

starters for Sunday

Second Sunday of Advent

7 December 2014

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Tom Gordon, Retired Chaplain of Marie Curie Hospice, for his thoughts on the second Sunday of Advent.

Contents

Isaiah 40: 1-11	2
Mark 1: 1-8.....	5
2 Peter 3: 8-15a	8
Illustrative material.....	10
Sermon	16
Prayers.....	22
Musical Suggestions.....	26
Additional Resources.....	27



Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

[Isaiah 40: 1-11](#)

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

⁹ You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.



Background to Second Isaiah

[Isaiah 40: 1 – 55: 13](#) is known by scholars as “Second Isaiah”. In chapters 1 to 39 we find the utterances of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Now we find the prophecies of his “great disciple”, from a different century and a different setting. Judah is no more. Jerusalem lies in ruins. Assyria has been replaced as the world super-power by Babylon. And Babylon itself is just about to be overthrown by the new power of Persia under its ruler, Cyrus. The background to the prophecies of Second Isaiah, therefore, is **The Exile**. The hearers, the audience for these prophecies, would be totally despondent. They were in Babylon, far from home, separated by many miles of desert from the remains of David’s Kingdom from which they had been forcibly deported in 587BC. And yet they tried to remain hopeful, and indeed, towards the end of the 50 years that followed, their hopes began to come to fruition. New voices of authority appeared. Jeremiah and Ezekiel sought to underpin the exile with the truth as they interpreted it, that this was God’s judgment on a wayward people; that the people needed to see the exile as a discipline, a time for reflection and a chance of making amends. Not everyone saw it that way, of course. Many felt that God had deserted them and that the gods of Babylon were more powerful than YHWH.

So, in that context, a message of hope was absolutely necessary. And this is what Second Isaiah provides. The opening words of the collection of prophecies – the remarkable affirmation at the beginning of chapter 40 – give us a thread (some might say a dominating theme) that runs through the whole work. Indeed, this first chapter, and the 11 verses that form our reading today – and this chapter is arguably one of the greatest in the whole of the Old Testament – can be taken, like the first chapter of First Isaiah, as an introduction and a summary of the prophet’s message.

This is the tender word you are to offer the people, God says. My word is not a strident, harsh or scary word, but a tender, gentle, reassuring word, a word of comfort and consolation. You have served your time! Your penalty is paid! Freedom, redemption, a new beginning is at hand. You live in a wilderness where you find no hope? I know that. I know it well. But even in that wilderness you can be ready for your deliverance. Don’t sit on your hands. Prepare a way for your God. Indeed, create a great highway, worthy of God’s coming. It will be easier than you think. Hills will be brought low. Valleys will be raised. Uneven ground shall be levelled. Rough places will become easy to cross. A mammoth feat of engineering? Not at all. So, get on with



your preparations. For God's glory will be revealed, and everyone shall see it. And you will wonder what to say... You might want to say, 'I never believed this would happen. I thought I would be like grass, blown away forever by the desert winds, dry, withered, lifeless. That's what we thought we had come to.' But no, not at all. So get up to the tops of the mountains, and shout at the top of your voice. Don't be afraid any more. This is what you should shout: 'Here is God coming. Here is God coming with all his might, and with all his love and goodness. He will be the shepherd who feeds us. He will be the shepherd who gathers us like lambs in his arms. He will be the shepherd who holds us close to his chest. He will be the shepherd who will lead us to freedom.'

Wonderful stuff, is it not?

You can find more useful material on the [Bible Commentaries website](#).

Universal consolation and the concept of comfort (40:1 – 42:17)

Someone once said, 'In the fortieth chapter of Isaiah we reach the mountain peak of poetry. This is the Mount Everest of world literature.' No wonder the text provided the composer George Frederick Handel with such inspiration for Messiah, and particularly the aria, Comfort Ye.

The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary observes: 'So far as the language is concerned, there is nothing more finished or more elevated in the whole of the Old Testament than this trilogy of addresses by Isaiah.'

This chapter is usually considered the watershed of the book, as if the prophet turns a page and begins a new subject. Here is a message of comfort. It is a comfort that needs to be experienced by those in going through trying times – bereavement, trauma, a crisis of faith. In short, the message of comfort begins where the need for it is as its most acute.

