

ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK ONE: GETTING READY

Jesus said to his disciples: 'There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand.' **Luke 21: 25-28**

SLOW DOWN AND LISTEN

Our daughter Annie died suddenly of natural causes in June 2020. She was a scripture scholar, teacher and evangelist, working since 2016 for Church Army. Last year's Advent Reflections were based on her writings. This year Annie's voice is joined by others to help us as we prepare for Advent.

"God speaks in all sorts of ways – through scripture, through nature, through other people. However, unless we slow down and listen, we miss his promptings and his voice."

Annie O'Connor, *The Camino: Finding Stillness and Presence (for Catholic Charismatic Renewal)* 2019

CLIMATE CHANGE

"Communities, especially the poorest and those on the margins, are already suffering the bitter consequences of an eroding biodiversity: millions of people are losing their livelihoods, food and water are becoming increasingly scarce, climate change is accelerating, and weather patterns are far less predictable. And it will not be long before the impact is felt by everyone.

Destroying the earth destroys a gift that has been entrusted to humanity.

The rich diversity of life reflects God's goodness and creative exuberance. Deep incarnation implies Christ's solidarity with the suffering earth and its potential restoration. If humanity is called to become co-creators in the image of God, indifference to creation is simply not an option.

Pope Francis points out in *Laudato Si'* that the earth and its peoples are deeply interconnected; if we destroy the earth, it is the poorest people who will suffer. We don't have a choice between paying attention to either conservation or poverty – the two are intricately bound up together.

Wild places rich in natural biodiversity are part of humanity's "life support system": they generate the oxygen we breathe; they produce the food we need and clean the water we drink, and they are capable of absorbing half of the carbon dioxide we put into the atmosphere. The intertwined nature of human lives and ecologies renders the protection of biodiversity an issue of social justice and of life and death."

Celia Deane-Drummond, Director, *Laudato Si'* Research Institute

"Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another."

Pope Francis *Laudato Si'*

May the Lord be generous in increasing your love and make you love one another and the whole human race as much as we love you. **1 Thessalonians 3:12**

CHERISHING THE LAND

From a meditation by **Richard Rohr**: "Perhaps the primary example of our lack of attention to the Christ Mystery can be seen in the way we continue to pollute and ravage planet Earth, the very thing we all stand on and live from.

Theologian, scholar, and Cherokee descendant **Randy Woodley** describes the difference between the attitude of early North American settlers and the Indigenous people who were already present on the land. He writes:

"The very land itself meant something quite different to the newcomer than it did to the host people. Something was missing. The difficulty, as the Natives saw it, was with the settlers themselves and their failure to tread lightly, with humility and respect, on the land.

The settlers wanted to live on the land, but the host people lived with the land.

Living on the land means objectifying the land and natural resources and being short-sighted concerning the future. Living with the land means respecting the natural balance.

To Indigenous peoples, the problems of a Western worldview are obvious. The way of life demonstrated by Western peoples leads to alienation from the Earth, from others, and from all of creation. This lifestyle creates a false bubble called "Western civilization," which people in the West think will protect them from future calamity. This false hope is detached from all experience and reality."

DISCOVERING BEAUTY IN A PLACE OF DARKNESS

"I remember distinctly the first time I visited a prison. Five years ago I stood outside the seemingly endless walls of a prison in Warwickshire intimidated by the world I imagined within. I'd seen prisons on film and TV, but being there, smothered by wire, gates, barred windows and guards, I felt a huge swelling of anxiety. I wondered, could God's miracles be seen in this place of darkness, or his goodness in this land of the forgotten?

Then, as the door opened to the courtyard, I was stunned by so much beauty. Gardens tended by the prisoners themselves, bird boxes brimming with life. Those towering walls were no barrier to creation, and there were no barrier to God.

Up in the Chaplaincy I spent time and studied with the lads, getting to know them and their relationship with God, through the Bible. I saw pain, fear, remorse, but also hope.

That's the journey we're all called on – those in prison and those outside. Those who live and work in prison, and those who may have never been near one. Those separated from their loved ones in prison, and those separated from their loved ones in death or isolation. We journey from despair to hope, from grief to peace. We might take that journey once in our lives, we might take it every single day. But none of us are alone in that journey, and as Christians we're called to walk with those on that journey.

St Teresa of Avila said: "Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world."

