



## Reflections & Prayers for the Second Sunday before Advent

15 November 2020



### Introduction

We're preparing for Advent, and the passages the lectionary gives us to reflect upon on these Sundays before Advent are full of foreboding and warning. It is possible to reject the love of God, and so to reject your own life. It is possible to live in such a way that you do not recognise Life when it stands in front of you. But it doesn't have to be like that. Paul wants us to "keep awake" because "we belong to the day", to "put on the breastplate of faith and love" and "encourage one another and build up each other."

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## Readings for this Sunday

These are this week's readings which you may like to look up in your Bibles at home and read.

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalm 90:1-12

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

### **Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-18:**

Be silent before the Lord GOD!

For the day of the LORD is at hand;  
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,  
he has consecrated his guests.

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,  
and I will punish the people  
who rest complacently on their dregs,  
those who say in their hearts,  
"The LORD will not do good,  
nor will he do harm."

Their wealth shall be plundered,  
and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses,  
they shall not inhabit them;

though they plant vineyards,  
they shall not drink wine from them.

### **The Great Day of the LORD**

The great day of the LORD is near,  
near and hastening fast;  
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,  
the warrior cries aloud there.  
That day will be a day of wrath,  
a day of distress and anguish,  
a day of ruin and devastation,  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness,  
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry  
against the fortified cities  
and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring such distress upon people  
that they shall walk like the blind;  
because they have sinned against the LORD,  
their blood shall be poured out like dust,  
and their flesh like dung.  
Neither their silver nor their gold  
will be able to save them  
on the day of the LORD's wrath;  
in the fire of his passion  
the whole earth shall be consumed;  
for a full, a terrible end  
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

### **1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11:**

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 labor 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 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.

### **Matthew 25: 14-30:**

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent

from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

### *Reflection from Anne Edwards*

These Sundays before Advent are regarded by the Church as the time when we're preparing to be prepared: we're getting ready to get ready, and this is quite a sombre business. It's a time when we look back – remembering all that God has done in the past, and we take time to look forward, anticipating all that God has promised to do in the future. Are we prepared? Do we take time to look at where we are – resolving to deepen the quality of our Christian faith and life in the present?

The mood this year is very different from what it was last year. In fact eleven months ago we'd barely heard of Coronavirus. Zephaniah described a people characterized by the word 'complacent'. They believed they had a good life because it was materially comfortable. They were well housed and well fed, and they believed they could keep God at a safe distance. That's probably where we were this time last year. Had we, as a society, slid into complacency – until suddenly with the arrival of Covid-10 the world was in turmoil. We've already had one lockdown, and are now in another. We don't know how long this time of pandemic will last, what it will mean tomorrow, next week, next year.

Zephaniah, just three pages, squeezed between Habakkuk and Haggai, is almost at the end of the Old Testament. I wonder how many of us have actually read his book. It's a book of almost unrelieved gloom, but we'd do well to remember that he made his witness in the early years of the reign of King Josiah, when the religious and social conditions of Judah had reached their lowest ebb. Zephaniah refers to 'the Day of the Lord'. If you'd lived then you'd have expected that the Day of the Lord would be a terrible day – a day in which one world was shattered and another was born. A day when the world as it had been would come to an end.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul also refers to the Day of the Lord, and he infers that it will come like a thief in the night, like the labour pains of a pregnant woman, both coming without warning. Paul insists that the Christian need not be caught unawares.

Now, nearly 2000 years later, we know that this day wasn't just around the corner as they thought then; but that doesn't mean it's not just around the corner for us. This season of Advent then is a time when the Church gives us space to review our past, to look at how we are living our lives in the present, and to do everything we can to encourage one another and build one another up – as Paul puts it – in anticipation of what is to come.

The heart of the parable from Matthew's Gospel today is "what does the king expect from his servants?" Separated into two categories, faithful and unfaithful, faithful is linked to fruitfulness. The two faithful servants transformed privilege and opportunity into action, resulting in further service and greater responsibility. The third servant is called unfaithful because he risked nothing, resulting in the loss of further opportunity. Perhaps apathy got the better of him, and he took the soft option.

