

Praying In Advent

The First Thursday of Advent

Isaiah 26:1-6

That day, this song will be sung in the land of Judah: "We have a strong city: to guard us he has set wall and rampart about us. Open the gates! Let the upright nation come in, the nation that keeps faith! This is the plan decreed: you will guarantee peace, the peace entrusted to you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord is an eternal rock. He has brought low the dwellers on the heights, and their lofty citadel: he lays it low, brings it to the ground, flings it in the dust. It will be trodden underfoot, by the feet of the needy, the steps of the weak.

The prophet today perhaps remembers the day (*I Chr 11*) when Jerusalem was first captured by David from the Jebusites, who had mocked him from within its walls. David knew that the stoutest walls are unsafe, but that God's favour is an indefectible stronghold.

Lord, I am often defensive, because I forget your eternal love for me. Give me time to know your favour, of which no human hand can rob me. Be my shield, so that I need not walk about in armour, burdened with weapons I do not need to bear.

The First Friday in Advent

Isaiah 29:17-24

The Lord says this: In a very short time the Lebanon will become productive ground, so much that you might take it for forest. That day, the deaf will hear the words of the Book, and, delivered from shadow and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see. The lowly will find ever more joy in the Lord, the poorest will delight in the Holy One of Israel; for the tyrant will be no more, the scoffer will vanish, and all those disposed to evil will be destroyed: those who incriminate others by their words, those who try at the gate to trip the arbitrator, those who groundlessly deprive the upright of fair judgment. That is why the Lord, the God of the House of Jacob, Abraham's redeemer, says this: No longer shall Jacob be disappointed, no more shall his face grow pale, for when he sees his children, the work of my hands, home again with him, he shall hold my name holy, and hold the God of Israel in awe; erring spirits will learn understanding, and murmurers accept instruction.

The obfuscated world where injustice wins, and the poor continue to lose, is doomed. The eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, are to be opened, so that the creation openly acknowledges the holiness of God, and the long reign of evil is brought to an end. This is what we pray for in the words: *Thy kingdom come.*

Lord, give me a share in your burning love for the poor. Give me the power to rid myself of bribes, and all my stake in the world that denies you, so that I may share in the joy of the simple, to whom your royal power belongs.

The First Saturday in Advent

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26

Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: "People of Zion, you will live in Jerusalem and weep no more." He will be gracious to you when he hears your cry; when he hears he will answer. When the Lord has given you the bread of suffering and the water of distress, he who is your Teacher will hide no longer, and you will see your Teacher with your own eyes. Whether you turn to right or left, your ears will hear these words behind you: "This is the way; follow it." He will send rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the bread that the ground supplies will be rich and nourishing. That day, your cattle will graze in wide pastures. Oxen and donkeys that work the land will eat wild sorrel for their food, spread by the shovel-load and fork-load. On every lofty mountain, on every high hill, there will be streams and watercourses, on the day of the great slaughter, when the strongholds fall. Then moonlight will be bright as sunlight, sunlight itself seven times brighter, like the light of seven days in one, when the Lord dresses his people's wound, and heals the scars of the blows they have received.

The sudden turning of a barren history to fruitfulness is characteristic of the Bible's account of life with God. Especially, the announcement that *the evils of the past are to be feared no more* gives us an agenda of prayer. The healing of the wounds of the past is accompanied by the tremendous transformation offered by the vision of God, the onset of a new and intimate understanding of the past, a time when we forgot to belong to God, but God never abandoned us.

Lord, free me to enter into the mystery of your love for us. Do not let the damage and wounds of the past stand between me and my coming to you. Give me peace, here and now, in your faithfulness to me, so that I learn to be faithful in response.

The Second Monday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10

Let the wilderness and the dry lands exult, let the wasteland rejoice and bloom, let it bring forth flowers like the jonquil, let it rejoice and sing for joy. The glory of Lebanon is bestowed on it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they shall see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God.

Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees, and say to all faint hearts: "Courage, do not be afraid! Look, your God is coming, vengeance is coming, the retribution of God: he is coming to save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.

