



12 December – 18 December 2021

### THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

It sounds strange to see, in the last verse of this Sunday's Gospel reading, the words "warnings" and "Good News" in the same sentence. For John the Baptist there was no contradiction between warning people about their injustice and proclaiming the Good News of the coming One. Preparing for God's coming was not just about having some nice feeling in the heart or agreeing with some theological ideas. Preparation for John was about changing every facet of life – attitudes, belief systems and behaviour. This remains true for us as we hear the Advent call to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ.

It is tragic that the season of preparation and incarnation has become one of the most unjust times in the human year. It is devastating that the time of "Good News" has become about consumption, materialism, and self-indulgence. If there is any preparation at all, it is in nice feelings of "goodwill" which may cause us to give a few coins to a beggar, or be nice to someone we would rather reject. But what Advent calls us to is a far more radical preparation of our hearts and lives. It calls us to become people for whom justice is a core value. It calls us to be people who have been captured and consumed by the principles and mission of God's Jubilee Dream – which is about economic equality, freedom, and caring for the earth. John the Baptist is the embodiment of this alternative way of living – humility, commitment to the poor, sacrifice, simplicity, challenging corruption, and integrity.

This week we will allow these values to challenge us to be true Advent people rather than just those who use the season as an excuse to pander to our addictions.

### SUNDAY 12 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Luke 3:7-18

**Reflect:** The people of John's day claimed that being children of Abraham gave them a special place in God's heart and plan. They believed that there was nothing more that they had to do to be in God's favour. But John confronted them very strongly, telling them that their ancestry meant nothing in God's Reign. What did count, according to John's preaching, was whether they lived as children of God. When they asked John what they were to do, he instructed them to treat one another with kindness, justice and generosity, refusing to extort, oppress, exploit, or abuse each other. But John was also clear that in order to live in this alternative way, people would need a power beyond themselves. And so he pointed to the coming of Jesus, who would "baptise" them with "the Holy Spirit and with fire".

Sometimes, as Christ-followers, we try to use our faith in the same way as the people who listened to John used their ancestry – as an excuse for elitism. Sometimes, we fall into the temptation of thinking that praying a "sinner's prayer" is all we need to do to be "saved". But the call of John (and of Jesus) remains – we are only really Christ-followers when our lives embody the principles and purposes of God's Reign – justice, simplicity, generosity and kindness.

How can you live out these values today?

**Do:** One of the best ways to release our tendency to think of ourselves as "different" or "better" than others is just to get to know those who are different from us in some way – age, race, gender, religion, sexuality. When we learn to welcome these "strangers" we discover that are all God's beloved children. Try it today.

**Pray:** Teach me to welcome all people with the same kindness and generosity you have shown me, Jesus.

### MONDAY 13 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Hebrews 13:7-17

**Reflect:** Today's reading is a wonderful complement to yesterday's. Where John the Baptist challenged people for thinking they were special because of their ancestry, the writer to the Hebrews speaks

about Jesus as the one who died "outside the city gates". In response, Christ-followers are challenged to go "outside the camp" to be with Jesus. Outside the camp, outside of the city, was the place where refuse was dumped, where the remains of animals were burned. It was not a place for respectable people. It was where the outcasts would be found. In calling us to an "outside" faith, the writer to the Hebrews is challenging us to give up our comfort, security and collaboration with the status quo – all the ways in which we are "in" with human systems of power, wealth and status. Rather, we are to live a "counter-cultural" life which embraces the outcast, does good to those in need, and stays true to the sacrificial, serving ways of God's Reign.

In the world in which most of us live, Christianity has become part of the establishment. It's easy for faith to become a way to success, power and wealth. It's easy to create closed communities in which we praise God with our lips but live according to the values of the world around us. But Advent calls us to a different way of living – a life "outside the city". The life of God's Reign is the life of loving the unlovable (even "enemies"), of serving the least, and of giving up our lives for the sake of others. It may not sound like Good News, but as millions of Christ-followers have found, this life "outside" is the way to abundant life. How can you try it for yourself today?

**Do:** Acts of service have always been central to Christian faith. Even in our worship gatherings we serve one another by serving tea, creating beautiful works of art or flower arrangements, welcoming one another, playing instruments, or washing up. We do these things in order to learn to live as loving servants every day. Who can you serve in Christ's name today?

