



WAITING ON THE LIGHT

Praying with the Psalms through Advent

Introduction

Advent has its particular emphasis on preparation, getting ready, longing for and making room. The meaning is in the waiting. Arriving has its own significance, and the two should not be confused.

The life of every Christian should be, and is, a continual Advent. Until the day of Christ's coming - either to re-enter this world with more splendour than we can imagine, or to take us to his world (more splendid still) - we are limited to, and gifted with lives of waiting.

This Advent, we are encouraged to wait by studying and reflecting upon the Psalms. The Psalms are the prayers and praises of people who started waiting long before we did; and they contain a vocabulary given by heaven to help both them and us. As the world spins, there is not a moment that passes in which the words of the psalms, in any number of languages, are not being sung. The whole world is waiting.

The Psalms are tried-and-true help to us as our souls wait afresh for the birth of our Lord at Christmas.

In this guide (which will appear weekly), one verse from a given psalm is presented for each day in Advent. Some of you may find it helpful to read all of the given psalm as part of your Advent devotions.

At the end of each daily meditation, a short prayer is provided.

Week 1

The First Sunday of Advent

'Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.' *Ps 33. 20, 21*

Psalm 33 is a call to praise and worship. God's unwavering qualities of creative power, just rule and loyal love are reason enough to shout for joy, as the psalmist says. Still, there are hints in the psalm that all is not sweetness and light. There is a suggestion that war may be at hand, and with it the possibility of famine and death. It seems unlikely that the psalmist would write about hoping in God's deliverance unless there was some need of it. 'Our soul waits for the Lord...Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name' (verses 20, 21). These are the words of people who sing to God, even while they look for help; people who rejoice, even while they wait.

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (Jn 1. 14). With these words, the gospel of John describes the supremely extraordinary appearance of God's glory coming to fill all the earth: the incarnation of his only Son, Jesus Christ. The fire of God's love was ignited in the womb of a Virgin, and there kindled a flame intended to enlighten the hearts of all people.

A cry of rejoicing is certainly a fitting response, even as we wait for that fire to come again. If we need a new visitation from the Almighty, and if we look for a fresh appearance of his love during this Advent, Psalm 33 reminds us that our hearts can (and must) rejoice, even as our souls wait.

Prayer

Lord, re-tune my heart; to the angels' key, and not my own.
Correct its tones, adjust its pitches, change its temperament.
While I wait, re-tune my heart again, Lord,
so that my heart song today may be new.
Amen.

Monday of Advent 1

'May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.'
Ps 67. 1

Psalm 67 is a prayer of blessing that sees the blessing of God as the very source of life and health, without which there is no prosperity or peace. A rich tone of thanksgiving is prevalent throughout the psalm, and this probably explains why it was used at the great autumn Feast of Sukkot, or Tabernacles.

The Feast celebrated the ingathering of the harvest, the annual sign of God's blessing in the fruitfulness of the fields. The Feast was also a reminder of the Israelites' sojourn in the wilderness, during which God made the people of Israel dwell in booths, or *sukkot*, temporary huts built of branches and leafy boughs, as they made their way from one camp to another on their trek from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Together with a spirit of celebration, therefore, the brief verses of Psalm 67 confess a sense of utter dependence of the people of Israel (and indeed of all the nations and the earth) on the favourable presence of God.

In his rule for the monastic community, St Benedict prescribed Psalm 67 to be sung every morning at daybreak, the rising sun being an apt image for the radiant and life-giving face of God.

Today, let us ask the Lord to shine his face upon us and to bless us with the warmth of his presence, so that we can reflect that blessing to others. A prayer for God's blessing is never contingent upon dire circumstances, illness, or misfortune. It is appropriate to every day of our lives, for every day of life given to us as an act of God's mercy and favour.

Prayer

Father, today I look to you for your blessing.
My life is in your hands; may those hands hold me close and keep me.
I also pray your blessing upon all those who are dear to me.
And for your blessing I offer my thanks.
Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 1

'For he will speak peace to his people to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.' *Ps 85. 8*

In reading Psalm 85, one has the distinct impression that something is amiss in the land. Is it a drought or some natural disaster? Is it the threat of defeat at the hand of the enemy? All we know for sure is that something has gone desperately wrong, behind which the psalmist sees the hand of God's divine judgement. The psalmist's appeal in verse 4 is simple and fervent: 'Restore us again, O God of our salvation.'

In the opening verses of this psalm, the writer looks back upon the multiple evidences of God's faithfulness and love. God has already been gracious in delivering the land from captivity; he has shown his mercy in forgiving the people; the land has already known a peace that comes from the providential care of the Lord.