For water gushes in the desert, streams in the wasteland, the scorched earth becomes a lake, the parched land, springs of water: the lairs where the jackals used to live become thickets of reed and papyrus, and through it will run a highway undefiled: it shall be called the Sacred Way. The unclean may not travel by it, nor fools stray along it; no lion will be there, nor any fierce beast roam about it; but the redeemed will walk there, for those the Lord has ransomed shall return.

They will come to Zion shouting for joy, everlasting joy on their faces; joy and gladness will go with them, and sorrow and lament be ended.

The return of the exiles from Babylon – still in the future when these words were written – is depicted as the flowering of the land; the themes of new life are once more evoked, the enabling of the deaf and blind, the lame and the dumb; the image of a great roadway for the returning People of God will become the theme of John the Baptist's preaching. God will turn the wilderness into a road. In our prayer we experience our lives as exiled, barren, disabled, aimless.

Lord, it is winter, and I am surrounded by the darkness of the dying earth. I too, in this winter, need your promise of faithfulness. Show me, beneath my possessions and self-concern, my real poverty, and beneath my busyness and ambition, my true homelessness. Let me see the joy of your promises, and put my hope in them. Show me your power to renew the joy of my youth.

The Second Tuesday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11

“Console my people, console them,” says your God. “Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her: tell her that her time of slavery is ended, that her sin is atoned-for, that she has received from the hand of the Lord double punishment for all her crimes.”

A voice cries: “Prepare in the wilderness a way for the Lord; make a straight highway for our God across the desert. Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low; let every cliff become a plain, and the ridges a valley. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all humanity shall see it, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

A voice commands: “Cry!” – and I answered: “What shall I cry?” – “All flesh is grass, and its beauty like the wild-flower's. The grass withers: the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows on them (*the grass is without doubt the people*). The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God remains for ever.”

Go up on a high mountain, joyful messenger to Zion. Shout with a loud voice, joyful messenger to Jerusalem. Shout without fear. Say to the cities of Judah: “Here is your God!”

Here is the Lord coming with power, his arm subduing all things to him. The prize of his victory is with him, his trophies all go before him. He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast, and leading to their rest the mother ewes.

This is the beginning of the Book of Consolation, Isaiah's message to the exiles in Babylon. He no longer needs the warnings of the first half of his book; the worst has now happened, and he is addressing a people that has lost everything. The only way forward is ascending. Isaiah does not think the forces of evil have triumphed, but that the Lord has allowed the punishment of his people, to correct them and lead them to a new appreciation of their life. In this way their terrible dispossession will lead to a new humility, to a whole heart, and to a new promise of joy.

Lord, we, your people, have become hemmed in with high rocks, sunk into deep places, we feel far from you. We receive your consolation in the desert, in the ruins of our past. Take from us our grief over all we have lost, so that we can look forward to all that you have in store for us. Help us to live in the light of your promise.

The Second Wednesday of Advent

Isaiah 40:25-31

“To whom could you liken me, and who could be my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look. Who made these stars, if not he who drills them like an army, calling each one by name? So mighty his power, so great his strength, that not one fails to answer.

How can you say, Jacob, how can you insist, Israel, “My destiny is hidden from the Lord, my rights are ignored by my God”? Did you not know? Had you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God. He created the boundaries of the earth. He does not grow tired or weary, his understanding is beyond fathoming. He gives strength to the wearied, power to the powerless. Young men may grow tired and weary, youths may stumble: but those who put hope in the Lord renew their strength: they put out wings like eagles. They run, and do not grow weary, they walk and never tire.

The Babylonians believed the heavenly bodies were gods, and worshipped them. Isaiah depicts the stars as an army, under the authority of the one God. All things accord to God as their maker: we will never understand the multiplicity of beings, or their relationships with us, until we see ourselves and the cosmos as one divine Creation.

Lord, turn me from my exhaustion to rest in you, for whom I was created. Turn me from my many failures to contemplate your limitless power. Let me be content with my littleness, in the knowledge that I am precious in your sight, and that you have filled the universe with wonder, so that I may glimpse the glory of its Maker.

