

# starters for Sunday

## *First Sunday of Advent*

**1 December 2013**

Rev Dr Derek Browning, Minister of Morningside Parish Church, Edinburgh, gives his thoughts on this week's lectionary.

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

Advent is a season of movement, outward movement as we move through times of preparation and readiness, inward movement as we reflect on the way we live our lives, and examine our consciences and actions in the unwavering light of God. In these verses of Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of God's truth and judgement being lifted up high enough for the whole world to see, and to be drawn towards it.

Jerusalem in the time of Isaiah was not much more than a provincial backwater in the eyes of the world, marginal and vulnerable. Its fate was frequently in the hands of powerful foreign nations. Isaiah here offers a hope and a vision of a different Jerusalem, and a different world. This hope is not simply for the children of Israel, it is for the children of the world. This is a time not for aficionados and those in-the-know, this is a time when the message and word of God is lifted up in such a way that all are challenged and chastened by what it says, but drawn nonetheless towards the light. The idea of learning God's ways through walking in His paths and in His light suffuses this passage.

There is a balance to be struck in the way we live our faith. The time of listening and learning, inwardly digesting what God hints at or declares is balanced by the time when we take that inspiration and apply it to how we live. In a few weeks we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, so it should come as no surprise that in the weeks leading to that remembrance the pursuit and practice of peace play a part. The means of war are to be dispensed with, and turned to implements for harvesting the earth. There are many words close to the heart of God's message, and peace will surely be one of the most important.

As we walk through Advent, where does peace need to be felt; where must peace be brought to bear? Nor is this peace only a thing between warring nations, it needs to be experienced in the life of the family, or in the workplace, or in the Church. If the word 'peace' is not to turn to ashes in our mouth when we speak it, we must put it to work in our thoughts and words and actions. It may not come naturally to us, which is why the ways of peace need to be learned. The prophet therefore in the Name of God calls those who are stirred by this season to start walking, hesitantly and hopefully, along the paths of God, finding ourselves guided by His light as we walk.



## [Psalm 122](#)

A song of ascents, thought to have been sung by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem, Psalm 122 serves like a song of arrival. Note, as with Isaiah, the concept of motion in the season of Advent. Note also the purpose of the Psalm is to comment on people and tribes being drawn together and towards the Holy City. This Psalm sings of the anticipation of drawing nearer to God in the place of worship, and also in the action of worship. Like Isaiah, this Psalm also shares an interest in themes of pilgrimage, justice and peace.

It is a song of arrival in the Holy City as the pilgrims reach the gates and walk in. The promises of the Kingdom of God are no longer far off, they are at hand.

Many different words capture this beautiful Psalm: gladness – in the act of worship; togetherness – people are drawn to God and God’s city; judgement – in such a place and at such a time we are called to reflect on our lives, as God surely will; peace – God’s presence and God’s purpose is peace for humanity. Peace in families and amongst tribes; peace in communities and between nations. Peace that is both personal and corporate. Peace is not an abstraction, the absence of war. Peace is a process that requires meditation and action. It is a promise that, if it is to be achieved, must be worked towards.

At the close of the General Assembly, it has been the tradition, observed by the more perspicacious Moderators, to close proceedings on the last day with the singing of this Psalm. Just as, in some traditions, the exchanging of ‘the peace’ has become part of the Communion tradition, so in the less tactile world of traditional Presbyterianism, the singing of peace, when sung from the heart, is as great a sign of intent and commitment as any hearty handshake or enveloping embrace.

The peace the Psalmist offers is to be ‘within’. ‘Within your gates’... ‘within, your walls’... ‘within your towers’... so that, ‘Peace may be within you!’ We have no power or ability to offer peace to the outside world if we are not, at first, at peace within ourselves. If the peace of God does not rest on heart and soul, it will not find expression in our hands or on our lips.



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

Paul's passion for the return of Jesus did not diminish as his ministry continued. He did not claim to know when, but he firmly believed that it could happen at any moment; perhaps more importantly, Paul believed that it had already happened. Paul is clearly of the school of thinking that the Christian believer should live each moment as if it were his or her last. Not with a sense of dread, but with a sense of expectancy, and a sense of hope. The future reality of Christ's coming again has an impact on the present conduct of the Christian believer.

The first words in this text have to do with time. Paul is insistent that it is 'now' to waken from sleep. Salvation, God's judgement, mercy and grace at work in Christ and the Spirit, is at work 'now'. The final realisation will be at any moment, an idea Paul catches up in that beautifully poetic phrase, "the night is far gone, the day is at hand." Christians need to be awake and alert. We are to live in the light, not in the darkness. We are not to be caught off guard, or unprepared.

