

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Advent Hymns and Carols 1



Tuesday 1st December – Saturday 12th December

[Introduction](#)

Over the Advent and Christmas season we will look at various hymns and carols associated with this time of year and reflect on them and the Biblical stories they relate to. We hope that, in these strange times, a feast of music will help lift our spirits.

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Tuesday 1st December - The Advent Responsory

The Rev'd Dr Gillian Poucher, Minister of Gainsborough United Reformed Church

The Advent Responsory often marks the start of Advent Carol services and comes from the Magnificat and Matins; it reminds us that Advent is intended to be a time of preparation and repentance. We remember Christ's coming in glory as both judge and saviour.

St Matthew 25: 31-33, 41-46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

The Advent Responsory

You can hear the Responsory here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3p9z1uCFLY>

V: I look from afar:

R: And lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth.

V: Go ye out to meet him and say:

R: Tell us, art thou he that should come to reign over thy people Israel?

V: High and low, rich and poor, One with another,

R: Go ye out to meet him and say:

V: Hear, O thou shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a sheep.

R: Tell us, art thou he that should come?

V: Stir up thy strength, O Lord, and come

R: To reign over thy people Israel.

V: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.

R: I look from afar: and lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth.

V: Go ye out to meet him and say:

R: Tell us, art thou he that should come to reign over thy people Israel?

Reflection

As Protestants within the Reformed tradition, we claim to adhere to the Pauline/Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone. The understanding of saving faith as complete reliance on God's grace revealed in the crucified and risen Jesus is foundational to us.

But gift brings demand. In this passage, the Matthean Jesus steers us firmly away from the danger of embracing the concept of 'cheap grace,' of thinking 'once saved, always saved', as a licence to pursuing our own selfish ways. The vision of Jesus returning in glory to enact judgement confronts us with the overwhelming requirement that we are to make a positive response to the good news of the gospel, if we hope to secure a place in the kingdom.

This positive response involves our active engagement with the vulnerable: giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the imprisoned, and caring for the sick. The accursed 'goats' have failed in these responsibilities towards the vulnerable. Their sins are sins of omission, rather than commission. We hear their bewilderment, imagine their terror, as they ask, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

Tragically for them, ignorance is no excuse, as the one coming to reign identifies with 'the least' in all their need and vulnerability.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, protector of the weak and friend of the friendless,
provider to the needy and healer of the sick,
prick our consciences and stir our compassion
to notice you among the vulnerable,
to seek you among the suffering,
and to respond with hearts overflowing with your love,
in the hope of your coming among us again. Amen.

scary, untamed, dangerous things of our actual "experience". Songs of Innocence and Experience.

John introduces Jesus as "the lamb of God". Perhaps in their "innocence" the people imagined a God who had fashioned a salvation for them that would bring warm, fuzzy feelings of woolly tenderness; a gentle, meek, non-threatening salve for the ills of the world – a lamb.

Maybe, being fanciful for a moment, John's portrayal of John the Baptist is from the "Songs of Innocence". Matthew's portrayal is from the "Songs of Experience" – he speaks of axes wielded and tree roots chopped, unquenchable fire, winnowing forks and chaff – much more like the scary tyger.

Blake intended the truth to be in the whole rather than the part. The book of revelation pictures Jesus as the "Lion of Judah", this would work better if it said "tiger of Judah" – but it's close enough! Jesus is both lamb and tyger, both tame and wild, both winsome and terrifying, and absolutely real and present to us in gentle fields and dark forests. Thanks be to God.

Prayer

Lamb of God whose gentle spirit would not break the bruised reed;
Lamb of God who lovingly took the Gethsemane cup;
Lamb of God who forgave his torturers from a cruel cross;
have mercy on us.

Tyger of God who roamed the shadows of the desert;
Tyger of God who dazzled on the mount of transfiguration;
Tyger of God who roared at injustice and smashed temple tables;
have mercy on us.

such birth befits the God of all.
2 Begotten of no human will,
but of the Spirit, thou art still

the Word of God, in flesh arrayed,
the Saviour, now to us displayed.

is the true path to a dawn of peace. Amen.

3 From God the Father he proceeds,
to God the Father back he speeds,
runs out his course to death & hell,
returns on God's high throne to
dwell.