The Second Thursday of Advent

Matthew 11:11-15

Jesus spoke to the crowds: I tell you solemnly, of all the children born to women, a greater than John the Baptist has never been seen. Yet the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is. Since John the Baptist came, up to this present time, the Kingdom of Heaven has been subjected to violence, and the violent are taking it by storm. Because it was towards John that all the prophecies of the prophets and of the Law were leading; and he, if you will believe me, is the Elijah that was to return. If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen!

Today the textual lead in the Advent liturgy passes to the Gospels, telling the stories of John the Baptist. This great figure, who revived the ancient and extinct phenomenon of prophecy, seems to gather all the religious resources of the Old Testament to himself, in a huge effort to inspire people to a sense of expectancy, hope, even a kind of *dread* that would enable them to repent, to turn their lives around to face God, to cancel everything except giving their attention to the supreme moment of history. Jesus inherited this critical moment.

Lord, I am choked up with concerns, half alive, half wise, half attentive, suspended between truth and falsehood. By my turning to you in prayer, make my heart and mind one, bring me to life and integrity. Help me to make sense of the gift you offer me: make me part, even the least part, of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Second Friday of Advent

Matthew 11:16-19

Jesus spoke to the crowds: “What description can I find for this generation? It is like children shouting to each other as they sit in the market place:

*We played pipes for you, and you wouldn't dance;
We sang dirges, and you wouldn't be mourners....*

For John the Baptist came, neither eating nor drinking, and they say: *He is possessed!* The Son of Man came, eating and drinking, and they say: *Look, a glutton and a drunkard, the friend of tax collectors and sinners!*
Yet Wisdom has been proved right in her children.

Jesus is frustrated, as he notices that the very people who rejected John's stern asceticism now take offence at his own gentle courtesy. No game appeals to them. He identifies himself and John as obedient servants of one divine Wisdom, who is variously revealed in various lives. What unites all of them is their alertness to the initiative of God, who asks us to join in his design today as willing children are generously prepared to join in a game.

Lord, do not allow me to rust and settle in my habits. Keep me youthful and generous in my response. Give me the resilience and humility which will help me to accept others, and the hand you will hold out to me, so many times, during this Advent day.

The Second Saturday of Advent

Matthew 17:10-13

As they came down from the mountain the disciples put this question to Jesus: “Why do the scribes say that Elijah is to come first?” Jesus replied: “True; Elijah is to come to see that everything is once more as it should be. However, I tell you that Elijah has come already, and they did not recognise him, but treated him as they pleased; and the Son of Man will suffer similarly at their hands.” The disciples understood then that he had been speaking of John the Baptist.

The Jews expected Elijah's return at the end of time, to be the forerunner of the Messiah, who would consummate the history of the universe by his coming. These climactic events were looked-for whenever history turned disastrous for the Jews. John the Baptist passionately believed that the last days were coming, and with them “the One who is to come”. The title “Son of Man” is intimately associated with this apocalyptic view of time, and Jesus assumes it for himself.

When I say: “Thy Kingdom come” I pray for the end of time, the final judgment of evil, the banishment of injustice, the defeat of death in all its modes and forms, the utter accomplishment of your will for the world. Separate my life from these doomed powers of evil. Help me to be worthy to say these words today.

The Third Monday of Advent

Matthew 21:23-27

Jesus had gone into the Temple, and was teaching, when the chief priests and elders came to him and said: “What authority have you for acting like this? And who gave you this authority?” Jesus replied: “I, in turn, will ask you a question, only one: if

you tell me the answer, I will tell you my authority for what I have done. John's baptism: where did it come from, heaven? Or man?"

They argued it out like this amongst them: "If we say *From heaven*, he will retort: *Then why did you not accept him?* But if we say *From man*, we have the people to fear, because they all believe that John was a prophet."

So their answer to Jesus was: "We do not know." And he retorted: "And I will not tell you my authority for what I have done."

The authorities have been galvanised by Jesus' deed of "cleansing the Temple" – one of the signs predicted at the advent of the Messiah. They are moving towards the moment when they will be forced to take a decision about Jesus. Jesus knows, however, that they still haven't responded to the previous challenge of John the Baptist, and hope to silence him as they silenced John, without committing themselves. He will not allow them to avoid this commitment. We too must make our decision about Jesus of Nazareth, as Advent moves forward another day.