As we approach Advent, we are encouraged to review our inner lives. Jesus warns us that that which is seen is like the flowers of the field – it fades, it vanishes – but our inner lives go with us into eternity. We've discovered this year that life as we know it is fragile and transient. There are no guarantees for tomorrow. This moment is all we can be sure of, so let us live it to the full, and to the glory of God. This involves a daily consecration of our lives to God, encompassing the use of our time (no doubt very different for some of us in this time of Covid-19), our gifts, our finances, our planning and decisions.

There's a lot in both Old and New Testaments about what comes next. And a lot of what came next was the result of the way the people of the time actually lived their lives. We know now that the way we and others have been living our lives has had a devastating effect on the earth, its land, seas and atmosphere.

These Sundays before advent are in some ways like the lists we make as we prepare for Christmas: lists of presents to buy or make, of food to buy for the menus we're planning, the cakes and puddings to be cooked, lists of cards to be sent. Perhaps we can liken Advent itself as the next step – when we write and post the cards, buy and wrap the presents, make the cakes and puddings – all of it leading to Christmas Day. However, the Day being written about by the prophets, the apostles, and talked about by Jesus is “the Day of the Lord”, the day that will come without warning. Our readings today are a reminder that we are encouraged to active Christian living, and there is much we can do to prepare for this Day.

A writer in a Christian magazine described it like this: “Towards the start of each winter I try to review my walk with Jesus. Just as I consider the harvest of vegetables from my little garden plot before I order fresh seed for the year ahead – so I weigh up the state of my soul.” He went on: “I tried a new variety of beetroot this year – it tasted good. I also tried out a new Bible reading aid.”

Maybe our journey in Christ has ground to a halt like a broken down car, or our spiritual life may be slowly but surely losing air like a slow puncture. We all need a spiritual MOT from time to time, and Advent and Lent are two specific times in the Church's year when we're encouraged to review our Christian lives, our life with Jesus and knowledge of God's Word, our times of prayer. But do we take that time and space to care for our souls? To feed our souls? In today's climate we have to guard against spiritual carelessness and apathy.

I would encourage you to spend some time comparing how much preparation goes into say Christmas Day, a wedding day, and then how much time we might give to prepare ourselves for the Day of the Lord, with a determination to do all that we can to deepen the quality of our faith. God's grace is multi-faceted, and just as each and everyone of us is unique and our stories and journeys are unique also, so God's grace is unique for each of us.

The Christian journey is never one we embark on alone. We step into a family of faith that extends around the world and across the centuries, and while the steps we take and the progress we make may be unique to us, we are surrounded by the wisdom and experience of others who have gone before us or are travelling alongside us. There are amazing resources at our disposal if only we would take advantage of them. Amen.

## Prayers

Lord, teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart (Psalm 90 v. 12)

Let us pray to the Lord:

Lord, the day is cold

Warm it with your presence.

The way is dark

Lighten it with your grace.

Our eyes are blind

Open them that we may see your glory.

Our ears are deaf

Help us to recognize your voice.

Our hearts are empty

Fill them with your love.

Our minds are fearful

Strengthen them with your hope.

Our lives are sinful

Guide us in your way.

Lord, we are yours

Be with us evermore. Amen.

Heavenly Father, as we face a second season of Lockdown, this time going into the darkness of winter, we pray for all those who are fearful, anxious, for themselves, for their loved ones. Help us to remember all we have experienced of your love in the past and to trust you for that love today and in the future; to remember that Jesus invites us to cast our cares on him knowing that he promised to be with us until the end of the age.



We pray for all those seeking ways to keep us safe from both the virus and damage to the economy, that they may have wisdom in their decision-making. We pray for our National Health Service and those working in our hospitals, in the laboratories seeking ways to cure and protect us from the effects of Covid-19, and for us doing our best to play our part in protecting our families, neighbours and friends.