Comfort is not an 'add on', something which is offered when all else fails, a kind of emotional extra when the 'important' things haven't worked. Comfort is a positive offering, showing a willingness to get right to the heart of things, and being fully immersed in the pain and sorrow of the sufferer. Our word 'comfort' comes from the Latin cum fortis, which means 'with strength'. So God, through his prophet, is not offering his people a sop for their pain and distress, a throw-away word of consolation which means little or as an extra when all else has failed. He is



expressing all they need to hear, that their God is standing with them in their struggle, with strength, with purpose, with absolute and total commitment.

Here is a pointer to the promise of the Incarnation. Here is the pre-cursor of the cry of John the Baptist. Here is the word of absolute truth – that God will come and stand in the midst of our humanity. He will not fail us, no matter our trauma or distress. Here is a word of comfort indeed!

And another thought... The Hebrew word translated ‘comfort’ is nacham, which means literally ‘to sigh.’ According to the context it can mean ‘to be sorry,’ ‘to pity,’ or ‘to console’. The first time the word is used in Scripture is at the birth of Noah. We read: “He named him Noah and said, ‘He will comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.’ ”

How often in our care of others have we felt our tears and wordless comfort and consolation were no good at all, offering little or nothing to those who are bereaved, in pain and distress, suffering in body, mind or spirit. Yet here is God ‘sighing’ with his people. And in that wordless sigh, the people have all they will ever need.

The above might be the bones of a sermon, especially around the concept of comfort outlined. See also the illustration from ‘The God Between God’ by John Taylor

[Mark 1: 1-8](#)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their



sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In what might be described as 'the search for the historical Jesus', the reader of Mark's Gospel might be inclined to strip away any 'awkward' passages from the apparently 'simple' Gospel narrative. This, it might be thought, would bring us closer to the 'real' Jesus, and, therefore, offer us the humanity of Christ in a more acceptable fashion. After all, wasn't the Gospel of Mark one of the principle sources for the later Gospel writers – Matthew and Luke? Isn't it, therefore, our task to simplify things even further?

But right at the start of his Gospel Mark doesn't allow us to do that. He makes it clear that the Jesus of history – our historical Jesus – is also the Jesus of the mystery of faith. 'This is the beginning', he writes... but not just the beginning of a historical narrative, but the beginning of a 'good news', a Gospel, which is anchored in the promise of the prophet and will unfold God's purposes, in Christ, for the meaning of the Incarnation.

From beginning to end Mark offers us not only the story of an inspired teacher, but of a new and powerful figure who makes us look at things in a new way, who points us to the mystery of God through miracles and wonders, so that the reader can, and should, come to the important conclusion – this can only be the promised Son of God.

Mark's Gospel is for the Gentiles. Consequently, the term 'Son of God' would be more meaningful than 'The Christ', the Greek word for Messiah. This is not, therefore, the fulfilment of a Jewish prophecy alone. The offering is to the whole world. The purpose of the incarnation – God is with us is for everyone. His Son has come.

It is interesting, therefore, that Mark does not have Jesus bursting into the human drama in a 'birth narrative'. William Neil (One Volume Commentary) suggests that: 'The ancient world had no great interest in childhood and adolescence, and Mark quite naturally starts his story at the point where Jesus ministry is about to begin.' Here is the incarnation in its completeness. Mark has Jesus defined at the real deal. The Gospel – the good news – is ready to begin.



The quotation Mark uses as the ‘announcement’ of the entrance of the Son of God is significant. ‘I send my messenger before you and he will prepare your road for you.’ (Malachi 3:1) This was used as a threat by the prophet, who saw the priests failing in their duty, with worship and ritual diminished to a very low point. The messenger will come, therefore, to cleanse and purify the worship of the Temple before the ‘anointed one’ of God came to the people. The hearers of Mark’s Gospel, therefore, would know from this quotation that the coming of Christ is a purification of all of life.

