for the care of the environment, they are working for the Kingdom and waiting on God's promises. Such activity represents signs of hope and promise, because they demonstrate our calling to be Kingdom people, partnering with God in bringing about the future healing of the entire universe (Rom 8: 19-21).

Question: The German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that life in a prison cell was like Advent because of the paradox that the place of struggle for the Christian can also become a place of hope and faith. For Bonhoeffer, Delp and many others, to wait for God's promises is a life of service and sacrifice. How is your life marked by waiting and what service and risks have you taken for the Gospel?

ADVENT - A TIME TO PRAY

Mary was a young unwed, woman, living in a small village on the outskirts of the Empire, familiar with poverty, oppression, sexism, terrorism, and war. Mary's experience reminds us that God does not intervene among the elite, but among the poor and those on the margins and her song of liberation, the Magnificat, announces a new transformed social order (Luke 1: 46-56).

It was in that world of violence that Mary surrendered herself to love and she teaches us that our response to God's love is to become people of prayer. In a world where God can seem absent, the angel declares to Mary that God is both present and active and that the process of loving dependence and expectation will open our hearts and lead us to seek Him in those around us. The journey into God takes us into the service of others -

Question: Meister Eckhart insisted that we are all born with the possibility that the divine life can be born in the humblest stable of our hearts and lives. Our lives are the womb that can bring to birth the presence of the Kingdom if we are willing, like Mary, to say 'yes' to God. How for you have prayer and social action connected? What have your experiences been of saying 'yes' to God?

ADVENT A TIME FOR TRANSFORMATION

The first thing that the Angel Gabriel did when he spoke to Mary was to declare her, 'Most favoured one' (Luke 1:28). The process of Mary's transformation began long before conception as the poem of Denise Levertov, 'Annunciation' reminds us. It was Mary's consent and courage which 'opened her utterly.' The Gloria of the angels (Luke 2:8-14) given first to the poor is good news for all and is a message of unconditional love and of transformation. At Christmas, the word made flesh in Jesus says, 'I am for you' but we are also called to be a message of love and transformation for others. We give glory to God by living the good news, by being the word of love become flesh; in our healing of wounds, in our restoring of relationships, in our struggle for justice - in our actions of transformation.

When Christians feed the hungry in the name of Jesus, or heal the sick, or work for peace, or seek to support asylum seekers, or work for the responsible care of the environment, such activity is not a distraction from the commission to preach the Gospel, but is a demonstration of the presence of the transforming power of the Kingdom. Jesus could not be clearer: true greatness is to be found in the service of others.

Question: The mystery of incarnation is the mystery of the divine life born in poverty, humility and powerlessness, and the 'unique grandeur of Christianity is its belief in a poor God' (Jean Sullivan). How do you seek Christ among the poor? Who are the poor where you live and how are you actively seeking to be an agent of transformation?

Pull back the curtain on Bethlehem's stable
Strip off the tinsel and peer through the dark,
Look at the child, who's a threat, yet in danger,
Homeless and helpless, he first makes his mark.
Love's the secret, love's the secret
Love is God's cradle, God's table, God's cup and God's ark.
John Bell