That's my challenge to you. To be the eyes through which Christ looks upon prisons, prisoners and survivors of crime with compassion. To be the feet with which Christ journeys with those from grief to hope. To be the hands through which Christ brings out "those who dwell in darkness..."

Chris Auckland, Senior Outreach Officer, Prisons Week 2021

ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK TWO: FINDING GOD

A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare a way for the Lord, Make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low, winding ways will be straightened and rough roads made smooth. And all mankind shall see the salvation of God. Luke 3:4-6

CHRIST IS PRESENT

*Into this world, this demented inn,
in which there is absolutely no room for him at all,
Christ has come uninvited.*

*But because he cannot be at home in it,
because he is out of place in it,
and yet he must be in it,
his place is with those others who do not belong,
who are rejected by power
because they are regarded as weak,
those who are discredited,
who are denied the status of persons,
tortured, exterminated.
With those for whom there is no room,
Christ is present in this world.
He is mysteriously present in those for whom
there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.*

Thomas Merton

*Poverty has a face! It has the face of a child; it has
the face of a family; it has the face of people, young
and old. It has the face of widespread
unemployment and lack of opportunity. It has the
face of forced migrations, and of empty or destroyed
homes.*

Pope Francis, Meeting of the Executive Board of the World Food Programme, June 2016

“Let us imagine peace and nonviolence for ourselves
in a world of peace and justice
where no mouth is left hungry
and the forgotten are embraced.
Let us imagine a world of enough for all.
Let us imagine touching sadness with a smile.
Let us imagine touching discouragement with hope.
Embracing this incredible abundance,
we trust that it is never too late for God to invigorate
and revitalize a person, a church, the world.”

Sister Edith Prendergast, RSC

FINDING STILLNESS AND PRESENCE

“I walked some of the Camino to Santiago de Compostela a few years ago. I found it to be such a powerfully moving and spiritually beneficial experience that I have undertaken a long pilgrimage walk every year since then.

One of the things I love about walking long distances is that it forces me to slow down. It helps me to be still and to practice being fully present to each particular moment.

When I walked to Santiago, I covered up to 18 miles (30 km) each day. That’s about six hours of walking each day, with additional time spent stopping, looking and being – in local villages, in churches, in nature, in conversation, in sharing meals and in sitting and being still.

In our busy, stressful world, we have to seek out silence and stillness consciously. God speaks in all sorts of ways – through scripture, through nature, through other people. However, unless we slow down and listen, we miss his promptings and his voice. Only then can we truly appreciate:

- the value of the journey, as well as the destination
- the value of slowing down, looking and listening
- learning from the rhythms of nature
- learning from the movement of one’s own body, from the formation of community along the way, and from times of stillness and rest.

So often we rush through life at breakneck speed, never pausing to reflect and be still. It is only when we slow down and look that we really see. By slowing down, and being more present to each moment, all sorts of lessons are learned.

For some people, this might involve the healing of painful memories. For others, it could be time to discern the next stage in life. For many, it is a chance to really get away and listen to God.

For me, it is an invitation to a whole way of being – one that recognises that God is not ‘out there’ to be sought, but already ‘in here’ to be found.”

Annie O’Connor, *The Camino: Finding Stillness and Presence (for Catholic Charismatic Renewal)* 2019

What marvels the Lord worked for us! Indeed, we were glad. Psalm 125: 2

MESSAGE FOR THE FOURTH WORLD MEETING OF POPULAR MOVEMENTS

“The pandemic has laid bare the social inequalities that afflict our peoples. We have stopped questioning the scourge of the food crisis. Despite advances in biotechnology, millions of people have been deprived of food, even though it is available. This year twenty million more people have been dragged down to extreme levels of food insecurity; severe destitution has increased; and the price of food has risen sharply.

Sisters and brothers, let us dream together. Let us dream together, because it was precisely the dreams of freedom and equality, of justice and dignity, the dreams of fraternity, that improved the world.

In *Fratelli Tutti* I used the parable of the Good Samaritan as the clearest possible Gospel presentation of this intentional choice. Do you know what comes to mind now when, together with popular movements, I think of the Good Samaritan? The protests over the death of George Floyd. This movement did not pass by on the other side of the road when it saw the injury to human dignity caused by an abuse of power. The popular movements are not only social poets but also collective Samaritans.