The messenger came, therefore, with a call to purification. This is no more or less than a demand for repentance. Consider the context of Mark’s message. It is to the Gentiles. Symbolic washing – purifying – was integral to Jewish ritual. A Gentile, therefore, was considered ‘unclean’. So if such a Gentile was to become a ‘proselyte’, ie a convert to Judaism, there were three parts of a purification process they had to undergo. Firstly, circumcision – the mark of the chosen people; secondly, a sacrifice made for him – only blood could atone for sin; and thirdly, baptism – the cleansing from the impurity of the past life. Baptism, therefore, was an immersion – a bathing – and not a mere sprinkling. So here was John in the desert insisting that all people – even the Jews who believed themselves already to be pure – had to submit to a new purification. A cleansing was needed if anyone was truly to belong to God.

William Barclay (Gospel of Mark) suggests (and here is a possible structure for a ‘repentance’ sermon on this second Sunday of Advent) that baptism should be accompanied by **confession**, and that such confession had three parts:

1. Confession to self
2. Confession to those who have been wronged
3. Confession to God.

Jesus said, ‘You must love the Lord your God, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you must love your neighbour as yourself’. In so doing he was pointing to the nature of the purified believer – be true to yourself; be true to your neighbour; and be true to your God.



[2 Peter 3: 8-15a](#)

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

This passage begins with three important truths (*a possible sermon outline*):

1. God's time is not the same as ours – “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.”
2. Every day is a day of promise and opportunity – “The Lord... is patient with you.”
3. God does not wish any of us to perish – “not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”

So, therefore, while we will never fully understand God's timescale, it is important for us at all times to give ourselves to repentance of heart and purity of service.

I won't dwell on it here, but it is enough to say that the whole concept of the Second Coming is fraught with difficulty. But let me suggest three things (*another sermon theme, perhaps?*):

1. If we struggle to conceptualise the Incarnation, and yet believe in the living presence of Christ among us – ‘God with us’ – is it not possible to move from a struggle with a ‘coming again’ and believe that it is enough to leave it in God's hands?



2. The day will come – and we have small glimpses of this every day – when God breaks into every life. The old ways will die and new life will be ours. Every day, therefore, offers the anticipation of this new life. Every day is a day of promise and opportunity. Every day Christ comes again.
3. We might say we should be prepared for a future event, but there is danger in that of ‘being so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use.’ We should live with the certainty that God is with us in our own lives. God, in Christ, is an ever-present reality – now! God with us is a present fact and not a future hope.

Finally, ponder this thought... Peter suggests that “... the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire...” One version of Scripture suggests that “the heavens will pass away with a crackling roar.” Such a vivid use of language must have some significance. Professor William Barclay, in his commentary on 2 Peter, says this:

... a crackling roar (roizedon). That word is used for the whirring of a bird's wings in the air, for the sound a spear makes as it hurtles through the air, for the crackling of the devouring flames of a forest fire.

Make of that what you will. But it suggests to me that Christ comes into a life with the wonder and beauty of a hovering bird, with the piercing of a spear right to our very heart, and with the cleansing – and renewing – power of a purifying fire. (Another sermon construction, perhaps...?)



Illustrative material

Preparations (relating this to the need to make use of Advent as a preparation for the Incarnation).

Edna's house was full of clutter. There was no getting away from it, if you were looking for someone to enter the Olympics in the 'owner of a small apartment full of stuff' competition, Edna would have won the gold medal hands down. Edna had never been good at throwing things out at any stage of her life. So she'd been accumulating stuff for as long as she could remember. But it was following Bob's death that the clutter seemed to take over her life. For a start, she couldn't bring herself to dispose of his things. 'It would have been like throwing him out with his stuff,' she decided. So Bob's things were still all around her. She liked that, of course, because Bob's stuff reminded Edna of Bob, and that was no bad thing. But there was so much of it... Moving house had just compounded the problem. Decanting from a three-bedroom semi to a one-bedroom retirement apartment had been a sensible move... If it hadn't been for the stuff! She hadn't actually squeezed all that had been in four rooms into two. That would have been silly. But most of Edna's stuff had come with her to her new home. So, even more than usual, Edna's house was full of clutter.