**Pray:** Lead me "outside the city", Jesus, and teach me to serve as you have served me.

## TUESDAY 14 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Acts 28:23-31

**Reflect:** The book of Acts seems to finish without a real ending. The events leading up to these last verses include Paul's arrest, the journey to Rome – interrupted by a dramatic shipwreck – and Paul's house arrest. Tradition tells us that Paul was eventually executed,

but the Bible tells us nothing of his death. Rather, the writer of Acts ends with this story in order to show how Jesus' final words to his disciples had been fulfilled – the Gospel had been preached in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (as they knew it then). If this ending were to be depicted in a movie, we would see Paul continuing to preach boldly as the screen fades to black, the music crescendos and the final credits role. The point is that nothing – not even the power of Rome – was able to stop the spread of the Gospel.

The particular conversation that is described in the last verses of Acts is between Paul and the Jewish leaders of Rome. After presenting his argument that Jesus is the Messiah, he notes how some believe him, but others don't. Then he confronts them with words from the prophets – words that Jesus himself had used - that speak of the hardness of the hearts of God's people. Then, Paul proclaims that God's salvation has been offered to Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

The Advent season seeks to confront us in the same way. It challenges the hard places in our hearts and calls us to welcome those we would prefer to exclude. The question is whether we are willing to hear the message and be changed.

**Do:** Like Lent, Advent is a time of self-examination and repentance. The work of this season is to allow God's Spirit to reveal the hard places in our hearts – the anger, resentment, greed, exclusivity, apathy and legalism – and to turn away from these destructive ways to the grace and love of Christ. To do this work, we will need to practice confession regularly. Why not do it today?

**Pray:** Search me, O God, and soften my heart that I may be a witness to your grace and salvation.

## WEDNESDAY 15 DECEMBER 2021

**Read:** Isaiah 11:1-9

**Reflect:** Isaiah's vision has traditionally been applied to Jesus, although Isaiah would not have known anything beyond perhaps a shadow of the future fulfilment of his words. Once again, we hear the echo of God's promise to David that he would have an

everlasting dynasty. Once again, God's Messiah is revealed to be a bringer of peace and justice to the world. Once again, the power for this work is given to the Messiah through God's Spirit of wisdom, understanding, power, knowledge and reverence for God. These are all descriptions of the Messiah's work that appear throughout the Old Testament.

The beauty of the new world that Isaiah describes is that it comes into being through peace, proclamation (the breath of his mouth), and justice. And it includes all of creation, not just human beings. Once again, the ultimate purpose of God's salvation is revealed – to make the entire universe whole and one in Christ. The Advent season is as much about preparing our hearts to bring about this new world as it is about preparing for the person of Jesus. Jesus inaugurates this new world, but we are to live it out and spread its influence through the world. This is also what John was speaking about as he challenged the people on the banks of the Jordan.

Where does your heart need to be prepared to embrace this new world of justice and peace?

**Do:** Living as people of God's justice begins in our hearts. When we have confronted the injustice within our own hearts – the favouritism, elitism, judgementalism, materialism and consumerism that lead to destructive behaviour – then we can live in ways that increase justice and peace in our homes, communities and countries. One of the best ways to do this heart work is to pray for, and imagine, a world of justice and peace. Fill today with this kind of prayer.

**Pray:** For your Reign of peace and justice to fill my heart and the world I pray, O God.

#### **THURSDAY 16 DECEMBER 2021**

**Read:** Jeremiah 31:31-34

**Reflect:** These words from Jeremiah are some of the best known from the Old Testament. Writing to the exiles living in Babylon, Jeremiah seeks to offer them hope, reminding them that God has always promised restoration to those who suffer. The heart of this prophecy is the promise of the new covenant, written on the heart. It's a covenant of love, not law; a covenant of relationship with God,

not lifeless religious observance. As is often the case in Scripture, the prophet uses the metaphor of marriage and intimacy to describe God's longing for intimacy with God's people.

The New Testament essentially presents Jesus as the fulfilment of this prophecy. When Jesus speaks about a new commandment (John 13:34), and when he and Paul speak about the new covenant in his blood (Luke 20:22; 1 Corinthians 11:25) they both, most likely, have these words of Jeremiah in mind.