As he rehearses this historical account of the nation's prosperity, it is as if the psalmist is *reminding* the Lord of how good he has already been to his people.

The thought of 'reminding' God of anything seems, at first glance, presumptuous. Who needs (or dares) to remind the Creator of all time and space of what he has already done in days past? Yet, does not this kind of address to God indicate a depth of intimacy between the psalmist and his God, a depth of honesty and trust? Beyond its use as a poetic device, reminding God of the good things of the past is a way of opening ourselves to God's future.

In the end, of course, by 'reminding' God of his goodness, the psalmist is, in fact, 'counting his blessings' in the presence of the one from whom all blessings flow. It is we, in fact, who need the 'reminding', so that in our need we can make our prayer with hope. Recalling the undeniable acts of God's love in our lives is part of what allows us to offer him our genuine complaints. We can take our cue from the psalmist who, having reached out for help, then sits back to wait and listen for the answer.

The psalmist writes as someone who knows that eventually the answer will be given, and the word of peace will come. A whole storehouse of God's answers is being gathered, always ready to be drawn upon as reminders, whenever the next need arises and the next cry for help must be made.

Prayer

Lord, I have known the liberating power of your love.

You have come to me again and again in my distress.

Today, I recount again some of those times when you restored me.

Even as I call upon you, I thank you.

Amen.

Wednesday of Advent 1

'Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.' Ps 107. 6

Psalm 107, which opens the fifth and final 'book' of the Psalter, is considered to be an 'historical' psalm because it recounts God's saving intervention in the lives of his people. It is a story of God's deliverance. Indeed, it is four stories wrapped into one.

The opening call to give thanks to the Lord is inspired by God's steadfast love, a love that not only endures for ever, but also shows itself in very specific divine acts. The psalmist illustrates the people of God being redeemed with four examples of God's wonderful works.

He writes:

- of those who were lost in wilderness places (verses 4-9), and whom God brought safely to new dwelling places;
- of those who were oppressed by darkness and despair (verses 10-16), and whom God brought into the light of day;
- of those who were sick and suffering (verses 17-22), to whom God brought healing and wholeness;
- and of those whose ships were no match for the raging seas (verses 23-32), whom God brought to safe haven.

One can imagine the psalm being sung by a huge assembly in the Temple, as one voice proclaims each example of God's saving power; and an answer is made by a chorus of cheers, calling for thanksgiving and praise.

As metaphors, these same stories find reflection in our own lives without much effort: we can find ourselves lost, weighed down, sick or tossed about by events or emotions beyond our control.

At such times, says the psalmist, the wise person will pay attention to the work of God (verse 43), and will find evidence of the incarnate love of God there, even in the midst of troubles. Then the redeemed will add their own voice of thanksgiving for all the wonderful works of the Lord, and the song will be sung again.

Prayer

Wandering, falling, lying down, and reeling;
these have all been my conditions.

Leading, rising, healing and saving;
these have all been your answers, my God.

When I cry to you, and when you answer,
may I remember, and give you thanks.

Amen.

Thursday of Advent 1

'The Lord is King! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!'

Ps 97. 1

Psalm 97 is one of a group sometimes referred to as enthronement psalms, named for their use in celebrating not the coronation of a king, but the sovereignty of Almighty God. These psalms serve as liturgical reminders that the supreme ruler of the universe (of all that is seen and unseen) has never been, nor ever can be dethroned by any other power, no matter how strong it might appear.

The psalmist perceives God's matchless strength in some of the most dramatic displays of nature: thunder and lightning, stormy seas, earthquakes, fire, floods and winds. To the psalmist, these appearances are not mere displays of power; they capture human attention and point us to the justice and righteousness of the hand that is behind them. They call forth both awe and praise.

The psalmist sets forth three reasons to rejoice and be glad: God is unequalled in his awe-inspiring power; God is just in governing all the earth; and God is known by heaven and earth to be the only true God. Nothing can ever change these truths, so the praises of God are always fitting and always timely. In other words, the praise of God is always to be firmly founded upon the changeless character of God, and not upon the variable conditions of human circumstances.

According to this and other psalms, we do not need to be enjoying prosperity in order to praise the Lord. Good health, favourable circumstances, and comfortable surroundings (as wonderful as they are) are not the criteria for rejoicing. The poet declares one unshakable and undeniable truth: the Lord is King. This is enough reason to be glad.

Like many prophetic and poetic images in the Scriptures, Psalm 97 portrays a vision that, while true, is not yet fully evident. In a sense, the scene can only be viewed from heaven's eternal perspective, and that is precisely the psalmist's purpose. From our point of view, it appears that God's ways are frustrated by the world's injustices; his holiness is perverted by terrible things that are done in his name; and God's very existence is unrecognised and even denied by countless numbers of his own sons and daughters.

