

Advent Sunday, 28th November 2021

Welcome and introduction

Birthdays

Song (384) Make Way

Lighting of the first Advent candle

Prayer: There is a lot of darkness in the world. We are only lighting a small candle, but we remember that Jesus came as the Light of the world, and his coming brings us new hope.

Song (572) We believe in God the Father

Mission news item.

Tear Fund: an update on Afghanistan

While the headlines may have moved on from Afghanistan, the reality is that the situation remains critical. Here we share an update from our local partners about how you can be praying for the people of Afghanistan amid the uncertainty.

Breaking point

The main challenge that people are facing is hunger. There are heartbreaking reports of parents selling their children because they cannot afford to feed them.

This is partly due to bank closures and currency shortages across the country. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has banned the use of foreign currency within the country, which is likely to make the problem even worse.

The severe drought – the worst in more than a decade – means that hoped-for harvests have failed. Many families were relying on these to see them through the coming winter.

Coronavirus crisis

The other crises that are affecting Afghanistan have overshadowed a growing threat in the country: coronavirus. Cases – and the number of reported deaths – are increasing as the virus is rapidly spreading.

With resources dwindling, more and more people are unable to afford healthcare once they are taken ill.

Hospitals and health centres are also operating at a limited capacity due to the uncertainty in the country. Many healthcare professionals have also fled the country following the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's return to power.

Reaching out

Some of our local partners have been able to restart their programmes. This work has included reaching hundreds of people with emergency food provisions, as well as sharing accurate information about coronavirus to help slow the spread.

However, there are uncertainties around the new government structure, and so some of the projects remain on hold. It is unclear when these will be able to resume.

Please keep praying for Afghanistan in this time of uncertainty.

Prayers of intercession

Afghanistan is being hit by the three biggest crises in the world today: conflict, coronavirus and climate change. A perfect storm. But other places are suffering too. Let us cry out to God for suffering people everywhere.

- We pray for refugees. This week we have been made aware of the tragedy that has faced asylum seekers in the English Channel. But the UK gets very few refugees compared with other countries. There are 80 million refugees in the world, many displaced people in their own countries, and many more in nearby countries. We lift up those working to help refugees in lands such as Lebanon, Jordan, Pakistan - we pray for the work of Tear Fund, Open Doors and BMS Worldwide. Lord, forgive us that we ignore the plight of people you love, people you died for.
- We pray for our own land. Grant wisdom to the government as they struggle to address the refugee crisis, the pandemic, and economic concerns. We pray that there will be a solution to the shortage of workers in health and social care, in agriculture and food production, in transport and in hospitality services.
- We pray for our own community, with the changes we see around us. We pray that new housing developments will result in more people coming to our churches. We thank you for the various Christian organisations that serve our community, and pray that they will be resourced effectively - financially and with enough volunteers - to make a real impact on our town.
- We pray for ourselves. Help us as a church to stay strong in these difficult times, even though some are not able to meet with us in person. We pray for our pastor and his family on holiday; strengthen Mark for the task you have given him as they return later this week. We lift up - in silence - those in our fellowship who need our special prayers at this time. Keep us all looking to you as our help and strength. We ask all these things in Jesus name. Amen.

Song (1239) From the squalor of a borrowed stable

Reading: *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Advent - what does it mean?

Let me tell you about my grandmother. Nanna Blackburn.

Nanna was a lovely lady, very affectionate and full of stories. She had a wicked sense of humour. And she terrorised Jehovah's Witnesses. If they came to her door, she would keep them talking for hours on eschatology, the teachings about the end times. The conversation usually ended in the same way: "Why do you always have a bus to catch when I get to 1 Thessalonians 4?" she would ask them.

Of course, by the time she got to 1 Thessalonians 4, she had probably been through Ezekiel, Daniel and most of the minor prophets. And now she was half way through the New Testament. She hadn't even started on the Book of Revelation. I imagine the poor JW was looking for a way to escape by then.

Mind you, some of Nanna's beliefs about the Second Coming were as crazy as those of the JWs. It has taken me quite a few years to sort out my own ideas. We all need to do this - as Paul says in our reading, we must not be uninformed. If you want to read up on it, you can't do better than read *Surprised by Hope*, by Tom Wright.

At the simplest level, 'advent' just means 'coming'. We can talk about the advent of Spring, or of the school holidays. In theological terms, it refers to the coming of Jesus. In the traditional church calendar, it is associated with Jesus first coming (as a baby to Bethlehem) and his return at the end of the age. During the four Sundays before Christmas, we remind ourselves that the Christ who came 2000 years ago to Bethlehem will also return in glory. We call this the Second Advent.

I want to consider the Second Advent under three simple headings:

- What will the Second Advent mean for Jesus?
- What will the Second Advent mean for us?
- What will the Second Advent mean for the rest of creation?

What will the Second Advent mean for Jesus?

First and foremost, this event is about **Jesus**.

He is going to return in person

This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. (Acts 1:11)

He is going to return in triumph

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, (1 Thess. 4:16)

He will destroy the forces of evil

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. (1 Cor. 15:24)

Everyone will acknowledge his Lordship

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:10-11)

He will then reign here on earth

“The kingdom of the world has become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15)

His kingdom will finally come (which we pray for every time we say the Lord's prayer)

What will the Second Advent mean for us?

We will be changed

We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. (1 Cor. 15:51-52)

We will become like Jesus

But we know that when Christ appears,^[a] we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

The Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Phil. 3:21)

And so we will be with Jesus.

We will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess. 4:17)

Song (1539)

There is a day

Sermon part 2:

Where will we be? Where will his kingdom be? His throne?

(We need to abandon 19th C views of 'heaven' and look at what the Bible actually teaches.)

What will the Second Advent mean for the rest of creation?

Creation has been suffering

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. (Romans 8:22)

Nature will be liberated

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that^[a] the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:19-21)

The nations will be healed

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev.22:2)

New heavens and new earth

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,¹ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. (Rev 21:1-3)

We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:13)

"As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure. (Isaiah 66:22)

The New Jerusalem

All that's good about life here on earth will become part of the new kingdom.

"The kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it." (Rev. 21:24)

Nothing we do now for the Kingdom is wasted.

So our labour is not in vain.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:58)

We are a people of hope.

- A future and a hope (Jer. 29:11)
- Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col.1:27)
- When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col.3:4)

Marana tha, Come O Lord

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus (Rev. 22:20)

Song (347) Lo He comes with clouds descending

Blessing:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (*Romans 15:13*)

Discussion questions:

1. Do we not focus enough on the fact that Jesus will return in glory? Has the idea that we go to heaven when we die distracted us from the fact that God has a plan for the whole of creation, and will act again in human history?
2. How should we be living in the light of Christ's return? Does it mean we can neglect to look after the world we now live in? Does it give urgency to our preaching the Gospel? What does it mean to say that 'our labour in the Lord is not in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:58).
3. What does it mean when we pray that the departed will 'rest in peace and rise in glory'? Is that an appropriate prayer in the light of New Testament teaching?