

# OUT OF DARKNESS INTO LIGHT



**Materials for  
Daily Prayer and Devotion  
for the Season of Advent  
2015**





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## From Bishop Rachel

I am delighted to commend this booklet to you as a resource to use during this season of Advent.

One of the main themes of Advent is about darkness and light. The nights are drawing in and the days are getting shorter. But at the same time, Christians are called to be salt and light – ambassadors for Christ amid the darkness of the world. Of course we can only be light because of the light of Jesus going ahead of us and shining within us. My hope is that these resources will help you focus once more on this light shining in the darkness.

There are lots of ways in which you might use this booklet. Some people will simply use them on their own as part of their own existing pattern of daily prayer. But you might also be able to gather together with others to pray, whether in church or at home, and I do want to encourage you to do that if you can. Praying together builds up our common life as the people of God and as the Diocese of Gloucester. Many people find that establishing a regular time of day for prayer is particularly helpful. When you pray, you might want to light a candle to remind you of the light of Christ!

I am grateful to the members of the Worship, Prayer and Spirituality Group for compiling these resources. In particular, they have been edited by Julie Fay and collated by Julian Elloway, while the reflections on the Bible readings have been written by Rob Axford, Sarah Bick, Peter Francis, Liz Palin, David Russell, Jenny Tann and Rosie Woodall.

May Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you, scatter the darkness from before your path, and make you ready to meet him when he comes in glory.

**+Rachel**

# Planning and Preparing

Here are some notes to help you use this resource.

## 1. Identify those who will commit themselves to share in this daily worship.

- It may include clergy and readers, but does not have to.
- It may be the same group of people every day.
- It may be different people on different days.
- One person each day would be enough, but two would be better, three better still and a larger group a blessing in itself.
- See whether members of other churches might like to join you.

## 2. Identify the most convenient time.

- It would be best if it were the same time every day, but it can be early morning, mid-morning, lunchtime, afternoon or evening, whichever is most convenient.

## 3. Ensure people know about it.

- A large poster outside the church.
- Tell people about it in notices, magazines, etc.—try to make sure it isn't just church-people who know.
- Make sure the publicity has a 'Come and join us any day' element to it.

## 4. Identify the part of the church you intend to use.

- Can you make it a space where people are comfortable to pray?
- Would any kind of focus help, e.g. a lighted candle, open Bible, icon?
- Discuss how you are going to use the material provided (for further guidance see below).
- Plan who will lead each session—a rota, for example.
- Make sure you have sufficient Bibles and copies of this booklet.

## How to use *Out of Darkness into Light*

These resources can be used in a variety of ways—they are designed to be flexible. You could use them ‘straight through’—there is a complete ‘order’ for each day that, used reflectively, would probably last about fifteen minutes. But you could extend it, shorten it, redesign it, create something less structured, do your own thing and simply draw on the material as a resource. This way it can meet a variety of needs.

These are the elements in the order set out for each day, with a structure based on *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* pp. 53–7, Prayer During the Day for Advent, and, for the Bible readings and reflections, on the sequences of readings for Advent in *Common Worship: Times and Seasons* pp. 46–7.

### The Preparation

#### The Opening Prayer of Praise

The one included here is *Salus Aeterna*, the song of praise for Advent included in *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*, Prayer During Advent p. 53.

#### A Psalm

A Psalm is appointed for each day on the weekly cycle as noted in *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*, p. 54. This cycle can be found on page 6. There are different ways of saying the Psalms—it could be together all the way through, but sometimes that can be ragged or gather too much speed. Verses alternating between the leader and everybody else may be the most helpful way. There may possibly be a parish custom about this. The important thing is to say the Psalm slowly, quietly and reflectively, probably seated; at the end the Gloria is said together. The Psalm each day is chosen from among those appointed for that day as found in the official Church of England provision for the season of Advent, so you are reading and praying it with the whole Church.

