

## Advent materials

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With thanks to all contributors and organisations mentioned herein.

### Introduction

Advent is the start of the Christian Year. It is a time when we look forward with happiness and joy to the birth of Jesus, son of God, who will bring light into a world of darkness, freedom for the captive and justice for all peoples. If there was ever a time when the world needed such a message of hope, it is surely now as people around the globe continue to struggle with the ongoing Covid-19 crisis and the aftermath of a pandemic.



This resource aims to help individuals, families or small groups to reflect on different aspects of the Advent season and consider how we can celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world and into our daily lives at a time when our realities have looked so different from what we are used to.

This resource has five different sections which cover the four weeks of Advent: **Hope, Peace, Joy, Love**, and then on Christmas Day itself, **Christ**. Each part offers a Bible reading, reflection, prayer and activity to help you on your Advent journey.

In the Bible, one place where we find people who experience similar things to us, ask similar questions and express similar hopes, is the book of Psalms. The Psalms are songs of praise to God, written in ways which express raw, hard emotions, both positive and negative, in creative ways. As such, each section of this resource looks at a different Psalm from Year B of the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) (pattern of Bible readings taking us through the year) for each week of Advent.

A tradition of Advent is the lighting of Advent candles to mark each of the four passing weeks of Advent, culminating in the lighting of the final candle on Christmas Day to represent Jesus, light of the world. You may wish to place five candles in a safe prominent space in your home or where your group meets to light during your reflections.

Please share stories of your Advent celebrations with us by emailing [wtw@urc.org.uk](mailto:wtw@urc.org.uk). You can also call us on 020 7520 2718, or message us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#). We'd love to hear from you!



## Week one – hope

### Reading – Psalm 80:1-7

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a  
flock.  
You who sit enthroned between  
the cherubim,  
shine forth before Ephraim,  
Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Awaken your might;  
come and save us.  
Restore us, O God;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.  
How long, Lord God Almighty,  
will your anger smoulder  
against the prayers of your  
people?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears;  
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.  
You have made us an object of derision to our neighbours,  
and our enemies mock us.  
Restore us, God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.



### Reflection

As the first candle of Advent is lit, we consider the hope which Jesus brings into the world. Throughout the year, people of differing religions and cultures enjoy different ways of thinking about hope. For Jews, Hanukkah marks the rededication of the second temple, a key moment of hope in a festival of light. For Hindus, Diwali, the festival of light, celebrates and focusses on all that overcomes darkness, evil and suffering. For Muslims, Eid al-fitr marks the end of a month of fasting (Ramadan) with a celebration of all God's blessings to us. These celebrations of hope are needed in our world where many people face desperate situations.

Throughout the Bible, there are many people who face similar experiences of uncertainty, fear and suffering, including the author of Psalm 80. This psalm is clearly a cry of despair, as the psalmist shares the anguish of their suffering with God. They could very easily have been writing during a pandemic, as it says in verse five "you have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful".

It is also, however, a psalm which looks forward in hope, and puts trust in God, asking: "Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved." Things may not always work out as we expect, we might end up in places where we do not want to be, or struggle to find a way out of. We can always trust, however, that no matter how bleak things may seem God is always with us and will never abandon us.

As we wait for the coming of Christ, we do so expectantly. It is not simply that we hope Christ is coming. Christ *is* the hope that we *know* is coming. Whatever our circumstances, let us approach this season with joy, waiting for the hope that is on its way to us.

## **Prayer**

Come Lord, your wounded world is yearning  
for you to come again.

Come Lord, your weary world is crying out  
for you to lift us up

out of our despair, our hunger,  
our thirst for something better,  
our need for the food that will last.

Come Lord, come again,  
we need to begin again.

*(Attributed with thanks to Sue Allerton/[CAFOD](#))*

## **Activity**

As Advent begins, we have an opportunity to share with God everything that's on our hearts and minds as we prepare for the coming of Jesus into the world.

If you were writing your own psalm, what would you include?

What would you want to say to God about the situation you face right now?

