



ADVENT 4: THE ULTIMATE PROMISE

Call to worship (adapted from Romans chapter 1)

Speaking through prophets down the ages, God promised Good News. The Good News that Jesus Christ, descended from David, filled with the Spirit of Holiness would be declared the true Son of God, anointed to bring salvation to all by conquering sin.

In this season of Advent, we eagerly and joyfully await fulfilment of that ultimate promise. Amen.

Hymn 169, Come thou long expected Jesus. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVI33j--eT8>

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free,
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.

Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a king,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.

Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art,
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne.

Charles Wesley

Prayer of Adoration

Lord God, as we prepare for your coming, inspire us with eager expectation and fill us with the wonder and obedience shown by Mary, with the trust shown by Joseph, and with the desire to seek out your ways in all that we do. May our preparation be worthy of the calling you give us. May your promises be an endless source of hope as we await your kingdom where peace, love and mercy reign supreme.

Prayer of Confession

We are surrounded by doubts and reasons to doubt and find it too easy for the seeds of doubt to take hold and push aside our faith and trust in your promises. We confess that we do not have the strength or steadfastness to cast those doubts and fears aside. Forgive our weakness and renew your spirit of courage and hope, we pray. Amen

Hymn 193, Born in the night <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRyOaoMo6CA>

Born in the night,
Mary's Child,
A long way from your home;
Coming in need,
Mary's Child,
Born in a borrowed room.

Truth of our life,
Mary's Child,
You tell us God is good;
Prove it is true,
Mary's Child,
Go to your cross of wood.

Clear shining light,
Mary's Child,
Your face lights up our way;
Light of the world,
Mary's Child,
Dawn on our darkened day.

Hope of the world,
Mary's Child,
You're coming soon to reign;
King of the earth,
Mary's Child,
Walk in our streets again.

Geoffrey Ainger © Stainer & Bell Ltd.

Readings

Isaiah 7:10-16,
Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon: The Ultimate promise

Advent is drawing to its conclusion for this year, as we approach the fulfilment of the promise that God will be born amongst us to bring salvation to a broken world. Advent – from the Latin – towards the coming or towards the arrival. Like all longed-for events in life, the more we are prepared, the more that event is likely to live up to its promise. The more we put into the preparation, the more we gain from its fulfilment. Not just a truism about Advent, but about the whole of life.

There has to be a but. True, advent does simply mean towards the coming, but as I reflect on that simple linguistic meaning it feels as if I am demeaning the significance of advent. It isn't just that we are looking towards the coming, it is that we are preparing for the fulfilment of promises that have been passed down through the millennia – promises made by a true and faithful God. Promises more often misunderstood than accepted for their power and authority. Promises more frequently twisted to the personal advantage of those holding onto power who should have known better. Despite our attempts to ignore and change the meaning of those promises, they are promises made by the faithful God who is full of truth and integrity and honour.

I wonder if I am still belittling Advent's meaning by reducing it to the notion that it is about the fulfilment of promises. After all, our life experience is one filled with broken or vain promises. Or throw away remarks dressed up as promises to avoid taking tricky decisions or having difficult but honest conversations. The very word promise is tainted by our experience. When we apply it to the mystery, the wonder, the life-changing impact of God's promises, it is too easy for us to miss its true nature.

Advent means so much more than we can ever fathom by using human imagery or understanding. There is a word "ineffable" to describe this dilemma we face. It means something that is incapable of being adequately expressed in words – something so sublime and beyond our imagination, that we struggle to express the feelings and emotions that are generated.

Advent embraces the ineffable nature of God, and his promises. At the heart of those promises that exceed our ability to understand sits the hopefulness generated and inspired deep down within our spirits. So our preparation in advent must fill us with an unchallengeable, undiminishable sense of hope and peace, created by the inevitability that God's promises are about to be fulfilled once and for all time.

With that as our goal for this final week of advent, I'm in danger of feeling a little bit anxious about how and whether it is truly achievable. I say that, because, more than ever before, I find that I am living in a world determined to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory as we are bombarded by messages, apparently designed to sap our spirit. A world in which it feels as if we are being drawn towards failure. A world whose cacophony feels as if it is encouraging us to give up hope. A world in which our resilience and resourcefulness is being drained from us, when we are encouraged to think about an off-day as the sign of the next doom-laden crisis. A polarised society drawing us from one extreme to another, like riding on a roller coaster swinging from the highs to the lows and back again – full of adrenaline but devoid of purpose.