5 Thy cradle here shall glitter bright,
& darkness glow with new-born light,
no more shall night extinguish day,
where love's bright beams their
power display.

4 O equal to thy Father, thou!
Gird on thy fleshly mantle now,
the weakness of our mortal state
with deathless might invigorate.

6 O Jesu, virgin-born, to thee
eternal praise and glory be,
whom with the Father we adore
and Holy Spirit, evermore. Amen.

Reflection

What a difference between two consecutive chapters. In chapter eight Isaiah warns of God's punishment in that He would send the dreaded Assyrian army that God would send to destroy Jerusalem as a punishment for disobedience to God's will. In chapter nine, we see a very different picture. In this chapter God offers a message of hope. There would be a new King in Jerusalem, a King who would bring joy, a move from sadness to joy, from oppression to freedom, from war to peace. Was this in its original form referring to the birth or coronation of king Hezekiah, son of the ineffective king Ahab?

No doubt over the next few weeks churches and Christian fellowships will celebrate the season of Advent with a service of nine lessons and carols. In such a service one of the earlier scripture readings would be today's reading. We are again reminded of verse six of this passage in one of the more famous choruses in Handel's oratorio 'Messiah'. In this passage we see God meeting human need by introducing a human agent to meet human need whether it was Hezekiah who stabilized the political state of Israel in the Old Testament context and Jesus who brought love and hope

Saturday 12th December - The Lamb

The Rev'd Phil Nevard, Minister of Kingsteignton URC and Synod Odd Job man.

William Blake plays with the image of Christ the Lamb in his children's poem yet the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God, so often used in our Communion liturgies, is rather more sacrificial.

St John 1: 29-37

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.' The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

The Lamb
William Blake

You can hear this sung here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXc7p-Qt6K0>

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee₁

understanding of how the sun works.

The sun, for us, is vital. It is the light generated by the sun which allows life to exist as we know it on earth. It is the visible light which allows some of us to see our way around. It is light which drives photosynthesis generating plant life which liberates the oxygen we need. It is the warmth of the sunlight which makes conditions on earth conducive to life, even in the darkest night.

Little by little we begin to understand more and more of God's creation. It is no accident that we equate enlightenment with understanding. We talk of seeing the light when a puzzle is solved. We consider an enlightened attitude to be one free of prejudices where social justice is central.

Little by little we seek to understand the mind of Christ: to let his light shine in the dark.

We seek enlightenment through our reading and study of Scripture, in our prayer life and in our interactions with others. Yet we realise that there is so much more to understand. We might echo the words of Pastor John Robinson "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word." (Congregational Praise 230)

Prayer

Born in the night, coming in need,
help us discern the needs of your children
as we stumble through a benighted world.
Clear shining light of the world,
help us to bring enlightenment where there is ignorance,
dispelling darkness and exposing corruption.

Truth of our life, prove it is true,
help us to speak truth to power that justice for all

in both the New Testament times and subsequent generations of all backgrounds.

Prayer

Saviour of the world, open our hearts and minds to the joys and expectations of Advent. Help and guide us, despite all the pressures of the present age to think only of the material element of this season to turn our thoughts and energy to proclaiming what Advent and Christmas is really about. We ask this in our Saviour's name. Amen

[Thursday 3rd December - Christus Vincit](#)

The Rev'd Viv Henderson is Minister of Minehead URC & a mental health chaplain with Elysium Healthcare in Wellington

This plainsong hymn comes from 8th Century France and reminded people of the Kingship of Christ in the face of the kingship of earthly sovereigns. Sung at coronations it might have been a wee bit subversive.

Revelation 11: 15 - 18

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,

'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Messiah,
and he will reign for ever and ever.'

Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God, singing,

'We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.

The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants,[b] the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.'

Christus Vincit

You can hear Christus Vincit here
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JIBNGunMrs

Christ conquers,
Christ is King,
Christ is the Lord.

O Christ hear us,
to the Holy Church of God, uniting
souls across the divisions of the nations: perpetual peace!

Christ conquers....

Reflection

When we worship we join with the hosts of heaven - the elders seated in God's presence are moved to prostrate themselves to acknowledge God's power and authority as the time of judgment arrives
We may flinch at the military sounding language. However the strong holy leadership of God is meant to be reflected in human leadership.