The suffering of the world is better understood alongside those who suffer. When people, men and women, have suffered injustice, inequality, abuse of power, deprivations, and xenophobia in their own flesh – in my experience, I can see that they understand much better what others are experiencing and are able to help them realistically to open up paths of hope. How important it is that your voice be heard.

Pope Francis, October 2021

ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK THREE: JOYFUL EXPECTATION

Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel, shout aloud! Rejoice, exult with all your heart, Daughter of Jerusalem! **Zephaniah 3: 14**

Always be joyful in the Lord. ...Never worry about anything; but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus. **Philippians 4: 4-6**

The mood for the third week of Advent changes to one of joyful expectation as we reach the half way stage in our time of preparation. This day is known as Gaudete Sunday – the Latin for “Rejoice” – its jubilant theme echoed in the pink priestly vestments. Looking forward to the birth of our Saviour is an opportunity to focus on all that is good in our lives and to give heartfelt thanks.

Yet conflicts continue to rage in many parts of the world and the effects of climate change and poverty hit the poorest the hardest. We cannot fully rejoice whilst so many of our brothers and sisters suffer.

When all the people asked John, ‘What must we do?’ He answered, ‘If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.’

There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, ‘Master, what must we do?’ He said to them, ‘Exact no more than your rate.’ Some soldiers asked him in their turn, ‘What must we do?’ He said to them, ‘No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!’ **Luke 3: 10-14**

YOUR KINGDOM COME

Lord, we wait with eager expectation for the coming of your Kingdom when the humble will be exalted and the hungry fed.

**Your Kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Lord, we prepare for your advent with searching minds and contrite hearts, trusting in your healing spirit and redemptive love.

**Your Kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Lord, we watch with those who wait and weep, longing to see the rule of justice and the reign of peace.

**Your Kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Lord, we seek you amongst the despised and rejected, knowing that there we will find your light shining in the dark.

**Your Kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Lord, we proclaim sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed, trusting in your tender mercy and passion for justice.

**Your Kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Lord, we work to proclaim your truth, challenging the mighty and raising the meek.

**Your Kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Lord, we wrestle with our hopes and fears, our struggles and our joys labouring with creation to come to new birth.

**Your Kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**

Annabel Shilson-Thomas *Just One Year, an anthology*

“Our task as God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians... is to proclaim love to the world... with joy, humour, gentleness, good judgement and true wisdom.”

N T Wright *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*

WHO IS AN EVANGELIST?

John the Baptist was an evangelist. Many thought that he was the promised Messiah but his mission was only to announce the Good News, preparing the way for Jesus’ coming.

“I wonder how we might answer the question ‘who is an evangelist?’ – in a way that word tells us a little more...”

Let’s start with some Greek! We get the English word *evangelist* from the Greek noun *euangelistes*, which means ‘bringer of good tidings,’ or ‘announcer of good news.’

You might spot the word *angel* lurking in the middle of both the English and the Greek words, and (in terms of the etymology of the word) you’d be right to make this connection. An angel is a messenger, or an envoy, and when the message they bring is from God, it is good; (*eu* is the Greek word for ‘good’).

So, the evangelist is one who, like the angels, brings a message of good news from God. And I think we can understand something of the evangelist’s message by looking at the message of the angels in the New Testament.

What is their message? Nothing less than the infinite God of love come down, God-with-us, peace on earth, joy to all, reconciliation, new life...

There is a broad sense, then, in which all Christians are called to be evangelists. We are all called to speak, live and act in ways that bring this good news of God-with-us to those we meet. We are all messengers of glad tidings.”

Annie O’Connor, Church Army, October 2019

“May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith. May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.”

St Teresa of Avila

*Grant us your light, O Lord,
that the darkness in our hearts being wholly passed away,
we may come at last to the light that is Christ.
For Christ is the morning star,
who when the night of this world is past,
brings to his saints the promised light of life,
and opens to them eternal day. Amen.*

St Bede



ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK FOUR: HOPE

Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.' **Luke 1: 41-42, 45**

CHRISTMAS PRESENT

"In recent weeks I've been reflecting on how Jesus' coming into the world teaches us about presence, and how Jesus is the presence of the Father, God-with-us.

One of the Hebrew words translated as 'presence' in the Old Testament is 'paniyim', which can also be translated as 'face'. I love this, because it reveals something of the nearness of God's presence and the close, personal encounter we can have with God face-to-face. As Psalm 67:1 tells us, to experience God's presence is to experience the light in God's shining face.

