

# starters for Sunday

## *First Sunday in Advent*

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## Introduction

This Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent and we are entering a period of waiting for the birth of Jesus. This time is a time of preparation and a time of looking over our lives, our communities and the world around us. It is a time of waiting for God in hope. What are the promises of God which are fulfilled in Jesus? What difference will the birth of this child make to our lives and the lives of our neighbours? What is the path that this child will take? Where is this path leading us?

In Advent we are waiting for the birth of Jesus, but, traditionally, Advent has been linked with the hopes in the New Testament for the return of Jesus at the end of the age. The New Testament readings urge us to be ready and prepared for Jesus to come back. This year Advent is a time when we are looking forward to the Referendum on the Independence of Scotland. The readings raise questions about the kind of values we wish to see in society in Scotland and in Britain. What kind of community would we wish Jesus to find if he were to return this Advent to the places where we live?

### [Isaiah 2:1-5](#)

The first reading is from the prophet Isaiah who speaks to the people of Judah and Jerusalem who have endured war. The prophet looks out at people who are devastated and a land which is in ruins. The most vulnerable people in the land are suffering: the orphans and the widows. Today Scotland is a wealthy country compared to many other places in the world but many people are struggling to make ends meet, children do not have enough to eat, and some elderly people are living isolated lives.

The prophet describes a vision of the nations streaming towards the Temple on the holy mountain. This vision portrays the power of God to attract people and draw people into community. God responds to the yearnings for life deep within us. The prophet describes a path of peace which is based on God's ways. It is a path of peace founded on justice. Systems of justice and fair processes in decision-making enable communities to live in peace with one another.



Isaiah gives the powerful picture of people who beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

One of the exhibitions halls in Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow contains examples of weapons, swords and armour from the past. It is frightening and shocking to look at the weapons which were used in the past by some human beings to slaughter others. Warfare today is more remote. People are killed by explosions and bombs and by drones. The nuclear weapons based at Faslane Naval Base have the power to create devastation unimagined by Isaiah.

Yet Isaiah's prophecy is a vision of peace to inspire us today. The Church of Scotland opposes the existence and threat of nuclear weapons. Sally Beaumont of Wellington Parish Church in Glasgow is a member of Trident Ploughshares. Trident Ploughshares is a campaign to disarm the UK Trident nuclear weapons system in a non-violent, open, peaceful and fully accountable manner. Sally belongs to the affinity group, the Gareloch Horticulturalists. This group uses peaceful means to protest against Trident. Sally explains that all members of Trident Ploughshares take part in training to learn strategies of peaceful means of non-violent protest. Sally says, "We carry out peace actions graciously and with humour accompanied by singing and liturgy".

Last year the group held the Peace Olympics outside Faslane Naval Base. Highlights included a synchronised swimming event with participants wearing bathing costumes over their clothes, and there was a putting the haggis event. Participants ran a relay carrying an Olympic torch from the Peace Camp to the North Gate of the base. The Gareloch Horticulturalists planted seeds outside the fence of the base as signs of peace.

Sally and three others from Glasgow and Edinburgh were arrested for holding a tug of peace across the road at the entrance to the North Gate.



## [Psalm 122](#)

Psalm 122 is one of the Songs of Ascent sung by people who go up to Jerusalem to worship God. The Psalm acknowledges the central role of God as the one from whom protection and peace flow. The psalm contains a prayer for peace for the city of Jerusalem. The prayer asks for prosperity for those who love Jerusalem, for peace within the walls and for security. Today Jerusalem is not a place of peace, but is a divided city with Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and Israelis in West Jerusalem. The Psalm raises questions about where peace may be found and how can we bring about peace in troubled places?

The World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine/Israel works towards peace by bringing people from different parts of the world to this area to observe daily life and to monitor human rights abuses and to support those seeking peace. The code of conduct states “We do not take sides in this conflict and we do not discriminate against anyone, but we are not neutral in terms of principles of human rights and international humanitarian law. We stand faithfully with the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. We want to serve all parties in this conflict in a fair and unbiased manner in word and action.”