#### The Bible Reading

As noted above, the Bible Reading for each day is based on the four sequences suggested in *Common Worship: Times and Seasons*. The readings can be found in the ‘Daily Provision’ section of this booklet. After the reading, you may wish for a short period of silence to allow

for reflection on its meaning; or this could be an opportunity for some bible study together. One way would be a simple *Lectio Divina* approach:

- After the Bible Reading, keep a time of silence.
- Each say a word or phrase that has struck you in the passage.
- Perhaps read the passage again.
- Keep a little more silence.
- Each contribute a brief thought emerging from your reflection on the passage.
- Be ready to bring these reflections into the Time of Prayer that follows later.

### **A Thought for the Day**

These short reflections on the day's reading have been specially prepared and are in the 'Daily Provision' section of this booklet. They may resonate with your own reflections on the passage or may give a different insight—each person will have their own unique experience of this. They should be read out loud, followed by a pause to think about them and maybe an opportunity to share thoughts and/or discussion.

### **Prayers**

Intercession prayers may follow, to include:

- The Church, that she may be ready for the coming of Christ
- The leaders of the Church
- The nations, that they may be subject to the rule of God
- Those who are working for justice in the world
- The broken, that they may find God's healing

These prayers can be put together by the participants, or those on Pages 36–7 of *Common Worship: Times and Seasons* can be used.

The prayers of intercession will be followed by the Collect and the Lord's Prayer. The collect for each week is provided in the 'Daily Provision' section of this booklet; there is a collect for each week, except for the final week where Christmas Eve has its own collect.

### **The Conclusion**

This is the same each day.

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# ***Out of Darkness into Light*** **An Order for Daily Prayer in the Season of Advent, 2015 in the Diocese of Gloucester**

## **PREPARATION**

○ God, make speed to save us.  
*All*     **○ Lord, make haste to help us.**

Your words have I hidden within my heart,  
*All*     **that I should not sin against you.**

Saviour eternal,  
life of the world unfailing,  
light everlasting  
and our true redemption.

Taking our humanity  
in your loving freedom,  
you rescued our lost earth  
and filled the world with joy.

By your first advent justify us,  
by your second, set us free:  
that when the great light dawns  
and you come as judge of all,  
we may be robed in immortality  
and ready, Lord, to follow  
in your footsteps blest, wherever they may lead.

## **PSALMODY**

<i>Monday</i>	Psalm 13
<i>Tuesday</i>	Psalm 14
<i>Wednesday</i>	Psalm 54
<i>Thursday</i>	Psalm 70
<i>Friday</i>	Psalm 75
<i>Saturday</i>	Psalm 85



All **Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

## **THE BIBLE READING FOR THE DAY**

*See daily provision on pages 13–41*

## **THE THOUGHT FOR THE DAY**

*See daily provision on pages 13–41*

## **PRAYERS**

*Prayers may include these concerns:*

- ¶ The Church, that she may be ready for the coming of Christ
- ¶ The leaders of the Church
- ¶ The nations, that they may be subject to the rule of God
- ¶ Those who are working for justice in the world
- ¶ The broken, that they may find God's healing

*The Collect of the week or the following prayer is said*

Keep us, O Lord,  
while we tarry on this earth,  
in a serious seeking after you,  
and in an affectionate walking with you,  
every day of our lives;  
that when you come,  
we may be found not hiding our talent,  
nor serving the flesh,  
nor yet asleep with our lamp unfurnished,  
but waiting and longing for our Lord,  
our glorious God for ever.

All **Amen.**

## **THE CONCLUSION**

May the Lord make us ready for his coming in glory.

All **Amen.**

## Daily Provision

The following pages contain the daily provision from Tuesday 1st December to Thursday 24th December, but do not include Sundays.

These can be added to or modified as users wish – for example where a feast or festival is noted, the collect may be substituted for the assigned collect for the saints or Holy Days, etc. Contemporary versions can be substituted with traditional language and so on.