Ultimately, however, none of these shadows, including the darkness in our own hearts and minds, can stand up to the radiant brilliance of the Lord. The day will come when the light of heaven will burst forth and bathe the world in its splendour; when all people will behold the glory of the Lord and give thanks.

Until then, and as we wait, we rejoice. Like the psalmist, we are glad for the things that, even now, we know to be true.

Prayer

Lighten my heart today, Lord,
with a glimpse of your glory,
a memory of your mercy,
a hope for your blessing.
For each of these things I give you thanks.
Amen.

Friday of Advent 1

'Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.' Ps 122. 2

The vision of the glorified Jerusalem given to John in the book of Revelation is a far cry from the broken and conflicted city we see today. Psalm 122 reminds us that even as we pray for peace in the earthly city of Jerusalem, we join with Abraham in looking forward to 'the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Heb 11. 10).

This psalm is a 'psalm of ascent', a psalm that was sung as worshippers made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the time of a Jewish festival. In this psalm, it is as if the writer is looking back on a visit to the Holy City. It sounds as if he is reflecting on his experience, both with delight in the memory and with a determination never to forget what he has seen.

The delight that the psalmist feels is expressed in the opening verses of the psalm, and this delight comes from the character of the city itself: Jerusalem is, above all else, the dwelling place of Yahweh. It is God's chosen habitation among the people he has called to be his own. As such, the city embraces within its sacred walls both the house of the Lord and the house of David. Spiritual and temporal authority are united under one roof. Jerusalem is the place where all the disparate tribes of Israel find their common lineage and purpose; and the psalmist delights with all his heart as he remembers standing upon such holy ground.

The vision of Jerusalem inspires the psalmist to make the city's future well-being a priority for both his prayers and his intentions. In the closing half of the psalm, the writer seems to play on the name *Jerusalem* as he sings 'pray, peace, prosper, good'. These words each share a common connection with the Hebrew word that makes up part of *Jerusalem*: *shalom*. It is as if the city has become part of him, and he part of it. The pilgrim returns to his own home even as he carries within his heart the name of a new home.

Before he ascended to heaven, our Lord promised that he would go and prepare a place for us (Jn 14. 3). The goal of our life's pilgrimage is not a temporary visit to the home for which we were created, but a permanent stay in it. Until we arrive, it is good to sing Psalm 122 along the way.

Prayer

Lord, I want to be close to you, near you, and with you.

And where you are, certainly there is heaven also.

So today, help me to stand and to walk

with one foot on earth and one in heaven.

Amen.

Saturday of Advent 1

'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.' *Ps 51. 1*

The context of Psalm 51 is given in its superscription: 'A psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.'

Late one spring afternoon, the eyes of King David fall lustfully on Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah who was one of the kingdom's faithful soldiers. Bathsheba becomes pregnant with David's child, and in a desperate attempt to cover his own unfaithfulness, David deceitfully arranges for Uriah to be killed in battle. Then he takes Bathsheba to be his own wife.

Nathan the prophet is sent to David to confront him. His sin looms before him like a mountain; and he is helpless to overcome it.

Four themes dominate David's repentance, and they are true of all repentance to sin. First,ly he has a deep sense of responsibility, of personal accountability for his choices and actions. Secondly, he knows that his sin against a neighbour was really a sin against God. Thirdly, with no recourse to his own worthiness, David's only appeal can be to the mercy of God. And finally, by that mercy, he can hope for (and receive) complete restoration from his sin. Through forgiveness, David can have unhindered fellowship with God once again.

Psalm 51 is one of seven psalms traditionally categorised as 'penitential'. For generations, the Church has put them to use in seasons that call for repentance and preparation. In each of these penitential psalms, the psalmist stands before God with the only 'sacrifice' that can be offered: 'a broken and contrite heart'. Such an offering, inspired by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, is always acceptable to God. And it is always answered with mercy and forgiveness.

So it is that, a thousand years after David, Mercy's coming was announced to the world in the song of an old man who also knew the forgiveness of God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah spoke of the divine calling of his son, John the Baptist, to prepare the way of the Lord by offering God's people the forgiveness of their sins through the tender mercy of their God (Lk 1. 77-78). When the day dawned upon us from on high, David's prayer for mercy was answered for us all (Lk 1. 78-79).

Prayer

Father, I make David's prayer my own.

And if I do, may my testimony be that of David:

You raised him up again.

With this psalm, I reach out to you.

Amen.