

Reflections and Prayers for Advent – Longing

This is the 36th 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.

Hoping and Longing



For many years in the 1980s/90s, our family (Joan, Alison, Martin and I) enjoyed our summer holidays in Grindelwald, Switzerland, in the shadow of the Alps, gazing at the forbidding north face of the Eiger.

We'd set off on a day out, which would include a chair-lift ride to First, a walk of indeterminate (!) length passing Grosse Scheidegg into the Rychenbach valley, lunch at the remote Schwarzwaldalp Hotel, a post-bus hop down the tortuous, zig-zag road or the funicular railway by the Reichenbach Falls (the dramatic scene of Sherlock Holmes' final encounter with Moriarty) to Meiringen (where the Swiss claim the meringue was first created and local bakeries offer them in abundance), a train journey through Brienz to Interlaken, or, time permitting, including a boat trip along the Brienzensee from Brienz to Interlaken before returning by train up the Lutschine valley to Grindelwald.

By then, we were somewhat weary, for though we did stop for refreshment breaks, the first morning enquiry was always, 'Dad, how far will the walk be?' and the oft-asked question by family members thereafter was 'where is the next post-bus-stop?' There wasn't so much 'a hush of expectation' in the air as a palpable yearning for a rest as the plaintive cry came from the rear, 'how much longer?' But they were lovely days out in beautiful landscapes as any readers familiar with the region will attest.

The second theme in our Advent series is 'longing'. What's the difference between 'hoping' and 'longing'? My sense is that hoping is something we do from now on whereas longing is something which has already begun, perhaps in the distant past, certainly generations before: we hope for outcomes which may be attainable in the near future (as I write, the coronavirus vaccine is about to be rolled out) but we long for things which eternally seem elusive, out of reach, like the oasis mirage in the desert. Indeed, as Bernadette Farrell's hymn reminds us in the liturgy below, some people are 'longing for hope': is there a more desperate plight than that?

The first reflection this week echoes the Psalmist's cry, 'how long, O Lord?' (Psalm 13:1): the second, courtesy of an unexpected candle and belief in the power of prayer, draws us to the world's longing for peace.

John Bell, December 2020.

Photo from Grindelwald postbus publicity: the Rosenloui Hotel, pictured, is one of the welcome refreshment stops and (for some, the even more welcome) boarding points for the bus to Meiringen. You can see the yellow bus-stop sign at the right edge of the photo, with the timetable below it (though I did have one in my bag!)

For Advent

How long is all this to go on? How often we find ourselves asking that question! About the pandemic and all the restrictions, when will 'normality' return? About the rain – or the drought – when will it stop? About being without a job, or a home, or being in persistent pain. There are those in war zones asking when the shelling and the sniping will stop. There are migrants longing to settle down, religious minorities asking when the persecution will end. 'How long?' is a question we should be asking about climate change, world poverty, the vast disparities, even in Britain, between rich and poor, about racial discrimination, child abuse, domestic violence. The examples are endless and there are no quick fixes. When will it stop? How can it be stopped? Hence the agony in the question, 'how long?'. So often there is no end in sight.

'How long?' is the Advent question: 'O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that waits in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.' Advent is about longing, longing for change. Of course the hymn does not end there. The repeated response is, 'Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.' If Advent is about longing, it is also about coming. That is what the word means. At Advent we look forward to the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem and in the thirty-odd years that followed. There we see God's response to the longing, Immanuel, God with us. The agonizing delays are not of God's making but of ours. He too asks 'how long?' when we dither and dally about changing our ways. One senses the impatience in Jesus' words 'How much longer must I put up with you?' (Mark 9:19)

But the coming of Jesus does not simply reassure us that God also shares our longings. It brings to us a vision of what the world can become and unleashes the power to enable us – if we are willing – to make it happen. Advent is a celebration of what God makes possible. Advent is empty without Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost.

But of course that is not the end of the story. The challenges facing humanity are huge, and in any case the will to make a better world has to be renewed in each generation. So Advent points us to the end and calls us to hope. That end has been envisaged in many ways. We may picture it as the last judgement, a new heaven and new earth, a heavenly city. But they are only pictures of what at present we do not see. The future is only definitively known when it comes. But the fact that we cannot definitively describe it does not put it in doubt. We are assured of it, not only by the coming of Jesus two thousand years ago but by his innumerable comings ever since, down to today. There was an advent for St Paul on the Damascus Road when an encounter with the risen Jesus changed the character and entire direction of his life. And there have been countless advents in the lives of ordinary men and women down the centuries, moments when light broke into the darkness. Moments when they felt a rebuke that turned their lives in a better direction, or received an assurance of God's forgiveness that lifted the weight of the past and set them free, or heard a call to some form of service.