The patterns of readings are based on four sequences:

Week 1	The King and his kingdom
Week 2	The forerunner
Week 3	A vigil for prisoners and those who sit in darkness
Week 4	Looking for the light

## Cycle of Psalms

### MONDAY

#### Psalm 13

- 1 How long will you forget me, O Lord; for ever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?
- 2 How long shall I have anguish in my soul  
and grief in my heart, day after day?  
How long shall my enemy triumph over me?
- 3 Look upon me and answer, O Lord my God;  
lighten my eyes, lest I sleep in death;
- 4 Lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed against him,'  
and my foes rejoice that I have fallen.
- 5 But I put my trust in your steadfast love;  
my heart will rejoice in your salvation.
- 6 I will sing to the Lord,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

## TUESDAY

### Psalm 14

- 1 The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'  
Corrupt are they, and abominable in their wickedness;  
there is no one that does good.
- 2 The Lord has looked down from heaven  
upon the children of earth,  
to see if there is anyone who is wise  
and seeks after God.
- 3 But every one has turned back;  
all alike have become corrupt:  
there is none that does good; no, not one.
- 4 Have they no knowledge, those evildoers,  
who eat up my people as if they ate bread  
and do not call upon the Lord?
- 5 There shall they be in great fear;  
for God is in the company of the righteous.
- 6 Though they would confound the counsel of the poor,  
yet the Lord shall be their refuge.
- 7 O that Israel's salvation would come out of Zion!  
When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people,  
then will Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad.

## WEDNESDAY

### Psalm 54

- 1 Save me, O God, by your name  
and vindicate me by your power.
- 2 Hear my prayer, O God;  
give heed to the words of my mouth.
- 3 For strangers have risen up against me,  
and the ruthless seek after my life;  
they have not set God before them.

- 4 Behold, God is my helper;  
it is the Lord who upholds my life.
- 5 May evil rebound on those who lie in wait for me;  
destroy them in your faithfulness.
- 6 An offering of a free heart will I give you  
and praise your name, O Lord, for it is gracious.
- 7 For he has delivered me out of all my trouble,  
and my eye has seen the downfall of my enemies.

## **THURSDAY**

### **Psalm 70**

- 1 O God, make speed to save me;  
O Lord, make haste to help me.
- 2 Let those who seek my life  
be put to shame and confusion;  
let them be turned back and disgraced  
who wish me evil.
- 3 Let those who mock and deride me  
turn back because of their shame.
- 4 But let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you;  
let those who love your salvation say always, 'Great is the Lord.'
- 5 As for me, I am poor and needy;  
come to me quickly, O God.
- 6 You are my help and my deliverer;  
O Lord, do not delay.

## **FRIDAY**

### **Psalm 75**




- 1 We give you thanks, O God, we give you thanks,  
for your name is near, as your wonderful deeds declare.
- 2 'I will seize the appointed time;  
I, the Lord, will judge with equity.

- 3 'Though the earth reels and all that dwell in her,  
it is I that hold her pillars steady.
- 4 'To the boasters I say, "Boast no longer,"  
and to the wicked, "Do not lift up your horn.
- 5 "'Do not lift up your horn on high;  
do not speak with a stiff neck.'"
- 6 For neither from the east nor from the west,  
nor yet from the wilderness comes exaltation.
- 7 But God alone is judge;  
he puts down one and raises up another.
- 8 For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup,  
well mixed and full of foaming wine.
- 9 He pours it out for all the wicked of the earth;  
they shall drink it, and drain the dregs.
- 10 But I will rejoice for ever  
and make music to the God of Jacob.
- 11 All the horns of the wicked will I break,  
but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.

## **SATURDAY**

### **Psalm 85**

- 1 Lord, you were gracious to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- 2 You forgave the offence of your people  
and covered all their sins.
- 3 You laid aside all your fury  
and turned from your wrathful indignation.
- 4 Restore us again, O God our Saviour,  
and let your anger cease from us.

