

## Reflections and Prayers for Advent - Hoping

This is the 35<sup>th</sup> in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

### Themes for Advent 2020

The themes we often identify for the four Sundays of Advent are the people of God, the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary the mother of Jesus, followed by the celebration of Jesus' birth on Christmas Day. The Reflections in the coming weeks will acknowledge this through the emotions of hoping, longing, waiting, struggling and rejoicing. These may be emotions that many people are experiencing at this time, often simultaneously, though the rejoicing may be distant for a while.

I am most grateful indeed to friends who have contributed their seasonal Reflections which you will read ere long. It really is quite extraordinary how the invitation to write has elicited such a diverse, but complementary, combination of thoughts on the urgent themes of Advent 2020.



*Photo of Advent candles from the Methodist Church website, November 2020.*

### Hoping for Advent

Are you a member (whether closet or open) of CAMRAD? Don't panic. It is alright for Methodists to belong. It has got a "D" at the end of the name. It is the Campaign for Real Advents, a movement I proposed forming many years ago now. Not that it has made any apparent difference. In 'normal' years, Advent has been taken over by Christmas.

I know that Advent can properly be called a time of preparation for Christmas. But preparing for something is not the same as having it or experiencing it. Are we in danger of living in a world where "I want, I get; and I get it now" is the norm to which we all now conform? Is that affecting us this year, in a time of Covid? Do the signs of vaccines becoming available in the future mean that we shall let things rip and give up all attempts to be careful if the current restrictions are lifted before Christmas?

In what do we place our hope? If, as Jesus suggested, where your heart is and where your energy goes tells you what you treasure the most, it will be those things that will be the most important for you over the next few weeks. It is easy for them to take over, partly because it is easier for us to identify them and get our minds round them.

It is harder to remember the Christian story (which all those things are meant to celebrate), and to let it become real for us. It is harder to follow the calendar of that story. In the northern hemisphere Advent comes when the days are physically darkening, and it feels as if the world is too. We get a few weeks in November of remembering the saints and all the dead. Traditionally that remembering has led people in Advent to reflect on what are sometimes called the "four last things" – death, judgement, hell and heaven – and to prepare themselves for them. It is not surprising therefore that we react by rushing to turn away from all those dark thoughts and turn Advent into a festive preparation for Christmas!

But how on earth are we to talk about death, judgement, hell and heaven and things like them? How can we imagine them or explore our feelings about them? How are we to think of them?

Jesus did it by telling parables. Parables draw us in to grapple with great truths in a way that can expand both our understanding and our experience of God. The amount we get out of them will depend on how much we put into engaging with them.

In Matthew 25:1-13 Jesus tells a parable about ten young women attendants at a wedding. They are outside a building at night waiting for the bridegroom to arrive so that they can welcome him and escort him into the wedding banquet. They have lights with them. Five of the women recognise that they cannot guarantee when the bridegroom will come, and so they think to take reserve supplies of the oil that the lights burn. Five assume that he will come soon and do not. The bridegroom is in fact severely delayed. The women become drowsy and fall asleep, whilst their lights continue to burn. Eventually in the middle of the night they are woken by a shout that the bridegroom is about to come. They look to get their lights ready for use. It is so late that they need to replenish the oil in them. Five of them then realise that they have no reserve oil. In panic they ask the other five for help. They refuse. They probably do not want to end up with all the ten lights running out by the time the bridegroom eventually appears. They tell the others to go and buy more supplies. While they are gone the bridegroom arrives and the remaining five escort him into the banquet. The other five return and find the door shut. The bridegroom refuses to let them in.

What are we to make of this? Was this procession of bridegroom and attendants normal for a wedding at the time of Jesus, or abnormal? We do not know enough of the customs of the time to be certain. Why is the bridegroom delayed? Is he haggling with the bride's family over the marriage settlement? Has he been distracted by other business? Or is he just being 'fashionably' late? We do not know. We might want to know, but we cannot know.