In this year, we have been reminded that what affects one, affects us all.

We have seen how good it is when:

and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

Born in the Night

Geoffrey Ainger © 1964 Stainer & Bell

You can hear the song here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG6xfTtu9dc>

Born in the night, Mary's Child,
a long way from your home;
coming in need, Mary's Child,
born in a borrowed room.

Truth of our life, Mary's Child,
you tell us God is good;
prove it is true, Mary's Child,
go to your cross of wood.

Clear shining light, Mary's Child,
your face lights up our way;
light of the world, Mary's Child,
dawn on our darkened day.

Hope of the world, Mary's Child,
you're coming soon to reign;
Savior of all, Mary's Child,
walk in our streets again.

Reflection

So they've discovered "campfires" on the sun. Not real campfires of course, but mini solar flares. Solar flares have been known about for 160 years, but these "campfires" were only seen recently when the UK-built Solar Orbiter satellite flew near the sun. Because of the Covid-19 crisis, the various instruments on board the satellite could not be commissioned in the usual high-tech control room but from peoples' bedrooms—in the case of the UK principal investigator, his son's nursery! Scientists have always had to improvise in their voyages of discovery in search of light and truth.

Understanding how these campfires work will give a much better

that being loved, and being loving
is the way you would have us be,
till the whole world unites in your praise. Amen

Friday 11th December - Born in the Night

The Rev'd Ron Reid is a retired minister in the Mersey Synod serving as Link Minister at Rock Chapel, Farndon. He is a member at Upton-by-Chester URC

This is one of the few carols that is addressed to Jesus; the deceptive lullaby tune lulls us into a sense of nostalgia but the words remind us of the price Jesus paid for his ministry.

Isaiah 59: 20 - 60:5

And he will come to Zion as Redeemer,
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord.

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord, from now on and for ever....

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,²⁸

- international cooperation in medical research has hastened vaccine research & development;
- where we have glimpsed the possibility to live simpler and more fruitful lives;
- when we have been reminded of the preciousness of life and relationships;
- when we realised a little more the need for perpetual peace.

We long for wrong to be punished, for faith to be vindicated and rewarded. Blue skies and birdsong have brought greater understanding of the effect we have on our beautiful planet.

The song of the elders reminds us of the Judgement that awaits those who mistreat it.

“What shall we do to hasten the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be full of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea”

We can join our prayers with the hosts of heaven and work to bring about peace, unity and shalom. In so doing we align ourselves with the purposes of God.

Prayer

May all I say and all I think
be in harmony with thee,
God within me,
God beyond me,
maker of the trees. Amen.

- Chinook prayer, Pacific Northwest Coast, North America
<http://www.worldhealingprayers.com/2.html>

Friday 4th December - Lo He Comes With Clouds Descending

The Rev'd Sue Cossey, NSM and Synod Pastoral Advisor, Bristol and member of Zion United Church, Frampton Cotterell

In the popular mind Advent is about preparing for Christmas but we're also called to prepare for the Second Coming of our Lord. Wesley's great hymn reminds us of this.

Revelation 1: 3 - 8

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Lo He Comes With Clouds Descending
Charles Wesley

Lo! he comes with clouds descending, Alleluia! Alleluia!
once for favored sinners slain; God appears on earth to reign.
thousand, thousand Ev'ry eye shall now behold him,
saints attending robed in dreadful majesty;
swell the triumph of his train. 10 those who set at naught & sold him,

Eleanor Farjeon's lovely carol illustrates Isaiah's directions, urging us to 'look east', towards our faith's beginnings, and of course the sun's dawning. Thereafter, the natural world is encouraged to heed the epiphany that brings light, love and fruitfulness into being. Each stanza finishes with the invitation to the singer(s) to know that love, in all its myriad forms, is about to embrace us. The final stanza envisages God's own messengers, the angels, delivering the joyous message of Christ's advent.

For Isaiah, God's advent brings with it the assurance of salvation for Israel. Here, there is no mention of war or the spoils of war. Rather, 'the nations', attracted by the splendour of God's glory appearing, stream into Israel, and, along with her diaspora, enrich her beyond all measure. This prophetic vision is a peaceful, joyous one where adoration rather than might rules.