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- 5 Will you be displeased with us for ever?  
Will you stretch out your wrath from one generation to another?
- 6 Will you not give us life again,  
that your people may rejoice in you?
- 7 Show us your mercy, O Lord,  
and grant us your salvation.
- 8 I will listen to what the Lord God will say,  
for he shall speak peace to his people and to the faithful,  
that they turn not again to folly.
- 9 Truly, his salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- 10 Mercy and truth are met together,  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other;
- 11 Truth shall spring up from the earth  
and righteousness look down from heaven.
- 12 The Lord will indeed give all that is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.
- 13 Righteousness shall go before him  
and direct his steps in the way.
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## **WEEK I**

### **The King and his kingdom**

#### **Collect for Week I**

Almighty God,  
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness  
and to 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 the living and the dead,  
we may rise to the life immortal;  
through him who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

*All*     **Amen**



## TUESDAY | DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Zechariah 9.9,10**

*Rejoice greatly, your king comes to you.*

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the war-horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall command peace to the nations;

his dominion shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

### **Reflection**

In Advent, we are invited to look beyond the commercial preparations for Christmas to the coming of Christ in his Incarnation and his coming again in glory, his final advent as judge at the end of time. As we look to his coming, Zechariah invites us to add to the great Advent themes of Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell the word 'Rejoice'. He reminds us to shout aloud in expectation that Christ comes for all people to the ends of the earth. So, in the midst of our practical preparations, let us also rejoice that our King comes!



## WEDNESDAY 2 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Jeremiah 23.5,6**

*I will raise up for David a righteous branch*

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

### **Reflection**

'The Lord is our righteousness'—we rejoice because our King is the one to bring us into a right relationship with God, he is the one to show us the way of holiness and purity, of wisdom and justice. We pray that through this season of preparation we may continually become the people who show the way of righteousness, that we may help others to prepare themselves for that day when our Lord comes, in his incarnation and at the end of time.

**THURSDAY 3 DECEMBER**  
**Francis Xavier, Apostle of the Indies**

**Bible Reading: Psalm 118.19–29**

*Open to me the gates of righteousness*

Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!

O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God,  
and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,  
up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

## Reflection

This was Luther's favourite Psalm. He said of it, 'This is my Psalm which I love— for truly it has deserved well of me many a time and has delivered me from many a sore affliction when neither the Emperor nor kings nor the wise nor the cunning nor the saints were able or willing to help me.'

As we look to the coming of Christ we give thanks that he answers our prayers, that he is our salvation and that he is with us when all around us seems to fail. We would do well to carry the final two verses of the psalm with us through this season and through life.

## FRIDAY 4 DECEMBER

### John of Damascus, Monk, Teacher of the faith; Nicholas Ferrar, Deacon, Founder of the Little Gidding Community

#### **Bible Reading: Isaiah 9.2,6,7**

*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.

For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and for evermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

#### **Reflection**

One definition of 'zeal' is of a tireless diligence or an enthusiastic devotion. Such was the way Isaiah wanted the people to see God; a God who pierces through our darkest moments with a great light that brings peace and justice. We think, today, of those who are experiencing darkness in all its forms; those who are victims of injustice and conflict. Isaiah reminds us that God brightens that darkness through the birth of a child. May we come to know that child afresh, and may our zeal; our enthusiasm, help others find the warmth of the light of the world.

## SATURDAY 5 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Isaiah 7.10–15**

*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son*

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.'

### **Reflection**

King Ahaz didn't have a great reputation, being described as weak and idolatrous. He undermined the spiritual and political foundations of the Kingdom of Judea, and they say that the sun only shone for two hours on the day of his funeral making them rush the ceremony! And yet God seeks out even Ahaz with one of the most important messages of God's revelation; the birth of a son; Immanuel—God with us. We might think we fail sometimes, either on purpose or through circumstance, but that doesn't stop God calling on us with the message that, even then, God is with us to help us 'choose the good'.



## **WEEK 2**

### **The Forerunner**

#### **Collect for Week 2**

Almighty God,  
purify our hearts and minds,  
that when your Son Jesus Christ comes again as  
judge and saviour  
we may be ready to receive him,  
who is our Lord and our God.

*All*     **Amen**

## MONDAY 7 DECEMBER

### Ambrose, Bishop, Teacher of the Faith

#### **Bible Reading: Exodus 3.1–6**

*The burning bush*

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

#### **Reflection**

As we celebrate the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary our thoughts leap ahead to her encounter with the angel. We read of Moses's encounter with God. Both Moses and Mary are chosen to prepare the way for the revelation of God's love. Both are curious. Moses decides 'I will go and see this strange sight.' Mary, when visited by the angel, asks, 'how can this be?' God does not mind our curiosity and uncertainty, for by being curious and questioning, we can confidently respond, as Moses and Mary did, 'Here I am.' What is God asking of you? How will you respond?