The priest came to visit not long after she'd moved in. She has a picture of him indelibly fixed in her mind, standing by the door of her lounge, looking over to where Edna was sitting by the fire, and casting his eye over the clutter that stood between him and his new parishioner – working out how to negotiate the piles of magazines; the three pairs of shoes; the coffee table heaped high with books; the two wicker stools in the middle of the floor, one holding an ironing basket, and the other an open folder out of which were spilling envelopes, stamps, pens and writing paper; the newspaper-rack stuffed full of papers with the telephone perched precariously on top.

Yes, Edna's house was full of clutter. She just didn't have the motivation to do anything about it. Until... Christmas was coming round, and Edna decided she would get herself a new Christmas tree. Now, it's not that Edna didn't have a Christmas tree already. She had one wrapped in a black bin-bag somewhere in the hall cupboard, and the little one she normally had on top of her TV - though she had no idea where that was. But, Edna had the urge to get another Christmas



tree. She'd read a thing in the local paper about a new charity in the town called 'A tree for you, a gift for someone else', and their blurb ran:

We sell good quality, fresh, locally-grown Christmas Trees that don't shed their needles. ALL profits made from the tree sales go to support local charities working to provide gifts for children who're having a tough Christmas.

DON'T MISS OUT. PLACE AN ORDER TODAY

Pick a date between 1st and 18th December, and we'll make sure your tree has been cut the previous day.

DON'T DELAY.

Order your tree now, and make a tree for you into a gift for someone else.

'That's for me,' Edna thought, and once she'd unearthed her telephone from under the pile of ironing on her settee, she phoned the number in the advert, and the tenth of December was agreed as the date her new Christmas tree would be delivered.

Edna looked round the room. Where on earth was the Christmas tree to go? There was not one square-centimetre of available space. There was nothing else for it - some of the clutter would just have to go. Edna looked at her calendar. It was the first of December. She had ten days to clear a space for her Christmas tree, ten days to get ready. It was the longest and most challenging ten days of Edna's life. But the funny thing was, once she got started clearing a space for the tree, she began to deal with other things too. She cleared 'stuff' she hadn't looked at for ages. Out went the vase of dried flowers she'd kept since Bob's funeral. She threw out a whole year's worth of back copies of the Radio Times. She even found a new 'Gloves, Scarf and Hat Set' she'd been given by her niece the previous Christmas – or was it the Christmas before? – still in its original packaging and in its Christmas bag. When she finished – late on the evening of December the ninth – the house was still full of clutter. But now, not only was there less clutter than there had been before, but there was a space by the window where a new Christmas tree could be put on display.

Edna's priest came to visit the week before Christmas. She was amused to see him standing apprehensively at the door of her lounge, clearly expecting his journey to the chair by the fire to



be as taxing as an expedition through the foot-hills of the Himalayas. But, as he surveyed the transformed scene, set off beautifully by a well-formed and magnificently decorated Scots pine by the window, a smile of pleasure flickered across his face. His eyes settled on Edna who was sitting grinning at him in her chair by a blazing fire, proudly wearing a matching set of gloves, scarf and a wooly hat. She knew right away what he was thinking, so she answered his question before he asked it. ‘Sorry, Father John. I know I may look a bit strange, but, you see, I’ve just finished getting ready for Christmas.’

From “With an Open Eye” by Tom Gordon, [Wild Goose Publications](#)

© Tom Gordon – tom.swallowsnest@gmail.com

So much

So much to get ready; so much to prepare;

So much to set up and to plan;

So much to provide for; so much to work out;

So much to arrange when I can.

So much to fit in when there’s too little time;

So much that’s expected again;

So much to accomplish; so much to create;

So much to uphold and maintain.

So much to be done as it’s been done before;

So much that’s the same as last year;

So much of tradition; so much that’s the ‘norm’;

So much – though it feels insincere.

So much – so I’ll need to take time-out to think;

So much – yes, I’ll try to un-wind;

So much – how important the message to know;

So much – when there’s meaning to find.



So much – when there’s purpose I’ve still to recall;
So much – with more wonder to see;
So much - of the mystery, insight and love;
So much – and all given to me!

From “With an Open Eye” by Tom Gordon, [Wild Goose Publications](#)

© Tom Gordon – tom.swallowsnest@gmail.com

Ready?

