



Clifton Parish Churches
Small Group Resources
Advent 2021

Some Background to Advent

We all know that Advent is the period leading up to Christmas, but did you know that it used to be 40 days long, mirroring the length of Lent? Like Lent, it is a season of fasting before a season of feasting and, like Lent, it is a season of preparation, but it's never had quite the same penitential character as Lent. Above all, it is a season of expectation, of watching and of waiting.

The central theme of Advent is of course one of preparation for Christ's coming. Traditionally, the first half of Advent was a time of preparation for Christ's second coming, and the second half of Advent was a time to prepare to tell again the story of Christ's first coming. Woven through the season was the theme of preparing for Christ's coming to us in the 'here and now' of our lives. Not for nothing is our prayer during Advent 'Maranatha' – O Lord, come!

Themes for study/reflection during Advent are several: the 'four last things' (death, judgement, heaven and hell) have traditionally been an Advent theme, in keeping with the theme of preparing for Christ's coming. The candles on the Advent wreath stand for hope, joy, love and peace; they are also known as the 'Prophecy Candle,' 'Bethlehem Candle,' 'Shepherd's Candle' and 'Angel's Candle' and these, too, may be taken as themes for the weeks of Advent. Otherwise, the themes might be given as 'the people of God' in week one, the Old

Testament Prophets in week two, John the Baptist in week three and Mary, Jesus' mother in week four.

This year, the lectionary readings will form the starting points for our themes.

My hope and prayer, as you work your way through this material over Advent, is that you may draw closer to the Christ whose coming we eagerly await.

Blessings always,

John

Week One – Preparing for the Second Coming

Readings

The lectionary readings for the First Sunday of Advent are:

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Thessalonians 3:9-end

Luke 21:25-36

You might like to read Luke 21:5-36, rather than just the verses given above. If you haven't the time (or inclination!) to read all four passages, just read Luke and Jeremiah.

You might also like to explore, as a group, different ways of saying the Psalm together; perhaps antiphonally (one half of the group reading the odd verses, the other half of the group reading the even verses), or taking it turns to read a verse each.

Luke's Apocalypse. An Unveiling...

The 21st chapter of Luke is of the literary genre known as 'apocalyptic.' There are several examples of apocalyptic literature in the Bible; the best known New Testament example being Revelation (it's other title, The Apocalypse of St. John, being a bit of a clue...) and the best known Old Testament example being the book of Daniel.

There is a danger that we get off on the wrong foot with apocalyptic literature though. In common parlance (certainly in English), 'apocalypse' has come to mean 'the end of the world.' But the Greek word 'apokalupsis' is translated into Latin as 'revelare' and the English translation is 'to reveal' or 'to unveil.' So an apocalypse is 'that which is unveiling' the truth of how things really are, and pointing towards how things will one day be. Apocalyptic writing tends to follow a fairly set formula involving weird visions and cryptic symbolism. It's not meant to be taken literally and it's not the same as prophecy!

Apocalyptic literature begins to appear after the Babylonian exile (6th century BC) and becomes popular around the time of Christ. It is generally written to people who are living through turbulent or difficult times – persecution, war etc. It is written to the persecuted people to show them that their current tribulations are not the final chapter of the story; nor are those who are

oppressing them the ones who are ultimately in charge of the universe, though it may well feel that way. When read by those in comparative safety and comfort, it can make little sense, or even cause discomfort and confusion. But, if we find that that's the case for us today, we must remember that it wasn't, in the first instance, written for us.

That said, given the last 20 or so months, a style of writing that reveals to us that our present situation isn't the final chapter of the story might be seen to be a source of encouragement. In the midst of all that the last two years (almost!) have held, we can hold on to the truth that God is here with us; indeed, at this time of year we remember especially that God took on the life of humanity in order to be able to truly journey with us through the depths of our darkest times and we reaffirm our belief that, in Christ, God will make all things new.

You might find the Bible Project video on Apocalyptic literature a helpful watch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNDX4tUdj1Y>

Some Questions

- 1) Having read the passages from Jeremiah and Luke, share your initial reactions to them. What theme/s do you see linking the passages?
- 2) Advent is a season of preparation and of waiting, but it's easy to feel like 'Christmas' begins immediately after Bonfire Night and ends at teatime on December 25th. It can be a busy, frenetic, fraught time for many. How can we carve out time to pause, to prepare and to watch and wait for the coming of Christ this year?
- 3) Apocalyptic literature can be confusing, unnerving, even frightening. What has been your experience of reading/hearing Biblical Apocalyptic literature (possibly chiefly the book of Revelation)? Have you found value in it? If so, what value has it held for you?
- 4) Do you find reading Luke 21 as Apocalyptic literature alters the way that you think of it? In what way?
- 5) 'Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell' might not seem like cheery subjects for reflection as Advent begins. How might reflecting on these things be a helpful way to spend the early part of Advent?
- 6) The first candle on the Advent wreath is known as the 'candle of hope.' Where do you see the need for hope in our world today? How can you (as an individual/as a small group) help to bring hope where it is needed this Advent? Is there some concrete action that you (as an individual or as a group) can commit to in the coming year?