

The Vine at Home

Advent 1B

Call to worship

The waiting begins, again.

The breathing in, the holding on.

Can you be patient, this advent season?

Can you make space for Jesus be born again, here, today? Amen.¹

Hymn: 176 STF – Like a candle flame, flickering small in our darkness

Opening Prayers

[Based on Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 - could be offered by 2 voices, or with the bible texts on a screen].

‘Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel’

- As we come to you in prayer this morning, Holy God, we ask you to listen to us and we give thanks that you have said that you will.

‘You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth!’

- Although you are full of majesty and power, yet you humble yourself and draw near to us; shine your light on our worship today we pray.

‘Stir up your might and come to save us!’

- In our weakness and brokenness at this time we know how much we need you; knowing that we cannot save ourselves, we call upon your strength today.

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

- In our uncertainty we wonder what restoration might look like in these days, but we trust ourselves to you and ask again that you will shine on us and give us hope in the shadows.

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?

- Amidst our worship we recognize that too often our lives let you down, our prayers are selfish, our compassion is cold, our witness is laughable....
- In a moment of silence we say sorry...
- *[Pause]*
- And with thankfulness we receive your forgiveness.

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

- As we call on your name this day, we pledge ourselves once more to you, O Lord God of hosts, you who have your hand upon us, you who makes us strong for yourself.
- We will never turn back from you who gives us life.
- Thanks be to God. Amen.²

¹ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Jill Baker

Let us now say the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence **2** [a] as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

4 From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

5 You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.[b]

6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

7 There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered[c] us into the hand of our iniquity.

8 Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.³

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I give thanks to my[a] God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, **5** for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— **6** just as the testimony of[b] Christ has been strengthened among you— **7** so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. **8** He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **9** God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.⁴

Mark 13:24-37 The Coming of the Son of Man

24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, **25** and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. **26** Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. **27** Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. **29** So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he[a] is near, at the very gates. **30** Truly I tell you, this generation will

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not pass away until all these things have taken place. **31** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. **33** Beware, keep alert;^[b] for you do not know when the time will come. **34** It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. **35** Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, **36** or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. **37** And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”⁵

Reflections on the readings

With the dawn of Advent, many of us turn our attention to our Christmas shopping list and begin thinking about buying gifts for people we love (and sometimes for people we don't!) In my experience friends and family have different approaches to this and whilst some enjoy surprises, others issue 'hints' around now, making sure I choose something they really want – indeed some have been known to send precise descriptions, including make and model number!

If I'm honest I'm not sure that approach captures the essence of this time of year. This is a time of year for surprises – even shocks! Although the annual rituals - such as Advent calendars and candles – can make it all feel familiar and cosy, it is really quite the opposite. Advent is a disruptive season!

Looking at today's readings, we can't escape that message. Isaiah appeals to God to 'tear open the heavens' (as we have already noted). He envisages the coming of God as something which makes mountains quake, brushwood burst into flame, water boil, nations tremble! God is seen to be doing 'awesome deeds that we did not expect'.

The words of Jesus recorded in Mark are even more dramatic and, yes, disruptive... the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken...

- Are you up for that this Advent?
- Isn't it all going just a little too far?
- Haven't we all been shaken up enough this year by the Covid-19 pandemic and all its miserable effects on our health, our lives, our relationships, our economy?
- Aren't we longing for a soothing message of peace and hope instead of all this drama and disruption?

Amongst the many lessons we are learning from the disruption of living with a pandemic, perhaps we are realising that, whatever we do, we cannot bury our heads in the sand and hope things which we don't like will go away. Tempting as duvet days are, we have to wake up to reality sometime. In fact, that is exactly what Jesus is telling us in Mark 13. See how many different calls to action there are in these few verses:

- 'From the fig tree learn its lesson'

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- 'Beware, keep alert for you do not know when the time will come'
- 'Keep awake'
- A man going on a journey 'commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch'
- 'And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake'

It's all reminiscent of the messages we have been hearing day after day from our political leaders; Stay alert! Whilst politicians and scientific advisers are alerting us to good hygiene, to physical distancing, to protective equipment and to closed doors, why do we need to be vigilant in the Advent season?

Isaiah speaks of a context where people have stopped calling on the name of God, where 'no one attempts to take hold of you' (v7).

- At its heart this is a passage about distancing.
- In Isaiah's time, and surely in ours too, people have distanced themselves from God by doing their own thing.
- We have distanced ourselves from God by doing our own thing;
- I have distanced myself from God by doing my own thing.
- Whenever I put myself first, disregard the needs of others, fail to pay attention to the voice of God, I am inevitably putting distance between me and God, and as a result, distance between me and other people.

A sixth century monk, Dorotheos of Gaza, suggested that we are all like the spokes of a wheel of which God is the hub. As we draw closer to God, we draw closer to each other too and become community in a real sense.

It is interesting that at a time when generally we are not allowed to take hold of one another, we hear this call to take a firmer grip on God and thus come closer to one another.

That has been the way lockdown has worked for some people; with fewer distractions many have discovered that God is present, God is not distancing from us, God is real.

Meeting on Zoom or WhatsApp or Facetime or Facebook or the phone we have found we can share our own stories, our own testimonies, our day by day experience of how to be a disciple. We have grown closer to one another too.

Has that been your experience? Might that become your experience during these weeks of Advent as we prepare ourselves for God coming even closer, for God breaking into human life, not just once, two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, but again and again and again. For whilst the season of Advent is in part a season of preparation for Christmas, it has a much broader meaning in our church calendar. Advent calls upon us to be ready for Christ to come into our lives today, tomorrow, the next day AND to be on the lookout for the day when Christ will return to the world in glory and what God started, God will also finish. We don't know when that might happen, hence the message to stay awake, to be alert.

Advent is disruptive, but alongside that disruption we hold onto the grace of God of which Paul speaks in his first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul makes a promise to which we too can hold as we look for God to tear open the heavens and come to us afresh; 'God is faithful' and 'will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Stay alert to that – these are exciting times.⁶

⁶ Reflection written by Jill

Prayers of intercession

Advent God, you heard the cry of your people and came to the world in Jesus Christ; come near to us now as we pray:

- We pray for all affected by sickness around the world; for those who will die today of malaria, tuberculosis, cancer, Covid-19... Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We pray for all who work to bring healing to those who are suffering in body, mind or spirit; for the NHS, for counsellors, for all who support others... Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We pray for all who are grieving the loss of family and friends; for those who feel helpless, powerless, guilty, distraught... Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We pray for all who are caught up in situations of violence; for those in lands where war is raging, for those in homes where abuse takes place... Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We pray for all who have lost their way in life; for those contemplating suicide, for those who don't know which way to turn, for young people confused by these strange times... Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We pray for governments and local authorities; for all who have to make difficult decisions, for teachers struggling to make schools safe places... Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We pray for the church here in ..., across these islands, and throughout the world; may we be alert to your presence in the world and draw others closer to your love... Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We pray for ourselves; we too suffer, we too grieve, we too struggle with abuse and confusion, with anxiety and selfishness... we cling to your promise to come into our lives and we open ourselves to your coming. Faithful God, **give your strength.**
- We offer all our prayers in the name of Jesus, who came, who comes, who will come.

Amen.⁷

Hymn: 169 STF – Come thou long expected Jesus

Blessing

May we go out disrupt all that is wrong, unjust and hateful in this world.

May we nurture and plant seeds of love.

May we celebrate your coming amongst us, Immanuel. Amen.⁸

⁷ Prayers of intercession written by Jill Baker

⁸ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

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