God appearing in radiant glory occurs a number of times in Isaiah, often in times of Israel's distress. These visions are rooted in the belief that God will bring salvation to his people. Christians have set this reading from Isaiah 60 firmly in history, associating the divine epiphany with the coming of Christ.

As we read Isaiah's oracle during the season of Christmas, we are reminded that God's promised salvation is for us too. In the coming of Christ, 'Love, the Lord, is on the way'. The welcome we offer him, whatever our circumstances, allows hope and confidence to flood into our lives. May it ever be so.

Prayer

Gracious God, come to our troubled world,
and into our anxious lives,
reminding us that the light of life Jesus Christ is your gift to us.
In his coming, your unconditional love for us is made known for all time.
May this dawn upon us time and again:

You can hear the carol here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vwel-dILSAY>

People, look east. The time is near
Of the crowning of the year.

Make your house fair
as you are able,

Trim the hearth and set the table.

People, look east and sing today:

Love, the guest, is on the way.

2. Furrows, be glad.

Though earth is bare,

One more seed is planted there:

Give up your strength

the seed to nourish,

That in course the flower

may flourish.

People, look east and sing today:

Love, the rose, is on the way.

5. Angels, announce with shouts of mirth

Christ who brings new life to earth.

Set every peak and valley humming

With the word, the Lord is coming.

People, look east and sing today:

Love, the Lord, is on the way.

Reflection

Hear the dramatic bass solo from Handel's Messiah which uses this Isaiah text; and listen to the antiphon 'O radiant dawn' (based on Isaiah 9), set to music by James McMillan. Both capture a growing rapture at the dawning of the divine presence.

pierced, and nailed him to the tree, shall the true Messiah see.
deeply wailing, deeply wailing,

3 Ev'ry island, sea, and mountain,
heav'n and earth, shall flee away;

all who hate him must, confounded,
hear the trump proclaim the day:

Come to judgment!

Come to judgment!

Come to judgment, come away!

4 Now Redemption, long expected,
see in solemn pomp appear!

All his saints, by folk rejected,
now shall meet him in the air.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

See the day of God appear!

5 Yea, amen! let all adore thee, high on thine eternal throne;

Saviour, take the pow'r and glory, claim the kingdom for thine own.

O come quickly, O come quickly; alleluia! come, Lord, come.

Reflection

So often, we spend the time of Advent looking back – back to the time before Jesus was born – we want to hurry towards Christmas as we hear the stories of Mary and Elizabeth and their babies, and to sing the Christmas songs and carols before the season of Christmas starts (but then stop singing them before the season ends!)

Advent, however, is not just about the past and remembering what happened. While we need to remember the past and learn from it, we also need to look forward to the future, and remember that God is always doing new things.

So, we need to keep Advent properly – a period of preparation. Preparation for Christmas, in the sense of remembering the amazing gift of God's only Son, rather than the need to cook, shop and write cards. But also preparation for the time when Jesus will come again – in a way that no-one will be able to ignore.

Charles Wesley's hymn pictures that future day of judgement described

in Revelation. A day that some might fear: 'deeply wailing'. A day that others wish would come: 'O come quickly'.

At my school, this hymn was always sung at the last assembly of the autumn term (though there was also a carol concert). It reminds us that Advent is not just a taster for Christmas, but part of a long discipleship journey through life, so that we might confidently feel we belong to the group wishing the day would come quickly, knowing that God loves each of us as a special child.

This Advent, we may look back 2000 years, but let us also remember to look forward and allow God to do something new in our lives and in our churches.

Prayer

Father God, you are always making things new for us, looking forward rather than back. Help us not to get stuck looking back to the past, but forward to the new future you want for us. Amen

Saturday 5th December - Wait for the Lord

Walt Johnson, Ordinand at Northern College and Member at Wilbraham St Ninian's URC in Chorlton, Manchester

The Taizé Community in France was founded by Reformed pastor Roger Schutz who had helped Jews escape over the border into Switzerland during the war. It is an ecumenical community working with the young in particular with distinctive worship based on simple chants. Today's song takes up the Advent theme of waiting.