Newspapers and TV reports often focus on violence. Sister Isabel Smyth is a Catholic nun who has been involved in interfaith relations for many years. In her blog [www.interfaithjourneys.net](http://www.interfaithjourneys.net) Isabel speaks of initiatives for peace in Palestine/Israel. One example is the village called Oasis of Peace which is located between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Oasis of Peace is the English translation of the name Neve Shalom (Hebrew) and Wahat al-Salam (Arabic). In this village Jewish and Palestinian Arab Israeli citizens have lived together in peace for forty years. The children in the village are taught in both Hebrew and in Arabic, and they learn about each other’s culture and religion. The village organises programmes which include Palestinian Arab and Jewish Israeli young people and which enable young people to get to know one another and to explore the issues that affect them.



In her blog Isabel speaks about the importance of dialogue and of the willingness to listen to one another's stories. She writes "Every time we close ourselves off from others we are contributing to suspicion and violence in the world. Every time we move out from our closed community to stretch out the hand of friendship to others we are contributing to peace and not just in our immediate situation but in the world at large."

### [Romans 13:11-14](#)

Paul has not visited the church in Rome, but he does know the church well. The church in Rome is famous because of its prominent location in the city at the heart of the Roman Empire. We do not know who founded this church, but by the time Paul writes to the church there is a large Christian community. This community is made up of several house churches, and it contains both Jewish and gentile Christians. In this section of the letter Paul is concerned about the relationship between Jewish and gentile Christians and whether Christians should observe the Law. Another key issue is the attitude of the church to the Roman Empire and the question of whether or not Christians should pay taxes to the emperor.

Paul seeks the unity of the church on the basis of his understanding of the gospel. In the verses preceding our reading Paul says that the one who loves another fulfils the Law. Jewish and gentile Christians are united in their love of one another.

Yet for Paul all types of human authority and power are subject to Christ who will shortly return to earth. Our reading begins with Paul's reminder of the significance of the time. Christians are waiting in the time of darkness before dawn, at the cusp of night and day. Paul warns Christians to wake up and be ready for Christ's return.

Paul tells the Christians in Rome to put on "armour of light" for they are engaged in a battle against the evil within the world. The imagery of light focuses on the importance of openness and transparency in human relationships because evil works through deception and concealment. The letter is not addressed to individuals alone; it is a communal address. Paul is concerned not only with the relationship between a Christian and God, but with the relationships between people within communities.



Paul urges the Christians in Rome “to put on the Lord Jesus Christ”. In this verse he alludes to the early Christian act of baptism. Before baptism Christians took off their clothes and then after baptism they put on a white robe which represented their movement into the new age. Baptism represents the participation of the Christian in the death and resurrection of Christ. In Baptism a Christian dies to the old age of death and rises into the new age of life.

Paul speaks of conformity to Christ. In putting on Christ we put on the perspective of Jesus and seek to see the world through his eyes. Putting on Christ enables right judgement and a loving approach towards life. It is a perspective that comes from a place of vulnerability, a willingness to put aside status and coercive power, but also to take a stand on what matters.

### [Matthew 24:36-44](#)

Our gospel reading comes from the final section of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem in the days leading up to Passover. Jesus takes this opportunity to teach his disciples about the events which will take place in the end-time. He knows that he is facing arrest and death. He wishes to encourage his disciples to remain faithful in the period between his death and resurrection and the end of the age. Jesus looks forward to his imminent return but he tells the disciples that no one knows the day or the hour.

The return of Jesus is described as a cataclysmic event comparable to the account of the flood in Genesis. At this time people went about their everyday lives and only Noah and his family escaped the deluge. The imagery of the flood emphasises the disruptive and engulfing impact of the parousia.

The following verses point to the divisive nature of the return of Jesus. Two men are in a field and one will be taken and one will be left. Two women are grinding meal together and one will be taken and one will be left. The return of Jesus is compared to the unexpected appearance of a thief in the night who breaks into our house under cover of darkness to take what is precious to us from us.