I did not believe that God would speak.
Oh, I hoped, right enough.
But I did not believe.
I had been in the desert for too long,
Separated from what I had known,
Of goodness and purpose,
Of faith and resolve.
Maybe I deserved it, I don’t know.
I’d long-since stopped trying to work it out.
The hellishness of it all was too overwhelming,
Too permanent, too all-consuming.
I had cried often enough.
And I had been angry with my God,
More, much more, that I am prepared to admit.
And I got no response,
Not even a word of retribution.
Nothing, save this abandonment to my hellish fate;
Nothing, never a word...

I did not believe that God would speak...
And then it came,
The whisper, faint, then gone...



The word on the wind, grabbed at then missed...
The voice...
Or was it a voice, or a feeling, or an imagining?
But it came,
Tender and true,
“Are you ready?
I’m coming, now, for you.
So prepare a way.
No, more than that, build a motorway,
Three lane, five lane, as big as you can.
No, don’t worry about civil-engineering.
Just get ready...
And shout!
Yes, shout!
Forgotten how to shout?
You shouted loud enough when you were angry,
So why not put your energy into praise when it’s needed.

I did not believe God would speak...
And here I am, up a mountain,
Shouting for all I’m worth.
“Listen up, folks! It’s time!
Good news! Great news!
Look, there’s a road ready for God.
He’s coming back!”
Does anyone need to listen?
That’s up to them.
But I know why I’m excited again,
For the first time in ages.



Excited?

I just can't contain myself!

I did not believe that God would speak.

Oh, I hoped, right enough.

But I did not believe.

So what happened?

Hope was justified.

Belief didn't matter.

God did his bit, even when I couldn't do mine.

Comfort

“A colleague has recently described to me an occasion when a West Indian woman in a London flat was told of her husband's death in a street accident. The shock of grief stunned her like a blow. She sank into the corner of the sofa and sat there rigid and unhearing. For a long time the terrible tranced look continued to embarrass the family, friends and officials who came and went. Then the schoolteacher of one of her children... called and, seeing how things were, went and sat beside her. Without a word she threw an arm around the tight shoulders, clasping them with her full strength. A white cheek was thrust against a brown. Then as the unrelenting pain seeped through to her, the newcomer's tears began to flow, falling on their two hands linked in the woman's lap. For a long time that was all that was happening. And then at last the West Indian woman started to sob. Still not a word was spoken, and after a little while the visitor got up and went, leaving her contribution to help the family meet its immediate needs.

That is the embrace of God, his kiss of life. That is the embrace of his mission, and of our intercession. And the Holy Spirit is the force in the straining muscles of an arm, the film of sweat between pressed cheeks, the mingled wetness on the backs of clasped hands. He is as close and as unobtrusive as that, and as irresistibly strong.”

From “The God Between God” by John V Taylor, SCM Press, London; 1972; ISBN 334 00557 4



Sermon

“Preparations”

Text: [Isaiah 40: 3](#)

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’

The question I want to pose for you on this second Sunday of Advent is, ‘Are you ready?’

[The following story is abbreviated from “The Best Christmas Ever”, from *A Blessing to Follow*, by Tom Gordon, [Wild Goose Publications](#), © Tom Gordon – tom.swallowsnest@gmail.com.]

The school Christmas Nativity Play began without any great fuss. It was a fairly normal event of its kind. When everyone was gathered – children, parents, dignitaries and the school chaplain - the children were sitting on the floor, forming three sides of an open square with the manger tableau in the middle.

They began by singing a Bethlehem-type song, and in from the changing room, encouraged by a fraught P2 teacher, came the beaming Joseph and adorable Mary, bedecked respectively in striped tea-towel tied round the head with dad’s old tie, and a blue veil, which looked suspiciously like the same material as the curtains in the upper-school staff toilet. Despite Joseph’s passion for waving at his mum in the back row - and the silly woman waving back – and Mary’s veil slipping dangerously over her eyes, the expectant couple arrived safely at the stable, right in the middle of the open square of carolling children.

The innkeeper got his words right, the baby Jesus was duly delivered and laid in the manger, and the shepherds made their entry complete with crooks and stuffed animals under their arms. The tableau was almost complete, Mary and Joseph centre stage, shepherds watching their menagerie on Bethlehem’s plains by night, and the angelic P1 and P2s singing beautifully.