The parable is introduced, like so many of them, as an illustration of what it is like for God to be in charge. So is the bridegroom God, who is often seen in the prophets as the husband of Israel (e.g. Isaiah 65:2; and throughout the book of Hosea)? Is the story about our needing to be ready for God to come to his people, even though we cannot know when that will be? Possibly. Is the way that God comes to his people one of coming through the earthly ministry of Jesus, for whom not everyone was ready; and is the bridegroom therefore Jesus? Possibly. Or is the story thinking of how and when Jesus will fulfil his promise to his followers and their successors to return to them after he has ascended to the Father? And if so, is it recognising that not all those waiting for him will prove to be worthy of him? Possibly. Or like elsewhere in the New Testament is 'falling asleep' being used as a way of talking of dying? And if so, is the story suggesting that when we die and are eventually resurrected, we shall discover that some of us have not properly prepared ourselves whilst we are alive? Possibly.

Then there is the biggest puzzle of all. Where is the bride in the story? Is the bride an unimportant object not worth mentioning? Or is the bride the people to whom God and Jesus come, escorted by human attendants?

With whom do you identify in the story? The prudent women? The foolish ones? Or the bride?

A 'proper' Advent calendar therefore begins with a time of getting ourselves, our church and the world ready to receive afresh the good news of God's love coming to us all, embracing us, filling us with light and life and joy. The Jewish people looked for God to intervene decisively in the world through a king or special agent (a "Messiah"). Looking back, we celebrate the fact that God did come, through the birth of Jesus. Looking forward, we pray that Jesus will come to us again. As we celebrate both past and future in the present, we can discover that he comes to us now, so that when he comes to us in the future, he will find us prepared.

So in Advent we prepare ourselves to celebrate that Jesus was born over two thousand years ago to show us in human ways that God's love which was there in the creation of the world in the beginning is here for each one of us now. We prepare to celebrate the promise that, if and when the world as we know it comes to an end, Jesus will still come to us to show us that the same love of God is there for us in and through it all. We celebrate that the same Jesus comes to us now, knocking on the door of our hearts; and we open ourselves to receive him.

We do not know when God will come to us. We have to be on the lookout and always be ready. God might even come in the form of a helpless baby, and we and the world might be judged by whether we notice and whether we are ready.

In this time before Christmas  
things pass by like shooting stars;  
whether leading to good things,  
or heading for disaster,  
is hard to tell.  
As we journey on, one star  
catches our attention, and  
stops over a baby in a manger,  
the still centre of our turning world.

*Revd Ken Howcroft, November 2020. Ken is a former President of the Methodist Conference, now retired to Lichfield.*

## First Liturgy for Advent – Hope

*‘Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art,  
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart’.*

From Luke 24: 18-21, on the Emmaus road: Cleopas answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people; our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel’.

Hope – what is hope? We hope something every day of our lives – for fine weather tomorrow, for a favourable football result, for a return to health, for a safe journey, for an early family reunion, for a return to normal life (which may not come quickly). The Advent hope is simply hope in Christ, not what we want of or from Christ. The Emmaus travellers’ disappointment was short-lived as Jesus, in vanishing from them, revealed himself: they returned to Jerusalem, rejoicing. Take away hope and you lose much: take away Christian hope and you have nothing.

*In preparation for the prayer, you may wish to light a candle.*



With all the people of God, we give thanks for the hope that is found in Jesus, not least at this strange and difficult time.

We pray with those nearby and across the world who face daily life with hope so slender and fragile: may it be sustained. We pray for those who see no immediate sign of hope at all: may it somehow be restored.

We commend them all to God’s care and keeping, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

*John Bell, November 2020. The hymn, by Charles Wesley, is StF 169 verse 2 and R&S 138, second part of verse 1.*

*Photo of some of today’s people of God, in a London street in busier and happier times.*

### Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at [belljohna@btinternet.com](mailto:belljohna@btinternet.com) Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC’s present hymnal.