How may we interpret these prophecies this Advent? On the one hand they look to the future when God will intervene to inaugurate a new age of peace. They also speak to the present



initiative of God whose power breaks into the world overturning complacency. These prophecies point to the need for us to be alert and to interpret the signs of our time so that we can discern where God is already present in the world with those who are working for peace.

The Scottish composer James MacMillan has written a concerto for percussion and orchestra called “Veni, Veni, Emmanuel.” He began this work in Advent 1991 and completed it on Easter Sunday 1992. This concerto moves through dramatic sounds of percussion until at the very end a gentle and strong sound emerges weaving its way through the percussion and the concerto ends with the Gloria of Easter. In James MacMillan’s music the Advent promises of liberation come to fulfilment in the Risen Christ.

The time of Advent leads us to consider priorities in our lives and in our communities. What would be our priority if we were to prepare for the return of the risen Jesus this Advent?

## Prayers

### Collect

Almighty God,  
Give us grace to cast away  
The works of darkness  
And put on the armour of light,  
Now in the time of this mortal life,  
In which your Son Jesus Christ  
Came to us in great humility;  
That on the last day,  
When he shall come again in his glorious majesty  
To judge both the living and the dead,  
We may rise to the life immortal;  
Through him who lives and reigns  
With you and the Holy Spirit,  
One God, now and for ever. Amen



Life-giving God,  
We hunger for you,  
restless, empty, uncertain where to go.  
When we see people torn and suffering in war,  
when countries build up stocks of weapon,  
when we see pain and disease and poverty  
while there is an abundance of wealth and riches  
we hunger for you.

When we look at our lives  
and we see the pain we cause one another  
the hurt we do to ourselves  
our silence when you need us  
and our desires aimless  
we hunger for you.

And we pray for forgiveness  
and you come to us,  
in the birth of a child.  
You come to us bringing peace.  
You give sight to the blind  
make the deaf hear  
and bring good news to the poor  
that the whole earth  
may be filled with God's glory. Amen



## Prayers of Intercession

God of highest heaven,  
You do not cling to the riches of heaven  
but come among us as a servant.

Your hands bring healing to the sick,  
share bread with the hungry,  
and wash your disciples' feet.

You give your life on the cross,  
that we might have life.

We give you thanks  
for you bring us the promise of your kingdom.  
and the courage to say no,  
to all that spoils the goodness of the earth  
and denies human life.

In the midst of war and devastation  
you bring life,  
where human violence destroys life  
in overcrowded cities, in countries ridden with debt  
your Spirit rises against injustice  
searching for freedom.

This Advent we pray for the city of Jerusalem  
and for the countries of the Middle East  
for all who suffer through violence  
and for those who work for peace.

In the places of illness and suffering  
You bring healing  
Where people are sick and face operations  
Where people are anxious and troubled



For the lonely and the bereaved we pray for peace.

And in silence we bring before you  
those we care for and are worried about...  
Bring healing and peace.

In the depths of our own hearts  
known only to you  
the place of our hopes and our yearning,  
our fears and our struggles,  
you give us your Spirit  
to live in us,  
nurturing us,  
and loving us,  
You bring us together to serve the world.

And we pray for the church.

May we look on the world with your eyes  
May our hands be your hands  
May our lives be lives bringing healing and peace.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen



## Musical Suggestions

- CH4 62 Sing a new song to the Lord
- CH4 82 Pray that Jerusalem may have peace and felicity
- CH4 83 I rejoiced when I heard them say
- CH4 195 Here to the house of God we come
- CH4 275 Come now, O Prince of peace
- CH4 276 Wait for the Lord
- CH4 472 Come, thou long-expected Jesus
- CH4 475 Christ is coming!
- CH4 516 We are marching in the light of God
- CH4 621 Spirit of Jesus, if I love my neighbour
- CH4 716 Come and find the quiet centre
- CH4 772 In the Lord I'll be ever thankful



## Additional Resources

### Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

### Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



### Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine [Different Voices](#).

### Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and

delivering sermons regularly.

### Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

*The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to Susan Miller for providing us with this Sunday's material.*

*Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.*