All was ready for the entry of the three kings. The pianist belted out the appropriate chord. The choristers struck up with an impressive kingly song. The changing-room



door opened, and in walked – two kings. ‘We three kings from Orient are...’ with one who seemed to have got lost along the way.

The two kings, however, appeared to have no knowledge of their wayward companion. They were heading for Bethlehem, right reason or none. There was no way these kings were going to miss the action. Their journey was well planned, round the back of the P2s, into the middle of the drama, and straight into Bethlehem’s manger-square. They walked with style, well-rehearsed, slowly, in time to the music, ready to present their gifts when the singing ended.

The two Kings were doing fine and all was going well, until the dressing room-door burst open and, falling through it, came the third king – cloak flapping, present for the baby Jesus tucked jauntily under his arm, cardboard crown at a crooked angle, and LATE! (Why, no one ever figured out, though a P2 teacher was seen in tears later on! (Artistic temperament, perhaps?)

Well, this third king may have been guilty of tardiness, or an inability to follow instructions, or of falling out with his teacher, but he was not short of intelligence. Any fool could see that there was no way he could get to Bethlehem by the time the music was finished and meet up with his two companions ready for the next dramatic scene. So he decided he would take a short cut – right through three rows of P1 choristers.

Now that might have been OK if the P1s knew he was coming, or if a teacher had got there soon enough to make a suitable gap, or if the recalcitrant king hadn’t decided to run at full tilt. But the kids weren’t ready for this intrusion, and the teacher wasn’t alive enough to the dangers, and the king didn’t fancy walking.

So he ran, tripped over a stray P1 leg, fell, skidded along a slippery floor, and arrived at the manger in time to join his more sedate regal companions.

But, having arrived, he couldn’t stop arriving. He continued to slide, right into the stable, right up to the manger, right into the lap of the suitably surprised Mary. The manger went one way, the precious gift of Frankincense went another. A cardboard



crown appeared in Joseph's lap, and the baby Jesus, free now of the restrictions of his swaddling bands, rolled gently towards the front row of the somewhat startled Primary 2s.

Teachers ran to the rescue. A clever pianist continued with some incidental music until a semblance of order was restored. The final carol was sung. The star performers took their bow – to the most thunderous applause anyone could ever recall at a school Christmas Nativity Play.

And one tear-stained parent told the school chaplain later that the school children that year had given her one of the best Christmas presents she'd ever had!

So, are you ready? Oh I don't mean ready like a third king should have been ready... I mean are you ready for Christmas? Are you prepared? Is everything in order? Is your planning all done? Are you ready?

No? Now, come on, it's ONLY the beginning of December... Ready? Oh, for goodness-sake. There's PLENTY of time yet... Ready? Give us a break.

There's a story told of a well-known atheist who got lost one day when he was walking through a dense forest. As he stumbled round, he saw a grizzly bear coming towards him. He had nowhere to run, and, in a panic, fell to his knees. And he prayed...

'God,' he pleaded, 'if you exist, save me from the clutches of this grizzly bear.'

And, just then, a booming voice rang around the forest. 'You,' said the voice, 'You? What makes you think I should save you, you who have spent your life denying my very existence?'

'But,' pleaded the man, now trembling with fear, 'I will do anything, I'll even become a Christian, if you will save me from a horrible end.'

And the voice boomed, 'You? What makes you think you can make a deal with me, just because you are in trouble?'



And the man, now with the bear almost face to face with him, cries out, ‘Oh God. Please? If not me, can you not make this bear a Christian, and then I will be saved?’

At which point the grizzly bear stops in its tracks, drops to its knees, puts in paws together in prayer and says, ‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful...’

So, I ask you again, unlike the atheist, but very much like a grizzly bear before a tasty meal... ‘Are you ready?’ Because, you see, the Christian Church over the centuries doesn’t believe that it’s too early to get ready. Indeed, it sets aside four Sundays in what we now know as the Advent Season. We set aside time to prepare. We take care to get it right. Four Sundays, indeed... four weeks of thorough preparation.