Lord, in Advent you remind us that the times are moving inexorably forward. Our only security is to invest our hopes in the end of all things. Lord Jesus, the fulfilment of the universe is your risen life. Help us today to fix our sights on that far destiny, and to make our way through the passing world with our hearts set on eternal joy.

The Third Tuesday of Advent

Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people, "What do you think? A man had two sons. He said to the first, "My son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not go," but afterwards thought better of it and went. The man then went and said the same thing to the second, who answered: "Certainly, sir!" but did not go. Which of the two did the father's will?" They replied, "The first."

Jesus said to them, "I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the Kingdom of God before you. For John came to you, a pattern of true righteousness, but you did not believe him; yet the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Even after seeing that, you refused to think better of it and believe in him."

The leaders' refusal of John the Baptist was in spite of his blazing holiness, and the impact his preaching made on the lives of the "public sinners" they felt free to despise and ostracise. They saw him obliterated by Herod with profound relief, as it seemed to take the pressure off the continuance of their shameful compromise with the Romans, threatened by John's apocalyptic summons to sanctity.

Lord, I compromise every day with the way of the world. Help me to remember John's lonely witness, and your own insistence on the Way. Help me today to refuse the dishonour of drift and vacillation, and to enter the narrow path that leads to life.

The Third Wednesday of Advent

Luke 7:19-23

John, summoning two of his disciples sent them to the Lord. When they reached Jesus they said: "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, *Are you the One who is to come, or have we to wait for someone else?*"

It was just then that he cured many people of diseases and afflictions and of evil spirits, and gave the gift of sight to many who were blind. Then he gave the messengers their answer: "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me."

John's style of prophecy was urgent and charged with doom. Jesus' ministry is expressed in gracious words and studded with miracles which bring gifts of life. Now that John is imprisoned, he wants to be assured that Jesus is indeed the one he proclaimed so dramatically. Jesus reminds him that the deeds he is doing are the deeds of the Messiah, and makes a fresh demand for John's trust.

Lord, I am ready to trust you in moments of quiet, in prayer, and on paper. It is when I am surrounded by the forces of the world that I falter and fail. Remind me of the faith of John, chained and under threat of death. As you entered our world to belong to us, help us to belong to you in the world you came to save.

The Third Thursday of Advent

Luke 7:24-30

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to talk to the people about him. "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swaying in the breeze? No? Then what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? Hardly: those who go in for fine clothes and luxury live in courts. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and much more than a prophet. He is the one of whom Scripture says: *See, I am going to send my messenger before you: he will prepare the way before you.* I tell you, of all the children born of women, there is none greater than John; yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he is. All the people who heard him, and the tax collectors too, acknowledged God's plan by accepting baptism from John; but by refusing baptism from him, the Pharisees and lawyers thwarted what God had in mind for them."

The *reed swaying in the breeze* is the sort of thing one might see in a wilderness. The *man in fine clothes* may be Herod, John's killer, who lived in a court, and would not be seen in a wilderness. The prophet belonged in the wilderness, because like Israel, he came by way of the desert into the Promised Land. Jesus identifies him as herald of the messianic day, in which we are called to live.

Lord, we have heard your call to live in a new world. Make us able to support one another with faith, hope, and love, which will make the Kingdom come.

The Third Friday of Advent

John 5:33-36

Jesus said to the Jews: "You sent messengers to John, and he gave his testimony to the truth: not that I depend on human testimony; no, it is for your salvation that I speak of this. John was a lamp alight and shining, and for a time you were content to enjoy the light that he gave. But my testimony is greater than John's; the works that my Father has given me to carry out, these same works of mine testify that the Father has sent me."

Jesus demands the faith of his hearers, because he is the Light of the World. His message is vital, final, and definitive because he is the Word of God. His witness is not something optional, to be taken or left according to taste. It is the ultimate word from God to the world, without which human life cannot be properly and truthfully lived. This is what he means by the phrase *the Father has sent me*.

Jesus, we receive you as Son of God; we thank you for being our brother. We receive you as our truth; we thank you for sharing with us your light. We receive you as our judge; we thank you for loving us, even to accepting the Cross.