What frustrations would you express?

What fears would you share?

What does the coming of Christ into the world mean to you?

What help do you need from God?

Have a go at writing your own psalm, either on your own or with help. It doesn't need to have a particular form, pattern or rhyme, but it should be an honest expression of what you'd like to say, good and bad, to God at this time.

If you know someone with musical skills, why not ask them for help in writing a tune for your psalm?

## Week two – peace

### Reading – Psalm 85:1-2 and 8-13

You, Lord, showed favour to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.

I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants— but let them not turn to folly. Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.



Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.

Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.

### Reflection

As the second candle of Advent is lit, we consider the peace which God offers but also calls us to maintain in the world around us as we await the coming of Jesus.

Although peace is a strong tie which binds different groups from various backgrounds, creeds, and opinions firmly together, it can also be undeniably fragile. It takes a lot of hard work to unite different groups, especially when people disagree or hold grudges. It takes even more commitment to keep people united, getting to know each other more closely as they grow and develop together. As we wait for Jesus' arrival at Christmas, now is an ideal time to begin that process of unity, working towards a lasting peace.

It is inspiring to read in Psalm 85, "I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants". The psalmist knows that they can trust in the promise which God has made.

However, they also know that we all have our part to play in living out these promises, in order that they may come to pass, for 'surely, his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land'. No matter how much we may pray for it, peace is not going to be delivered to us on a plate. What has been given freely, however, is the gift of Jesus, and, in our acceptance of him, the ability to live in ways which see "love and faithfulness meet together" and see "faithfulness spring forth from the earth".

We know the risen, living Jesus and that the power of the Holy Spirit is with us every day as we seek to live the life of Jesus today. "Our land will yield its harvest," but only when we are able, through God, to plant the seeds of unity and peace. "Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps." How can we sow the seeds of unity and peace, in the name of Jesus, where we are?

## Prayer

God of Salvation,  
Wake us up Lord!  
The night is nearly over.  
Let us begin our Advent journey.  
Move us from our lives  
Of greed and selfishness,  
From our globalised world  
Of inequality and exploitation,  
To your kingdom  
Of righteousness and mercy.  
To a transformed world,  
Where peace is built on understanding not weapons,  
The poor are empowered to live their lives to the full,  
Businesses are built on need not greed  
And your Creation is nurtured not abused.  
Wake us up Lord!  
Let us live as people of the light.  
Amen.  
*(Attributed with thanks to Sue Cooper/[CAFOD](#))*

## Activity

Revd Susan Durber, Minister of Taunton URC and Faith and Order Moderator for the World Council of Churches, invites Christians to take a 'pilgrimage where you live'. (See [Walking the Way summer materials for 2020](#), page 5)

Why not take this pilgrimage with friends or members of your household or church group?

As you travel around your local area, either physically or virtually, consider the struggles and challenges people in your community might be facing at this time of year. Perhaps some are feeling isolated or disconnected. Some will be facing financial hardship as costs mount up and uncertainty about employment grows. Some will be facing physical and mental health concerns which cause them great suffering, disruption and pain.

In this world, it is us whom God calls to be a living presence of peace and hope. Consider how you might shine the light of God's peace in your area this Advent. Is there someone feeling lonely you could call or visit? Could you donate to a local foodbank or work with people in your church to set up a collection centre? Are there organisations or charities in the local area you could support to help those facing particular difficulties?

## Week three - joy

### Reading – Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.



Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

### Reflection

As the third candle of Advent is lit, we consider the joy which the coming of Jesus signals for all humanity, even, and especially, in times of darkness and uncertainty.

During the Covid-19 crisis, questions arose about how we might ‘save Christmas’ during physical distancing requirements, local lockdowns, possible transport restrictions and increasing worries about the economy. Many people yearned for the things they missed, such as big parties, gatherings in church buildings, family events and singing carols together. As Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, it is not us that need to save Christmas in order that it might be joyful, but rather the joy of Christmas which can save us!