So as we gather for this service of worship on this second Sunday of Advent, I ask you again, ‘Are you ready?’

The prophet Isaiah said, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Make a straight path for him.’ John the Baptist quoted these words as he sought to help people prepare for Jesus coming. For so momentous was the coming of the Messiah, was it not right that this is what would be expected of the people?

Are you and I any different? So momentous is this message of Christmas that Christ is coming, that God’s love is in human form... should we not prepare for the way of the Lord and make a straight path for him?

So, I ask you again, as the whole Church is asked at the beginning of Advent 2014, are you ready?

*Possible use here of **So much** [From *With an Open Eye*, by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications] (see above)*

So there’s the first lesson today when we are challenged to get ready... While Christmas is obviously about practical preparations, it has to be more than that for you and me. You’ve got 4 weeks of Advent to get it sorted out – so don’t let all the practical ‘getting ready’ stuff squeeze



out the getting ready for the true meaning of it all, the wonder, the mystery, the insight, the love, that is given in Christ, in all its totality, for you and for me.

And that brings to my second point about getting ready... stop being impatient. Don't worry too much about the outcome once Advent is over. Enjoy the waiting time. Revel in the anticipation. Find a value in the self-examination of your time of readiness.

Have you ever stood at a bus stop and watched people waiting? There are those who step out into the road every two minutes as if that's going to make the bus come quicker... I've done that!

There are those who constantly check the sign that tells you when the bus is due, and check it out all the time with their watch... I've done that.

There are those who hop impatiently from foot to foot, and complain to anyone who's prepared to listen about the quality of the bus service and the disruption of the tram works – I've done that.

And there are those who calmly wait... absorbed in their own thoughts. I spoke to a lady like that at a bus-stop once. 'No point in getting agitated,' she told me. 'This is the only time in the day I get any peace...' She valued the preparation time, wherever she was coming from or going to, waiting, getting ready was no stress. She valued the time...

So, make good use of Advent. Value the getting ready; heighten your awareness; sense the anticipation; make use of the preparation. The excitement, the momentous meaning of Christmas will be on you soon enough. Take time to appreciate getting ready.

Imagine this conversation between a little boy and his grampa...

Waiting [From **With an Open Eye**, by Tom Gordon, Wild Goose Publications]

'Why is a waiter called a "waiter"?' my grandson asked.

'Why do you ask that?' I enquired.

'Well, we're waiting for our lunch.'

He was right, of course.

Well, you do that in cafés – wait, I mean.

Even fast-food has to be waited for – just a little bit.



‘We’re waiting,’ he continued,
‘so shouldn’t we be called the “waiters”, eh?’
He was right, of course.
He usually was.
‘Well,’ I began,
‘to wait, like that nice man is doing for us,
also means to care,
or to serve by bringing us the things we need.
So, because he’s waiting on us,
that makes him a “waiter”, right?’
It didn’t seem good enough.
It usually wasn’t ...
‘So he’s a waiter and a server who brings things, eh?’
‘I suppose,’ I replied.
He was silent for a nanosecond.
‘I know,’ he exclaimed, triumphantly,
‘I’ll call him “Mr Bringer”.
It sounds better, eh?
Because he brings us things, eh?’
So we waited,
until Mr Bringer arrived
with two cheese-burgers and fries.
There were no more questions –
not for now, anyway.
Burgers and fries tend to get in the way of questions,
for a while, anyway.
And the lunch was well worth waiting for.
Mr Bringer had seen to that.



So, make sure getting ready is more than the practicalities... and make sure you value the preparation time... Mr Bringer will come soon enough...

And, if you do both of these, you will be in the right frame of mind for the wonder of the Incarnation.

“I’ve just finished getting ready”... when Christmas is upon you in four weeks time, will you be able to say that? Will you have prepared in your heart for the coming of Christ, as well as being involved with all the practical things? Will you value the anticipation and the preparation time, being happy to be a waiter because Mr Bringer will bring you the greatest gift of all? And will you have cleared a space for the incarnate Christ to come into your life?

Are you ready? If you are, well done... If you’re not, you’d better get on to it quick, because you’ve only got a wee while left...