This Sunday – the last in Advent before the Christmas celebration – is all about this new covenant, and the one who is born into the world to bring it into being. The incarnation is not just about God becoming flesh. It's about the entire world becoming an incarnation – a dwelling for God, a body for the divine presence, a place in which God's grace and glory fill every corner. This is our hope, and it is the longing of God's heart.

How can you allow your life to be a small part of this glorious plan?

**Do:** When we face the suffering and evil in our world, it is easy to lose hope in God's dream. But, when we remember that even in suffering God is at work, and God's plan of salvation cannot be stopped, we can begin to recognise, and cooperate with, the Reign of God among us. One helpful practice that opens our eyes to God's restoring work is praise. In every situation today, good or bad, offer praise for God's dream of healing and peace.

**Pray:** For your new covenant of love and peace I praise you, O God.

#### **FRIDAY 17 DECEMBER 2021**

**Read:** Psalm 80:1-7

**Reflect:** A lot of the readings that connect with the Advent season originate in times of destruction and exile for God's people. This Psalm is no different. Many commentators believe this Psalm is a response to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom (called Israel after the kingdom divided under Solomon's sons). But, even so, it is a corporate lament that has relevance for any time of suffering and humiliation. The cry of this Psalm is for salvation and restoration. It acknowledges that only God is able to save God's people – and it pleads for God's glory to be displayed among God's people again.

It's interesting that many of the prophecies of God's coming Messiah originate in such times of suffering. When things were going well for God's people, it seems, they had no need to imagine a better world, even though their actions were bringing suffering and oppression on others. It was only when suffering came on the whole nation that God's people began to dream of a world of justice and peace. This Psalm is a case in point – the people who have suffered defeat, now plead for God's presence and salvation. Before their defeat, they were happy to ignore the warnings of the prophets and seek protection in wealth, power and human alliances.

The Advent season reminds us of these readings from the Old Testament in order keep us from making the same mistakes. Rather than try to do things in our strength and wisdom, Advent reminds us that we always need God's presence and salvation – even in the good times. Then this season calls us to the work of mindfulness and heart preparation in order to stay connected with God's presence and grace.

How can you practise mindfulness today?

**Do:** One of the ways the Advent season calls us to mindfulness is through the reading of Scripture. When we learn from those who have gone before us – both in joy and in suffering – we are able to stay aware and follow the call of God's Spirit more easily. Today, allow the Scriptures to heighten your awareness of God's presence and salvation.

**Pray:** As you display your glory around me, O God, teach me to stay alert and mindful of your presence.

## **SATURDAY 18 DECEMBER 2021**

**Read:** Luke 13:31-35

**Reflect:** Among the many things that stand out in the life of Jesus, two are highlighted in today's reading. The first is that Jesus spoke his harshest words against those who abused their power – especially those who pretended to be serving the people. King Herod Antipas was one of those people. His father (sometimes called Herod the Great) had tried to win the people over by expanding the Temple, but the Herods were all oppressive and

violent leaders. Whatever piety they may have displayed was simply an act. Like John before him, Jesus threatened the unjust rule of this Rome-appointed ruler, and so Herod wanted to destroy the Nazarene. But Jesus was unafraid, and publicly denounced Herod, calling him "that fox".

The second thing that stands out is how Jesus, in spite of the warnings of those around him, was determined to go to Jerusalem. He had no illusions about what would happen in the city – he knew he would die. But he also knew that the only way to establish God's Reign and bring salvation to the city he loved was to reject the self-protective power games of human systems and sacrifice his life. And so he grieved for the city that did not recognise the visitation of God in Christ, even as he went to his death for the city's sake.

The Advent season calls us to remember the sacrificial, loving character of God's Reign, and to make a different choice than those of Herod and Jerusalem. Where they rejected the Coming One, Advent calls us to receive Jesus and his mission into our own hearts and lives. This is not just about what we sing or pray. It's about the values around which we orient our lives. How can you centre your life around the values of Christ's Reign a little more today?

**Do:** The Advent season reminds us that our commitment to Christ is not just a once-off event. Rather, we need to make a decision to follow Jesus afresh every day. Some days this decision is much harder than others, but it is our commitment to the Reign of God that brings life to us and to our friends and neighbours. Today, renew your commitment to the coming Reign of God.

**Pray:** Today I say 'yes' again to the call of your Reign, Jesus.