When Psalm 126 speaks of the fortunes of Zion being restored, mouths full of laughter and tongues with songs of joy, the Psalmist is referring to the rewards of the very long and arduous journey which the people of Israel undertook in the Old Testament, a journey which led them to places of pain and suffering, uncertainty and fear. However, it was also a journey which shaped them and helped them to focus on what really matters as they found fresh, creative ways of responding to God’s will in difficult circumstances.

This week, we remember another arduous journey, that of Mary and Joseph as they travelled to Bethlehem to register as part of the nationwide census, while with Mary heavily pregnant with Jesus. As if the distance weren’t enough of a challenge, we know that, upon arrival, they couldn’t find anywhere to stay and then, after giving birth to Jesus, Mary, her husband, and new-born baby, had to flee for their lives as King Herod sought to kill the child.

Looking back on these journeys, we know that, through God, the outcome was better than anyone could ever have imagined. For even when we feel lost, isolated, restless, fearful, or uncertain of what’s happening or where we’re heading, God is always with us guiding us ever towards a future of hope, peace and joy. As we continue to prepare for Jesus’ arrival, we can join with the Psalmist and ask “Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev” that we, too might know the wisdom and blessing which God seeks to reveal to us, even in this time of darkness.

## Prayer

With expectant waiting  
we anticipate your coming.

Come close to us, Lord,  
come very close.

Come, Alpha and Omega,  
who is from before the ages.  
Come, Son of Joseph and Son of Mary,  
who went down to Nazareth to be obedient to them.

Come, Morning Star,  
who named the stars.  
Come, carpenter from Nazareth.  
who knows the smell of planed wood.

Come, Beloved Son of God,  
who knows the heart of God.  
Come, Son of Man,  
who knows the hearts of God's people.

Come, Lord of Life and Prince of Peace.  
Come, Dayspring and Rising Sun.  
Come, Wonderful Counsellor.  
Come Immanuel, God with us;  
God very close to us.

Amen.

*(Attributed with thanks to Ged Johnson/[CAFOD](#))*

## Activity

Might you organise an Advent gathering with friends, family, or people in your local church and community to give a sense of unity and joy? What about an online Zoom event?

People might play games together, engage in quiz activities, or just enjoy some yuletide cheer.

How might you organise your event? What creative things might you include? How will you ensure that it is accessible and safe for as many people as possible? Check out this [Pudding Party](#) online for inspiration.



## Week four - love

### Reading – Psalm 89:1-4 and 19-26

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. You said:

I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.

Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said:

I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have raised up a young man from among the people. I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him. The enemy will not get the better of him; the wicked will not oppress him. I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries.

My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted. I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers. He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Saviour.'

### Reflection

As the fourth candle is lit, we consider the love which God sends us through the coming of Jesus into the world.

An old saying tells us that God does not call the equipped, but rather equips the called. Ever true to form, God has a habit of calling people who seem unsuited for the task which has been set.

In Psalm 89, we read of David, known ultimately as a powerful king loyal to the values and ways of God, but perhaps best known for slaying the giant warrior Goliath when he was called in his younger days as a harp-playing shepherd boy to face this behemoth of an enemy. Why would God choose a young, inexperienced child to carry out this massive task, instead of an older, more experienced warrior?

God does it again, of course, in Jesus, whose arrival we await with growing anticipation. Jesus comes onto the world, not as a grown adult ready to face the challenges of life with wisdom and fervour, but as the child of a working-class carpenter family, where the man of the family is not actually his father, and is forced immediately following his birth into exile as a refugee, fleeing for his life against King Herod. Again, why would God do such a thing?

If we ever wanted a sign of God's love for us, it is surely in the person of Jesus. For, in Jesus, we have Immanuel, meaning 'God with us', not as a king or a warrior, but as a human being, just like us, facing the same joys and challenges of life which we face on a daily basis. As one popular Christmas carol puts it, 'For he is our childhood's pattern, day by day like us he grew. He was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles, like us, he knew'.