1 Thessalonians 5:4-11

But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light¹² and children of the day; we are not

and to wait with steadfast patience, sure in the hope of yet more glorious days to come. Through Jesus Christ your Son, our Saviour. Amen

Thursday 10th December People Look East

The Rev'd John A Young, retired minister National Synod of Scotland, member Giffnock URC

Eleanor Farjeon is best remembered for Morning has Broken. She wrote this Advent carol based on a passage in Baruck (5:5-7) where the people were told to look to the East to see the people gathered in by the Lord. A committed Christian, Farjeon used the carol to remind us to look to Christ who comes to redeem us.

Isaiah 60: 1-5

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

People Look East

Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965) © David Higham Assoc. Ltd.

Reflection

We all of us live in tension between the harsh realities of our lives and the final unveiling of God's purposes. It is an intensely peculiar experience. And Paul captures it to a tee.

He starts by setting our lives in the context of creation as a whole. The whole of creation, which includes all sub-human life, is groaning in frustration. It is not able to fulfil the purpose of its existence. It was created to glorify God, but is unable to do so fully so long as we human beings fail to play our part. Human beings were created to be stewards of creation but we have used and abused it for our own purposes.

Creation can, however, be set free. That painful state of affairs will yet have a good outcome. As in childbirth, the labour may be long, but the turmoil and anguish that surrounds it will ultimately be productive.

As Christians we also groan. We too have still to be liberated. But in all the frustrations and suffering of the present, we have been given the Spirit as a foretaste and pledge of the glory that is to come. We know that we have already been saved through Christ, but we know too that we still have to wait to enjoy that salvation to the full. And so we wait eagerly, not just in resigned suffering, or in anguished groaning, but in steadfast hope. And in that hope, we wait in patience.

Prayer

Ever living and ever loving God,
we thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit,
And for the fulness of your glory revealed in Jesus Christ.
Give us grace to be bold in standing for what is right,
to endure whatever suffering comes our way,

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.

Song

Wait for the Lord, His day is near.
Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart.

© Les Ateliers and Presses de Taizé

You can hear the chant here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7GexlvX8HU>

Reflection

Some 30 years ago, while I was a university student, I made two visits to Taizé which had a profound influence on my walk with Christ.

In Brother Roger's own words, it is "a community where kindness of heart and simplicity would be at the centre of everything." We readily understand the notion of "kindness of heart", but how about "simplicity"?

Simplicity manifests itself in Taizé not only in the food, accommodation and facilities, but mostly linguistically.

Taizé's guests usually stay for a week, so there is a constant change in the mix of languages. There is no default or 'langue de préférence'. This means that in services, Bible-studies, and group discussions, songs are short, few in words, and readings just one or two verses.

If you are familiar with the practice of lectio divina, you will recognise similar elements in the Taizé style of worship and Bible study. And, as in any monastic tradition, in Taizé, silence is an important part of the common life with 10-15 minutes of silence in every service.

Today's chant from Taizé has its roots in Psalm 27:14. The Psalm expresses longing for God in the many different aspects of life.

If you have ever had a pet dog, you will know how quickly they eat their dinner, but if you give them a bone, they will spend many happy hours gnawing it. For me, this is a metaphor which reflects the time-commitment, simplicity and joy to be found in waiting for the Lord.

When we read the great stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, we learn that God's purpose is worked out in years, decades and generations.

In our modern times, we seldom need to wait and have grown impatient. We tend to fill every moment with activity, even in our church services. Have we stopped waiting for the Lord?

Prayer

Loving God,
forgive us for not waiting for You:
when we speak to You, and we do not wait to listen to You;
when we ask You in prayer, and we do not wait to hear Your answer;
when we fill our lives with noise, and we do not wait for You in the silence;
This Advent, help us to wait for You, to keep watch and to take heart.
Amen.

Sunday 6th December - St Nicholas
Dorothy Courtis, Lay Preacher, Thurso URC

Romans 8: 18-25

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in[a] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Earth Was Waiting
Walter C Smith b1824

You can hear the hymn sung here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41MxW28eA3E>

EARTH was waiting,
spent and restless,
with a mingled hope and fear;
and the faithful few were sighing,
"Surely, Lord, the day is near;
The desire of all the nations,
It is time He should appear."