## TUESDAY 8 DECEMBER

### Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

#### **Bible Reading: Isaiah 40.1–11**

*A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord*

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;



lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
'Here is your God!'  
See, the Lord God comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.  
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.

### **Reflection**

Would that preparing the way of the Lord were easy! I once complained of aching legs after a hard climb. I would have relished the mountain to be laid low, but my daughter wisely declared, 'the harder the climb, the better the view'. Preparing the way of the Lord requires work: valleys raising up, paths straightening. But we must do it. We need to lift up our voices, to declare, 'Here is your God!' Does sharing your faith feel like a hard climb? Pause to think of the summit and marvel at the view; then ask for strength to continue.

## WEDNESDAY 9 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Isaiah 52.7–10**

*How beautiful on the mountains*

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'  
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,  
together they sing for joy;  
for in plain sight they see  
the return of the Lord to Zion.  
Break forth together into singing,  
you ruins of Jerusalem;  
for the Lord has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.  
The Lord has bared his holy arm  
before the eyes of all the nations;  
and all the ends of the earth shall see  
the salvation of our God.

### **Reflection**

My mother would be the first to say she had terrible feet—a far cry from the beautiful feet on the mountain pictured in our reading today. Instead she took comfort in the fact that feet that brought messages of hope and salvation were the most beautiful feet in the world. We are called to welcome the message, no matter what the state of the feet that brought it. Because the hope, love and salvation that comes through God's son is the best message there is.

Give thanks for the feet that brought you the message of God's love.

## THURSDAY 10 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Malachi 3.1–5**

*Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me*

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

### **Reflection**

Preparations for Christmas, or at the least the sale of Christmas items, seem to be getting earlier and earlier. Someone puzzled by a rather different form of preparation, the reference to God's 'refining' of us in this passage, asked a silversmith about this process. He explained how the impurities in the silver were removed and that you knew when the process was complete, when you can see your own image reflected in the silver. At this point the penny dropped, that God will 'refine' us until we reflect his image. How might God be seeking to refine you this Advent?

## FRIDAY 11 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Luke 1.5–25**

*The birth of John the Baptist is foretold*

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision

in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

### **Reflection**

We may be all too aware of the things we need to do to prepare for Christmas; maybe we already have a huge list. But what do we need to do to prepare for Christ? What's on that list? In preparing God's people for Jesus' coming, John the Baptist was called 'to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous'. So take some time to ask God: what are the relationships in our lives that we need to work on and what are the disobediences that we need to turn away from today?

## SATURDAY 12 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Philippians 4.4–7**

*The Lord is at hand*

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

### **Reflection**

Around our breakfast table this morning a misheard remark led to a somewhat surprising (and nonsensical) interjection into a conversation. At first glance, 'The Lord is near' is perhaps a surprising interjection by Paul into his own conversation! But it actually undergirds his arguments in two important ways. Firstly in seeing our situation, our struggle, our pain, in the light of eternity, that: Jesus 'will come again to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end'. And secondly, that he is always with us now. Listening to us, transforming us, renewing us. What does it mean that 'The Lord is near' you today?

## WEEK 3

### A vigil for prisoners and those who sit in darkness

#### Collect for Week 3

God for whom we watch and wait,  
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:  
give us courage to speak the truth,  
to hunger for justice,  
and to suffer for the cause of right,  
with Jesus Christ our Lord.

*All*     **Amen**

## MONDAY 14 DECEMBER

### John of the Cross, Poet, Teacher of the Faith

#### **Bible Reading: Isaiah 43.1–7**

*I have called you by name, you are mine*

But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

Because you are precious in my sight,

and honoured, and I love you,

I give people in return for you,

nations in exchange for your life.

Do not fear, for I am with you;

I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you;

I will say to the north, 'Give them up',

and to the south, 'Do not withhold;

bring my sons from far away

and my daughters from the end of the earth—

everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory,

whom I formed and made.'