We pray for the world, especially its troubled parts, for the USA in this post-election period where feelings are high, and those countries where there is discord, war, natural disaster. For the refugee camps and those who have had to flee from their homes. Help us to find ways of living lovingly together.

We pray for the Church, for our Archbishops, Bishops and the ministry team at St John's. We continue to pray for Berkeley for healing of body, mind and soul – we miss his presence with us, Lord. And now as we are unable to worship together in church, we pray for one another, especially those who are finding their way tedious, lonely, who don't know which way to turn, what to do for the best.

Our hearts are filled with thanksgiving as we realise again the extraordinary extent of your love for us, and that we can come to you through Jesus with our requests in prayer,

Merciful Father

**Accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.**

### Parish Prayers for the week ahead

#### **In the Anglican cycle of prayer:**

Sunday	The Church of Ceylon
Monday	Sabongidda-Ora (Nigeria); Dublin & Glendalough (Ireland)
Tuesday	Saldanha Bay (Southern Africa); Duk (South Sudan)
Wednesday	Salisbury (England); Dunedin (Aotearoa NZ & Polynesia)
Thursday	Sambalpur (North India); Dunkwa-on-Offin (West Africa); Durgapur (North India)

Friday San Diego (The Episcopal Church); Durham (England)  
Saturday San Joaquin (The Episcopal Church); Dutse (Nigeria); Kyoto (Japan)

**In our Diocesan Cycle of Prayer:**

Sunday Parish of Knebworth (Deanery of Stevenage)  
Monday Parish of Stevenage, All Saints, Pin Green (Deanery of Stevenage)  
Tuesday Parish of Stevenage, Holy Trinity (Deanery of Stevenage)  
Wednesday Parish of Stevenage, St Andrew and St George (Deanery of Stevenage)  
Thursday Parish of Stevenage, St Hugh and St John, Chells (Deanery of Stevenage)  
Friday Parish of Stevenage, St Mary, Shephall (Deanery of Stevenage)  
Saturday Parish of Stevenage, St Nicholas (Deanery of Stevenage)

**For the homes and families in:**

Sunday Cross Lane, Dark Lane  
Monday The Deerings, Dellcroft Way  
Tuesday Dickinsons Field, East Common  
Wednesday Eastcote Drive, Eastmoor Park  
Thursday Ennis Close, Fairmead Avenue  
Friday Fairway Close, Field Close  
Saturday Fovant Close, Gordon's Walk

**The Sick:**

Berkeley, Emily, Amy Smart, Claire, Jo, Sue, Christine Strohm, Hermione, Karen, Sue Holt, Enid Giles, Jo Young and all whose names are entered on our St Luke's Cell Prayer List.

**For the recently deceased:**

Shambu Mitra

### **On their year's mind:**

Donald Kenward, Aline Hopper, Freda Kestell, Richard Bowler, Joan Brown, Joan Pease, Jean Daborn, Bert Cooper, Janet Gander, Phyllis Edmunds, Bill Eden, Heather Gray, Ellen Warren, Freda Jowers.

### **A Month of Prayer for the Nation:**

We are being encouraged to pray daily for a specific area of national concern during this month of lockdown wherever we are, culminating in a collective moment of prayer at 6pm each evening with cathedrals and churches across the country to ring a bell at this time. Christians are encouraged to follow a simple seven-day prayer cycle for a specific area each day. These can be found at [churchofengland.org/PrayerForTheNation](http://churchofengland.org/PrayerForTheNation). If you can't go online, then I suggest that just before 6pm each evening you light a candle – a reminder that Jesus is the Light of the World – and pause bringing to God in prayer whatever you think our Nation needs most on that day. There is something special about knowing that we, Christians, are all together in praying for our Nation at the same time every day. Please make every effort to join in.

### **A reminder... of this phone service:**

**Daily Hope** – dial 0800 804 8044 for prayer, reflection, music and worship services from the Church of England. A weekly service is available from 9 am every Sunday.