2: Then the spirit of the Highest
On a virgin meek came down,
And He burdened her with blessing,
And He pained her with renown;
For she bare the Lord's Anointed
For His cross and for His crown.

3: Earth for Him had groaned and travailed,
Since the ages first began;
For in Him was hid the secret
That through all the ages ran—
Son of Mary, Son of David,
Son of God, and Son of Man.

Jesus said later: 'I go and prepare a place for you' (John 14:2) which is what the servants were doing for their master, ready for his arrival.

Another role reversal.

Will you be 'dressed and ready for action' when the call comes, or will you be stumbling in the dark?

Prayer

God of Reversals

who turned 'I prepare a place for you'
from the preparation of the servants,
to the master,

when the light goes on
and it blazes bright in the night,
may we be prepared,
dressed and ready for action.

Holy and blessed Three,
glorious Trinity,
Wisdom, love, Might,
boundless as ocean's tide
rolling in fullest pride,
through the world, far and wide.,
let there be light.

[Wednesday 9th December - Earth was Waiting Spent and Restless](#)

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member of Macclesfield and Bollington URC.

This year our nations, with the rest of the world, had a stark lesson in waiting - having to wait indoors, waiting for the pandemic to pass, waiting for infection rates to fall. Advent is about waiting, something we find difficult.

Across Europe St Nicholas' Day is celebrated today. Interestingly his cult was observed in England in the medieval era but fell into disuse. St Nicolas' name Santa Claus has become linked with Fr Christmas in the popular mind, yet he was a bishop charged with the oversight of God's people.

I Timothy 3: 1-7

The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

You can hear Graham Kendrick singing this hymn here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5-DQmhKPY4>

God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform:

He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

3 Ye fearful saints,
fresh courage take;

The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

2 Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,

He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

4 Judge not the Lord by feeble
sense,

But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence

He hides a smiling face.

5 His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour:
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

6 Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own Interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

Reflection

We expect a lot from our leaders. Whether ministers, moderators, elders, or whatever office they may hold, expectations are way above anything that may be written down in a job description. And I doubt that Paul's list of requirements for a church leader would get past any Human Resources department!

With candidates few and far between and a shortage of volunteers, it may be tempting to just grab whatever we can get without looking too closely, but too often we may find ourselves in the ecclesiastical version of 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure!' And that on both sides!

At a recent safeguarding refresher course offered to a varying mix of organisations, I was shocked at the number of people who had experienced what was termed 'pastoral abuse'. Although one of the worse forms of abuse is sexual abuse, the people who spoke to me talked of bullying, a general lack of a servant-heart replaced by a more hard-edged business management style that brooked no opposition.

Clearly there can be problems. In some cases, where abuse is not dealt with, congregations simply drift away. In others, there are painful splits and the bitterness can persist for decades. At the end of the day, maybe we need to remember that it is Christ's church, not ours or the minister's or moderator's. We are all merely workers in the vineyard with a responsibility for one another and to our Lord. He has decided in his

Wisdom, love, might;
Boundless as ocean's tide,
Rolling in fullest pride,
you can hear the hymn here

Through the world far and wide,
Let there be light!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNfR3r1WuEY>

St Luke 12: 35-38

'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.'

Reflection

Those living 75 years ago when the end of war was declared (VE Day) have experience of what living in darkness was like - having your clothes laid out in case the air raid siren sounded and you had to get dressed in the dark and make your way to the nearest shelter. May 8th 1945 changed all that. No wonder people headed into the streets to celebrate. Jesus warns 'the little flock' to be ready for action when the master returns. It's no-good lying-in bed, even if you've laid your clothes out for the morning. (Do you do that in these dark mornings?) You fumble for the light switch; 'Let there be light', but not too much or you're blinded. You mustn't be stumbling round trying to put your pants on in the middle of the night 'when he comes and knocks'.