Prayers

Collect

Almighty God,
you sent your servant John the Baptist
to prepare your people to welcome the Messiah.
Inspire the ministers and stewards of your truth
to turn our disobedient hearts to you,
that when the Christ shall come again
to be our judge
we may stand with confidence before his glory;
who is alive and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Approach, confession and supplication

The prophet Isaiah said, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’

Let us pray



Loving and ever present God,
the God of Isaiah of old and the Church of now,
in this Advent Season,
we heed your call to prepare for your coming.
As the sun rises with the promise of a new day,
so you come again to your people,
always new, always true, always real.
As we come to church again, and greet one another in the fellowship of faith,
so you greet your returning people;
you throw your arms open in welcome, and lift up your hands to bless us all.

Yet we know we have to ask ourselves...
are we really prepared – and truly thankful - for the glory of a new day?
Are we prepared for our time in the presence of our God?
Are we prepared for the acceptance of your blessing?
We hope we are.
We try to be ready.
And yet, how ill prepared we really are.

Our faith tells us to prepare,
but our busyness with other things often means we don't give the time.
Our hearts are ready to receive you,
but our lives often don't show that in practice.
Our calling is to make a highway in our deserts for our God,
but often we prepare no more than a rutted track or an indistinct trail.

Forgive us Lord,
for saying but not doing,
believing but not acting,
praying but not performing.

You call us to get ready for your coming.



Forgive us when our preparations fall short of your expectations.
And in the silence, we ask for forgiveness.
And in the silence, we give time to be more ready for your love.

Silence

Be assured, God tells us, that I will not forsake my people.
Arise, and go forward. Your sins are forgiven.

So, ever-present God,
send your Holy Spirit upon us now.
Strengthen us in our commitment.
Hold us to your purpose.
Christ our Lord is coming.
Let us be ready.

Amen

Prayer of Intercession

God of all things,
God of the Church, God of the nation, God of the world,
God of every individual, every needy person,
we believe that if you are the God of all, then you will listen to all.
So in that blessed assurance, we come to you with our prayers.
We offer you our all – in words and in silence –
holding nothing back,
in the belief that you will hear our prayers
and answer beyond our expectations.
In your wisdom, in your love for all,
hear the prayers of your humble people.

Hear our prayers for your Church.
Heal our divisions in love and peace.



Grant us strength to witness as we should.

Give us the grace to offer your love where it is most needed.

Give us the assurance that when we hold high the lamp of truth,
the light of compassion,
the beacon of hope,
we will bring your light to all the world.

Hear our prayers for the Nation,
this land of history and hope,
of privilege and passion,
of welcome and witness.

Raise up those who will be role-models for our children,
who will be leaders of our people,
who will be holders of the baton of truth and justice
which we will pass on to them.

Hear our prayers for the world in which we are set,
with all its tension and striving,
all its brokenness and deep concerns.

Where there is war, may your peace descend.

Where there is inequality, may your justice prevail.

Where there is poverty, may your call to share be heeded.

Where there is pain, may your healing bring a soothing balm.

Where there is hopelessness, may your truth sustain.

Hear our prayers for those who are in need,
those whom we carry in our hearts,
not only in this place but in every waking moment of our daily living.
And in our silence, we offer you the names and faces,
the places and circumstances of those we love.

Silence...



And we rejoice in the Communion of Saints,
those known and unknown to us,
who, together with us now in the one Kingdom of your love,
bring you all that is needed
of praise and prayer.
We give thanks for them,
as one day, we pray, others will give thanks for us.

Amen

Musical Suggestions

Have a look at the [Different Voices blog](#) for musical ideas to use during the whole Advent season. This includes ideas for congregations, choirs, bands and children compiled by members the Church of Scotland Music Group.

As well as the traditional Advent Hymns, these might be considered

CH4 280	Alleluia! Hurry, the Lord is near
CH4 636	Baptised in water, sealed by the Spirit
CH4 466	Before the throne of God above
CH4 284	Hope is a candle, once lit by the prophets
CH4 334	On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry...
CH4 473	Thy kingdom come...
CH4 276	Wait for the Lord
CH4 291	When out of poverty is born a dream that would not die



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. [Revealing Love](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#).



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 pages [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 the Rev Tom Gordon 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.