In the 'olden days' December and January was the time for prelims to further exams. It was a testing time for teenagers. The constant injunction of teachers and others was that we were to get ready, to revise, to prepare, not to leave things to the last minute. A little revision and often, not a last minute cramming in of facts and figures and quotations going in by the eye and out by the pen and leaving no apparent trace. Christian living should be lived not in a state of nervous tension, or frenzied, last minute panic, wondering if we can do enough. The return of the Lord is unlikely to be announced with a month's notice. It will be unexpected, and could be at any moment. Better then to live a steady, balanced life of faithfulness and kindness than the 'famine or feast, hunger or burst' approach that applies to some expressions of Christian faith. Weeks of carol concert attendances will not make up for months of absence from worship.

Paul is insistent that we know what the time is, and reflecting on how we use time in the contemplation and service of our Saviour. Christians need to be aware of the past, and active in the present, but our orientation is towards the future. We are called to live now in conformity with God's future. The message and lifestyle of the future Kingdom of God is to be lived out in our lives now.



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

Jesus at no point in His ministry gives a specific timetable for the events of the end time. Nonetheless, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians are not at liberty to avoid because it seems from another time, or demythologise out of existence texts which, though written for and by 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, still have punch and purpose today. Our challenge is to listen carefully to what such texts say and allow their symbols and metaphors to evoke the sense of urgency and expectancy of God's future.

The late Leith Fisher, in his commentary on Matthew, *But I say to you*, draws attention to the fact that the opening key word in this section is the word 'But'. Jesus has announced His coming again, yet He immediately goes on to repeat His assertion that the precise time of His coming cannot be given. Fisher goes on to say that this lesson is repeated for emphasis three times. We become lazy and indifferent to these words of Jesus at our peril. Whether we mark the time between Jesus' first and second coming by decades or millennia, the point remains that He will return, somehow and in some way. We are therefore to be watchful and vigilant. Like those who were unprepared for the flood in the parable of Noah in the Book of Genesis; or the examples of the men at work in the field, or the women grinding their meal at the mill, busy at their daily work, but with no time to prepare when the end time comes; or the provocative image of the thief in the night – in all of these the words of Jesus were intended to shock Matthew's readers into wakefulness. They still have the same effect on us today.

As we observe the season of Advent and look long and hard at themes of pilgrimage and preparation, of waiting and watching, it is challenging to be made aware that what the Church currently awaits is not Christmas, but the second coming of Jesus. The Christ-child born in Bethlehem fulfils the promise of the Old Testament; but that same Christ-Child becomes a promise of something much more – the coming of the Son of Man at an unknown hour. Today, we no longer await the baby's birth. We await His return. Celebrating Christmas means renewing the promise and standing ready to welcome God's consummation. (*from Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa and Newsome, Texts for Preaching, Year A*)



## Prayers

### Sentence

Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

(Luke 21:28)

### Collect for the Day (Common Order p649)

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.



## Prayer of Approach and Confession

Lord Jesus Christ,

In a world bewitched by speed and the

Rapid passing of time,

You tell us to slow down.

In a world demanding answers,

You pose questions.

In a world on the edge of breakdown,

You offer calm.

In this time of waiting and wondering,

Steady our minds;

Unravel the web of frantic action

With which we have enmeshed our lives;

Open that place of wonder and awe

That allows the mystery of grace and hope

To enter into our lives.

Loving Lord,

Remove from us the self-absorption

That blinds and deafens us to the needs of others.

Help us examine our lives without fear,

Repent of our many failings,

Cast ourselves upon the mercy of a loving God,

And strengthen us that we may break free



From the chains of selfishness, pride and doubt,  
And walk with purpose and hope  
In the paths of light.

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May the Lord, the liberator of each soul,  
Bind your fractured lives,  
Mend your broken hearts,  
Cleanse your sin-stained souls,  
And grant you mercy and peace,  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen

### **Prayer of Intercession**

Eternal God,  
Sustainer and enlivener,  
In Your hands You hold the gifts of hope and love,  
Plenty and peace.  
We bless You for Your infinite generosity  
And unhesitant mercy.  
Father,  
Knowing that we come to You as supplicants  
Who can demand nothing,  
Yet still we are confident through faith  
To lay before You the needs that press upon our lives.



For ourselves,

The hopes and hurts, the brightness and gloom

That populate our waking and our sleeping hours.