The servants are ready and they are blessed because they didn't nod off during the night. Here we have a reversal of the master/servant relationship. (Downton Abbey theme music has just started playing on the radio). Who knew God moves in mysterious ways?

and the call of your sudden grace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Tuesday 8th December - Thou Whose Almighty Word](#)

The Rev'd Andrew Royal Minister: Maidstone & Staplehurst URC's

In the northern hemisphere Advent is a dark time of the year and can often be dark emotionally as we remember those no longer with us. Our hymn, written by John Marriott, plays with the idea of light - ironic since he died at a young age from a degenerative condition meaning he experienced the encircling gloom of illness. The author, John Marriott, based his poem on Genesis 1:3 And God said 'Let there be light' and there was light'. He never saw his words published or set to music as a hymn, but they were quoted, 6 weeks after he died, by Thomas Mortimer when addressing a meeting of the London Missionary Society in Great Queen Street Chapel, London in 1825. In the last 120 years there has been no Protestant hymn book which has failed to include it (From the companions to Congregational Praise and Rejoice and Sing)

Thou Whose Almighty Word
John Marriott (1780-1825)

Lord, your almighty Word
Chaos and darkness heard,
And took their flight;
Hear us, we humbly pray,
And where the gospel day
Sheds not its glorious ray,
Let there be light!

2 Saviour, you came to give
Those who in darkness live
Healing and sight,
Health to the sick in mind,
Sight to the inly blind,

Now to all humankind
Let there be light!

3 Spirit of truth and love,
Life giving, holy dove,
Speed forth your flight!
Move on the water's face
Bearing the lamp of grace,
And in earth's darkest place
Let there be light!

4 Holy and blessed three,
20 Glorious Trinity,

strange and mysterious wisdom to work through fallible folk like us and we need to take our problems to him for sorting out.

For those of you who have perfect loving congregations and absolutely no problems, you are blessed indeed! Long may it continue!

Prayer

Lord, who chose to entrust your Gospel to the weak and foolish of the earth, give us humility to serve you and your people with humble hearts, ever-remembering that it is your church, not ours. Lead us forward in everything we do in your name in such a way that it honours you and extends your kingdom, not ours. Amen

[Monday 7th December This is the Record of John](#)

The Revd Michael Hopkins, Minister of a group of Methodist and United Reformed Churches based around Farnham, Surrey, and Clerk of the URC General Assembly.

Today's reading is set as a canticle for morning prayer meaning Zechariah's prophecy over John the Baptist became known in the Church. John the Baptist went ahead of Jesus to prepare the way, Orlando Gibbon's anthem shows John's conflict with the authorities.

St Luke 8: 68-79

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

This is the Record of John
Orlando Gibbons

You can hear This is the Record of John sung here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9pE5vrgBHQ>

This is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not, and said plainly, I am not the Christ.

And they asked him, What art thou then? Art thou Elias? And he said, I am not. Art thou that Prophet? And he answered, No.

Then said they unto him, What art thou? that we may give an answer unto them that sent us. What say'st thou of thyself? And he said, I am the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord. John 1 vv. 19–23

Reflection

'Making straight the way of the Lord' sounds good, good, but is actually difficult. I was first alerted to this in a sermon by Susan Durber, and the

thoughts in this reflection are entirely hers.

The metaphor of straight as good and crooked as bad is well grounded in our subconscious and our language. We talk of being straightforward and straight talking, and about crooks and bending the truth. It's little wonder that John the Baptist wanted to prepare a straight path for God. But did God really intend the fells of Cumbria, the Brecon Beacons, and the highlands of Scotland to become flat and uniform? Can it be that God actually wanted to destroy what God had created? Perhaps the straightest way isn't always the best. The hero in the story is always straight and square-shouldered, whereas the villain is a misshapen ogre. The dragon curls and writhes, while George stands straight and tall.

It isn't true that people with twisted bodies are less good than those with more perfect bodies. Humans don't come in straight lines. We can't be pressed into shapes we don't have. Souls don't easily conform to set measurements. Teardrops can only be curved, and so can smiles.

Life, if not always success, lies not in straight lines, but along a circuitous route. It is easy for us to think that we have to be perfect, to do everything right, well and on time. It feels like we'll never smooth out the bumps in life. It's true that we won't. We won't make the road of our life perfectly straight, but the good news is that we don't have to. Because even though people weren't yet ready, even though the wilderness was as messy as ever, even though there was as much struggle, selfishness, fighting and hunger as there had ever been, God doesn't wait for everything to be ready before God can come - God comes anyway.

Prayer

God of the wilderness way,
whose Word scours our evasions:
take us on the narrow, winding, path
to the centre of our world
with a cry of invitation