## Reflection

Prisoners, of course, may be justly or unjustly imprisoned, and the prison may be stone and iron, or thought and deed. The prisoner may be caged in, longing simply to get out, or like those in exile, rather feel kept out and longing to get back in.

While governments must make heart-breaking judgements about prisoner exchange and hostage negotiation, balancing the bigger picture with the short-term concern—the needs of the many with the needs of the one—ultimately, we need not be afraid. The ransom will be paid, we will be redeemed.

## TUESDAY 15 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Psalm 107.1–3,10–16**

*When they cried to the Lord, he delivered them from their distress*

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,  
those he redeemed from trouble  
and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.

Some sat in darkness and in gloom,  
prisoners in misery and in irons,  
for they had rebelled against the words of God,  
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.  
Their hearts were bowed down with hard labour;  
they fell down, with no one to help.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress;  
he brought them out of darkness and gloom,  
and broke their bonds asunder.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
For he shatters the doors of bronze,  
and cuts in two the bars of iron.

### **Reflection**

What was longed for has come to pass! The Lord has saved as promised.

Just as we have cried to the Lord in our trouble, let us now proclaim what the Lord has done in equal measure. As we tell our stories of how God has saved us, we encourage those who still sit in darkness, and we encourage in ourselves a faith in the God who saves that will nourish us in our own times of darkness yet to come. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever.

## WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER

### **Bible Reading: Isaiah 61.1–3, 11**

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me*

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.  
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

### **Reflection**

Do actions speak louder than words? Perhaps we need both—to tell and to bring good news. Again we are confronted with the needs of the one and the needs of the many—which are easier to meet?

How do we feel about Jubilee when we are the ones who need to give up our riches? When abolishing child poverty requires us to pay more income tax? When our lonely neighbour would love to see us after we've had a long day at work?

We pray for the hungry—and the fed.

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## THURSDAY 17 DECEMBER O Sapientia Eglantyne Jebb, Social Reformer, Founder of 'Save the Children'

### **Bible Reading: Isaiah 42.5–9**

*Bring the prisoners out of darkness*

Thus says God, the Lord,  
    who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
    who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
    and spirit to those who walk in it:  
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
    I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
    a light to the nations,  
    to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
    from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
I am the Lord, that is my name;  
    my glory I give to no other,  
    nor my praise to idols.  
See, the former things have come to pass,  
    and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
    I tell you of them.

### **Reflection**

Some of us may remember as children, being told to mend our ways in order to set a good example to siblings or peers. Isaiah writes of Israel being promised that it will become the means by which God will become known in the world. Israel was not being directed to undertake missionary work so much as to behave as God wished people to live. We have been given good role models down the ages—and today in international agencies. Closer to home how do we address the needs of our neighbours? How might we learn to shine?

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## FRIDAY 18 DECEMBER    O Adonai

### Francis Close, Priest, Founder, Educationalist

#### **Bible Reading: Micah 4.1–5**

*They shall beat their swords into ploughshares*

In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples shall stream to it,

and many nations shall come and say:

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,

and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between many peoples,

and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;

they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,

and their spears into pruning-hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war any more;

but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,

and no one shall make them afraid;

for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

#### **Reflection**

Neville Chamberlain's promise of 'Peace for our time', made in 1938, lasted only a few months. And, down the ages, the greatly hoped-for peace has been consistently difficult to realize. Israel was given a prophetic ideal of peace founded on working the land. Soldiers were to be transformed as farmers, their swords becoming ploughshares. Universal peace could only happen if nations would acquiesce with God's instructions. And, down the ages, poets, politicians and scientists such as Albert Einstein have striven to remind us that 'Peace cannot be kept by force, it can only be achieved by understanding.'

## SATURDAY 19 DECEMBER O Radix Jesse

### **Bible Reading: Ephesians 2.11–22**

*He is our peace, who has made us one*

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

### **Reflection**

As we share ‘The Peace’, Sunday by Sunday, do we make a point of holding the hands of those we find it more difficult to understand or to like? Peace seems to be just about the most elusive aspiration to achieve in the world. Paul tells us that Jesus Christ has broken down hostilities and cultural barriers between Christians and Jews with a message of reconciliation. We have been given the model yet there is still much work to do. We each have a role to play in the creation of a ‘dwelling place for God’. How do we encourage and contribute to peace?