'Present' is one of those wonderfully rich words that can have all sorts of meanings.

When we think of Christmas presents, we think of gifts; Jesus certainly is the self-gift of the Father to the world. But to be present also means to be: here, to be near, to turn up, to exist in this moment, now, to be accessible. Isn't it wonderful that Jesus' coming means all these things as well?

When I look at Jesus' life and ministry, I'm struck by how totally present he was to everyone and in everything.

Whether in prayer to the Father, in conversation with the people he encountered, in proclaiming the kingdom, in ministering to people's needs, in listening to their concerns, in suffering, in dying and in rising, Jesus was fully present in each particular moment.

I wonder if this Christmas we can practise being fully present in this particular moment, to these particular people in this particular place, without thinking of what comes next? Can we accept this moment as a gift from God, to be lived to the full?"

Annie O'Connor, Church Army, 2018

THE SNOWFLAKE

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake", a sparrow asked a wild dove. "Nothing more than nothing", was the answer.

"In that case I must tell you a marvellous story," the sparrow said. "I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow not heavily, not in a raging blizzard: no, just like in a dream, without a sound and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the 3,741,953rd dropped onto the branch - nothing more than nothing, as you say - the branch broke off." Having said that, the sparrow flew away.

The dove, since Noah's time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while, and finally said to herself: "Perhaps there is only one person's voice lacking for peace to come to the world."

Kurt Kauter *Thus Spoke the Caribou, New Fables*

HOPE CAN CHANGE OUR LIVES

Syrian artist **Vian Kolhusein** fled war in her homeland. She says: "Hope is all we need to innovate and carry on as peace is all we are looking for.

Rape. Abuse. Sexual violence. These can be faced by many women in the camps. Their lives are much harder than the men as they try to protect their babies. In my paintings I try to share my experience in the war, I try to draw women and their suffering, as well as the suffering of refugees and their hold on hope to cross the sea in search of a safe haven to live in.

My displacement from my country at the age of eleven to another country was a suffering in itself, as I lost my education and my home. I tried to start my life over when I had the opportunity to come to the United Kingdom. In my paintings I try to integrate my experience of displacement and literally losing everything just because of a hope that I did not lose inside me. Hope remains the only incentive within us that can change our lives.

It's only the beginning and end story of refugees that is ever told. We hear of a war in Syria. We hear of camps in Calais. But these people have had to travel thousands of miles to flee that war. On foot. On the sea. With their babies and possessions on their backs.

My paintings show people on the move. Silhouetted against the sunrise they look beautiful - you almost forget their terrible fate. I use the sunrise in my pictures to represent hope, to represent my new life in the UK."

HOPE - A PLACE OF PROMISE

"Hope is something you make every day". This is Basma, and the first thing she tells me about hope. When a militia came to burn down her home in Libya, she and her daughters ran for their lives under a barrage of bullets. Now Basma lives in Liverpool as a refugee, caring alone for her children, working odd jobs, studying human rights. I ask her the difference between real hope and false, and she says, "You have to face the tragedy of the world." This is hope's test - can it face up to the world as a tragic place?

In my conversations with people well-grounded in their hope, I've been finding that they share a fervent feeling for the vitality in the world around them. They can still look out into the world as a place of promise, even after all the harm we've done.

Celia's been an activist since her schooldays in Italy. She says she's always felt hopeful, despite the baked-in injustices that she's been railing against for years, because "life is beautiful". About ten years ago a massive earthquake levelled her house, burying her in bricks; she was presumed dead. In the darkness under the rubble hope was all she had left, she tells me. I ask why hope stayed with her. Because above her in the light of day, she answers, she knew that "life is beautiful".

As a nurse in palliative care, Joe has cared for many people who are dying. Accompanying his patients towards their death has drawn him closer to "what makes life worth living and death worth dying and the present worth being in". Every moment of our aliveness carries worth, Joe says, even when - especially when - death waits around the corner.

Joe and Celia know that the world is a tragic place, but also that it's not merely tragic. Hannah, a community worker, puts it perfectly: even "in a broken world, things aren't fully broken". If hope had a slogan, this might well be it.

David Gee, October 2019

"Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire."

St Catherine of Siena