Help us to separate our needs from our wants,

That we may discern where priorities in our

Ordered lives should lie.

In a world where consumption rules

And many have become accustomed to plenty,

Remind us of the privileges we take for granted,

And the bounty we believe is our right, and not Your gift.

Lord,

We pray for common-sense, and the touch of faithful humility

That marked the life of Your Son, our Saviour.

That we may determine to live lives of kindness and grace.

God of faithfulness and truth,

We pray for the world around us,

For peoples whose names we do not know

Yet whose hurts fill the news,

And whose afflictions touch us not nearly long enough.

We can change a channel, or turn a page,

But they endure the long days and months

Of famine and thirst,

Of war and feud,



Of corruption and despair.

Solutions may not be easy for all the ills of this world,

But in each hurting place send Your Spirit,

That those who do have the power to effect the changes

Needed for justice, peace and honour

May use their power for wellbeing of all.

We pray this day for our own country,

For the Queen and the Parliaments in Westminster and Holyrood;

For the councils in our cities and regions,

And for all who have an influence upon the way our lives are shaped.

In public policy, and private debate,

Let good judgement, prudent action, and generous spirits

Be at work.

In this season of Advent, where many watch and wait,

Be with those who at this time

Wait by a hospital bedside,

Watch anxiously for results in exams and tests

Wait for news of an interview,

Watch of a loved one to return.

May all who wait with anxiety continue in hope,

And all who watch with fearfulness continue with a steady heart.

We pray for the Church,

The family of hopeful people,



Persistent in faithfulness and graciousness,  
Marked by a willingness to work in kindness  
And not count the hours or the cost.  
As the world darkens and the days grow short,  
May our light, Christ's light in us,  
Shine with a steady flame,  
Bringing light, bringing healing, and bringing hope.  
And all for the sake of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen

### **Prayer of Dedication**

Bountiful God,  
In this time of gifts,  
When many prepare to show and share their love  
Through what they give,  
May we, today,  
Offer with these gifts of money  
Our own selves, heart and soul, body and mind,  
Dedicated to realising the promises  
Of our faith, and living the Kingdom life today,  
So drawing others into the circle of Your light and love.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen



## Children's Talk

(Gather together as many 'alarm noise' making items as you can: alarm clock, mobile phone alarm, child's toy fire engine or toy police car with siren etc)

All of these different sounds shake us up and make us wonder what is happening. They are meant to catch our attention.

Some alarms are there to warn us of danger; other alarms are there to wake us up, or to remind us of certain times.

In the Bible we are encouraged on many occasions to be ready for Jesus' return. Not that we are to be frightened or nervous, but that we live in ways that would show to Him, and also to the people around us, that no matter when He comes back, we have been doing our very best to be like Him, to listen to His words, and to put them in to action.

Jesus wants us to live the kind of life that brings light and hope into the world. We need to practice this as it is not always easy. When we get tired, or forget, or think it no longer matters, the Bible sounds an alarm. It is time to wake up, and to pay attention, and to think again. Jesus is coming!



## Hymns

CH4 82	Pray that Jerusalem may have
CH4 83	I rejoiced when I heard them say
CH4 273	O come, O come, Emmanuel
CH4 277	Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes
CH4 278	Wake, awake! For night is flying
CH4 279	Make way, make way
CH4 281	People, look East
CH4 290	The race that long in darkness pined
CH4 472	Come, Thou long-expected Jesus
CH4 473	'Thy Kingdom come!'
CH4 475	Christ is coming!
CH4 477	Lo, He comes with clouds descending
CH4 478	Behold the amazing gift of love
CH4 479	View the present through the promise



## Additional Resources

### Resourcing Mission



[www.resourcingmission.org.uk](http://www.resourcingmission.org.uk) is host to Starters for Sunday as well as key mission resources from the Church of Scotland, for download and purchase, and has an online booking facility for Mission & Discipleship events (eg National Youth Assembly). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. We welcome all feedback so if there is something you'd like to see on this new site that isn't already there, please use the 'Website Feedback' option on the '[Contact Us](#)' page.

### Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in Prayers. You may also be interested in looking at our publication **Pray Now 2013**. Please click [here](#).



### 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** which can be found on our Resourcing Mission website [here](#).

### Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for **what** you might preach this Sunday. If you would be interested in looking at our free materials on **how** you might preach, please click [here](#) to see our

[Preachers Perspectives](#) web page 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 i 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](#) If you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism you may find some helpful materials here

*The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to Rev Dr Derek Browning 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.*