## WEEK 4

### Looking for the light

#### Collect for Week 4 up to 23 December

Eternal God,  
as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,  
so we wait for his coming in glory;  
bring us through the birth pangs of this present age  
to see, with her, our great salvation  
in Jesus Christ our Lord

All **Amen**

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## MONDAY 21 DECEMBER O Oriens

### Bible Reading: Genesis 1.1–5

*And God said: Let there be light*

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

### Reflection

Being afraid of the dark is the most well-known childhood fear. But perhaps it is something we never grow out of, something that echoes the deepest primeval anxieties of humankind. At the beginning of all things, there was only darkness. We still live in a world that seems to be full of the darkness of hatred, poverty and disease. But Advent is a time when hope springs eternal. Do not give into your fears—remember the Prologue of John's Gospel, reflecting the dawn of creation: 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.'

## TUESDAY 22 DECEMBER O Rex gentium

### **Bible Reading: Baruch 4.36 – 5.9**

*Look to the east*

Look towards the east, O Jerusalem,  
and see the joy that is coming to you from God.  
Look, your children are coming, whom you sent away;  
they are coming, gathered from east and west,  
at the word of the Holy One,  
rejoicing in the glory of God.

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,  
and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God.  
Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;  
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;  
for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven.  
For God will give you evermore the name,  
'Righteous Peace, Godly Glory'.

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;  
look towards the east,  
and see your children gathered from west and east  
at the word of the Holy One,  
rejoicing that God has remembered them.  
For they went out from you on foot,  
led away by their enemies;  
but God will bring them back to you,  
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.  
For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills  
be made low  
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,  
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.  
The woods and every fragrant tree  
have shaded Israel at God's command.  
For God will lead Israel with joy,  
in the light of his glory,  
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.



## Reflection

It is perhaps inevitable that during Advent our thoughts turn towards the Holy Land and towards Jerusalem, still a place where there is no lasting peace and where many still wear 'the garment of sorrow and affliction'. Baruch writes when many of the Jews are in exile in Babylon and the Chaldeans have just captured and burnt Jerusalem. Their hearts are breaking for their home. But God has not forgotten his people and promises that he will bring them home in glory. No matter what situation we find ourselves in, neither has God forgotten us. The Messiah is coming ...

## WEDNESDAY 23 DECEMBER O Emmanuel

### **Bible Reading: Thessalonians 5.1–11,23**

*You are not in darkness, for you are all children of light*

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.



## Reflection

We may be surrounded by a world still trapped in night, but we are already children of the daylight. God's new world has begun to break in through the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. We are already up with the dawn as the sun rises slowly on the whole world. The main defence that the children of light can use against the dark world is to put on the armour of faith, hope and love, and hold fast to the Gospel message, which contains all the comfort and strength we need. God is faithful!

## THURSDAY 24 DECEMBER

### Collect for Christmas Eve

Almighty God,  
as we prepare with joy  
to celebrate the gift of the Christ-child,  
embrace the earth with your glory  
and be for us a living hope  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

All **Amen**

### Bible Reading: John 3.16–21


*I am the light of the world*

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

### Reflection

God’s love is in the here and now. As we celebrate the birth of a man who came into the world some two thousand years ago, the words in the Gospel speak in the present, not the past tense. Jesus enlightens us with his teaching of how to be the people God wants us to be. It is work in progress—not consigned to the past or only of the future but happening in the here and now. Here is where we encounter God—in our daily life, our choices, our responses to others and our personal relationship with God. In that everyday life, just as we see things



illuminated by the light of the sun, so we see everything illuminated by the light of the risen Son, if we choose to look at life in the light of Christ. In that light, we see all too clearly the consequences of choosing darkness as the alternative. Be ever hopeful that God's light shines in even the darkest of places, revealed in the face of the Christ child and the reflection of that light in our own faces.