In calling young, inexperienced people to do great things, God shows that, no matter who we are, regardless of our background or abilities, we are loved, just as we are, and called to be part of building God's vision of peace, justice and love for all.

As we wait for these last few days before Christmas we can join with the psalmist and say: "I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself."



## Prayer

Expectant God,

The heavens can no longer hold your abundant love,  
So, you pour out the gift of your embodied self  
Relinquishing the beauty of your majesty,  
To adorn the pale colours of our humanity.  
Choosing to enter into this world in a place of scarcity and need.

Reveal to us this hidden world  
of poverty,  
of refugees,  
of suffering.  
As you choose this as the place of your birth  
Let us choose this to be the place of our rebirth.

Rebuild us,  
Transform us,  
Make us anew.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord,  
Amen.

*(Attributed with thanks to Kieran O'Brien/[CAFOD](#))*

## Activity

Gifts are often given at Christmastime as a sign of our care for others and a reminder that we are thinking about them.

Who, in your community, needs to feel God's love right now? Who is lonely? Who is tired? Who is struggling? Is there a gift you could offer them which might be useful to them at this time? Could you cook a meal to deliver to someone living alone? Could you make some cards for your neighbours to wish them a Merry Christmas? Could you 'pay it forward' when you next buy a coffee so that someone who can't afford one can enjoy a drink? Could you donate to a local charity supporting homeless people over the winter?

These may seem like simple acts of kindness, but they can make a huge difference to people who need to know that they are loved by God, and those around them.

Rosie from the charity [Stewardship](#) has some suggestions:  
<https://youtu.be/RJsUvYjkVxM>

The [URC Shop](#) has some items for Christmas which make good gifts.



# Christmas Day

## Reading – Psalm 96

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.

For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.

Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns." The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

## Reflection

Do you feel like singing Happy Birthday Jesus? Why not sing for joy as we celebrate his birth?!

As Psalm 96 reminds us, the promises of God are not just for Christmas, but for the whole of our lives. It opens with unmoderated words of praise, ascribing all glory and honour to God, not because God is an autocratic ruler who demands our attention, but because God will 'judge the peoples with equity.'

Every year, the commercialisation of Christmas seems to increase relentlessly and millions of pounds worth of excess food and presents are purchased. In the midst of all this, it is easy to forget the true meaning of this festival, a meaning that everyone can take hope and joy from.

It is out of love that God came to this earth, in the form of Jesus, to live and breathe as we do. God is not a distant dictator with little interest in our wellbeing. When we experience joy and excitement, God is there with us. When we experience sadness and suffering, God is there with us.

We might not know what the coming year will hold, but we can be sure that God will be with us, supporting us as we deal with all of life's challenges. No wonder the Psalmist says: "Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day."

With that in mind, may you, and all you love, have a very Merry Christmas.

## Prayer

All of us are the work of your hands.

From the earth we were moulded in your image,  
fragile and dependent upon you.

Made perfect, we sin against you,  
but you respond always with forgiveness.

Out of love, you prepared us for the coming of Christ.  
Your own image was moulded from the same clay.

You came into our lives,  
and talked about forgiving one another.

You sat among those who were down and out,  
healing the sick and the lame.

You shared our joys and sorrows,  
teaching us about loving our neighbour.

We are your clay, remaining fragile yet hopeful.  
Shape us in this season of Advent in readiness for the Word made flesh.

Through the grace of hope we pledge ourselves to confront injustice.  
And we pray for the peace that only Christ can bring to our broken world.  
Amen.

*(Attributed with thanks to Tony Singleton/[CAFOD](#))*

## Activity

A staple tradition of Christmas Day is eating together. We traditionally sit round the table with those closest to us to enjoy a special meal of particular foods, enjoying each other's company and the general sense of joy which the day brings.

Not everyone, however, is able to enjoy this. Some have no-one to dine with. Others are unable to travel to see their loved ones. Some find themselves in hospital or care homes, away from those closest to their hearts.

Is there someone in your community who is alone at this time who you could invite to your Christmas meal? What might you help your church organise for people who are isolated at this important time of celebration?