Such moments are life-changing, but the God we celebrate is the Advent God who also comes to us daily, in the beauty of the world around us, and in the love and acts of kindness we receive from others – comes also, if we heed Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:31-46, in the poor and needy we are in a position to help. In them all God is giving himself to us. They are his daily advents, and at this season of Advent we celebrate them all.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Charles Cape, a young probationer minister, was preparing to go overseas. The tour would last seven years and only after the first four would he cease to be a probationer and be permitted to marry. Unlike some of his contemporaries he had no fiancée lined up. So in a final frantic few weeks he proposed to more or less every girl he met. One was Lucy Christie. They met when he was visiting on a preaching engagement and on the Sunday afternoon he proposed to her. She did not turn him down like the others but asked him to send her his photograph and promised to give him her reply after a week. She studied the picture every day and decided, yes, she could live with that face. A week later they met again. It was all very formal. 'Miss Christie will you marry me?' 'Yes, Mr Cape I will'. They shook hands. He went off to India, and for four years they exchanged letters, writing every day. Then Lucy sailed to India and the day after she disembarked she married Charles. They had a long and happy marriage.

I often think at Advent time about Lucy and the confidence with which she went half-way round the world to meet her man. But she had already met him and had got to know him, albeit at a distance by correspondence.

Advent is about a confidence in the future, based on a promise in the past and sustained by a conversation in the present.

Revd Dr Brian Beck, November 2020. Brian is a former President of the Conference and served as its Secretary from 1984 to 1998: now retired, he lives in Cambridge.

Peace Candle

John Bell recently mentioned the 'quietening candle' (in Reflection 33) which some churches have introduced just before the start of a service, to encourage people to stop chattering and quieten themselves for worship. In the 1980s and 90s we belonged to a church in Marlow which used one of these, but we called it the 'peace candle', and when it was lit people were encouraged to pray specifically for peace at the start of the service.

There was a very moving story behind the acquisition of this candle. In the dying days of the Soviet Union, as the country was beginning to open up to the West, a group of American tourists was visiting Moscow. They were taken into one of the churches, which had only recently been returned to its original use. There were several elderly people praying in the church. As the Americans came out and stood around waiting on the pavement, an old woman came up to them and held out her hand. They thought she was begging but discovered through their interpreter that she was in fact wanting to *give* them money. She asked that they would take the money and use it to buy a candle when they got home, and light the candle each week in their church to pray for peace – peace between their two nations, peace in the world. So they did. They purchased a candle and used it at the start of each service to pray for peace. But after a time, they decided it was too good an idea to keep to themselves, so they started sending more candles to friends they had in other churches and asking them to do the same.



By a circuitous route, the one we had in Marlow came to us from the cousin of a church member who lived in Northern Ireland, which at the time was still living in the aftermath of the Troubles, and where peace was still a fragile aspiration. So the candle was a particularly poignant gift, and the prayers for peace had a special significance.

A great wave of prayers for peace around the world, all because an elderly Russian woman had kept her faith and believed in the power of prayer.

Elizabeth Holmes, November 2020. Elizabeth is a member of Frodsham Methodist Church and a local preacher in the North Cheshire Circuit.

Second liturgy for Advent – Longing

**'Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair'.**

From Micah 4: 3: They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

With the prophet we join the clarion call for peace, repeated in Isaiah, which often seems but a permanent longing. How come that, if the world wants peace, it is so hard to get? Does individual selfishness, pride, ambition and corruption escalate, out of control, into fierce tribalism or nationalism? Sadly, many international leaders believe in the zero-sum strategy – that their aims can only be achieved at the expense of someone else's.

From the Christian hope of last week flows the longing for peace; that the traditional message of a peaceful Christmas may be sustained and acted out in the coming year.

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

With the prophets of old, we cry out in an unbroken chain of prayer for the peace of the world.

- We pray with those who face their daily life in the turmoil of repression, revolution or civil war, fearing the sniper's bullet or the captor's strong arm, longing for peace, freedom, dignity and ordinary living.
- We pray too with those in many countries who are persecuted or marginalised because of their faith, to the point of ethnic cleansing and even genocide.
- We pray especially at this time for people in Mali, fleeing from jihadist violence and terror; people in Guinea and the Ivory Coast, escaping from election-related violence; economic migrants from Senegal, believing that finding employment in rich countries will enable them to remit money home: they are amongst the 9000 refugees from West Africa who have embarked on the hazardous journey to the Canary Islands in the last month, hoping to reach Europe.
- We pray for the people of Ethiopia, a country sliding into civil war as the crisis in Tigray province deepens.

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



John Bell, December 2020.

The hymn is 'Christ, be our light', StF 706 verse 2, words and music by Bernadette Farrell. Photo of some of God's people in Myanmar/Burma – the persecuted and displaced Rohingya Muslims – from The Times and other news sources.

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 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.