Our news presenters open the majority of interviews with the question: "how worried are you?" priming us all to expect bad news at every turn. When did we replace a spirit of agency with one encouraging despair? When did we allow ourselves to be brow-beaten into abandoning the lofty ambition and the hunger for new discovery and adventure? When did we allow our conversations to focus on life's daily grind, rather than the inspiration of the new wonders that we will be experiencing today? When did meaningful purpose give way to apathy?

In our Old Testament reading set for today, God is speaking to Ahaz, King of Judah, who is being threatened by the surrounding armies of Israel and Aram that have joined together. The odds look as if they are stacked against Ahaz and the people of Judah – they are fearful and scared of what will happen. God tells Ahaz that despite appearances, both the kings of Aram and Israel are weak and nothing is going to happen, if Ahaz takes notice of what God is telling him. Ahaz declines to listen to God, and would rather listen to the voices of despair and defeat. Isaiah is told to go and shake some sense and some hope, and indeed some backbone into Ahaz, who responds that he is not prepared to listen to the voice of God. Through Isaiah, God promises the gift of a baby who will be called Immanuel – God is with us. God is declaring that the power of misdirected human power and might will be as nothing compared with the power of love and obedience that will be present in the vulnerability of that new-born.

Turning to the gospel reading of the announcement of the coming Immanuel, we might be more familiar with the way Luke tells the story. Writing to the Greeks, his story focuses on Mary, and the obedience and love

demonstrated in the words of the Magnificat – My soul glorifies the Lord. But Matthew writes to the Jews. The essence of his story is the fulfilment of God's promises echoed by prophets down the ages. For them, it is important that fulfilment of those prophecies is demonstrated through the male line. All his attention is on Joseph. Joseph: devastated by the unfaithfulness of his betrothed and mourning the loss for ever of his soulmate. Fearful of the opprobrium and attack from all his friends and family, but still deeply in love with Mary so that despite it all, he will protect her at all costs. Joseph must feel as if he is in a similar corner to Ahaz: - under threat all round. Unlike Ahaz, when God speaks to him and makes incredulous promises, he chooses to believe that the impossible can happen. The shame and pain that he was anticipating was wiped away by his belief and obedience to God. Hope was restored, despite the apparently hopeless situation.

As we are confronted by overwhelming forces threatening to fill us with fear and dread for the future, are we going to stop listening to the promises of God like Ahaz did, or are we going to hold onto that hope, however unbelievable it might seem, just as Joseph did? And if we take the latter course, we will discover afresh in this advent run up to the incarnation, that the power of vulnerable love will transform a despairing world into one of glorious peace and promise. Paraphrasing the words of Joshua, "as for me, I will serve and believe the Lord". A Lord whose promises are full of hope

May God – the ineffable God, fill you with the spirit and power of hopefulness as he brings light into the dark world this Christmas.

Prayer of Intercession

In this week leading to your incarnation, we pray for all those for whom you have no meaning. Those whose lives are empty of purpose. Those who feel so oppressed by the pressures of the world that they can find no hope, and those whose lives are dominated by the whim of the rich, the powerful or the dictator. Bring your peace, your love and your mercy into all those lives.

We pray for those who hold the lives of others in their hands – may they be inspired by your compassion and filled with your grace, so that they will bring true justice to the marginalised, the disadvantaged and the poor. May your kingdom values dominate all decisions by those in power.

Amen.

The Lord's prayer

Hymn 708 O God of hope, your prophets spoke

O God of hope, your prophets spoke
of days when war would cease:
when, taught to see each person's worth,
and faithful stewards of the earth,
we all would live in peace,

We pray that our divided world
may hear their words anew:
then lift for good the curse of war,
let bread with justice bless the poor,
and turn in hope to you,

Earth's fragile web of life demands
our reverence and our care,
lest in our folly, sloth and greed,
deaf both to you and others' need,
we lay our planet bare,

Earth's rich resources give us power
to build or to destroy:
your Spirit urges us to turn
from selfish, fear-bound ways, and learn
his selfless trust and joy,

The prince of Peace is calling us
to shun the way of strife:
he brings us healing through his pain;
our shattered hope is born again
through his victorious life,

Basil E Bridge © 1999 Kevin Mayhew Ltd

Blessing

Lord God, as we journey through this final week of Advent, may we be richly inspired and blessed by the hope we have in you, and may we be bring the light of your coming into the lives of all around. Amen.