

Advent Reflections

We hope that you will find these short reflections useful in preparing for Advent 2024. They are based on the lectionary readings for each Sunday in Advent.

Week One: Hope

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

- As we begin the journey of Advent this week we reflect on hope. We ponder how our 'love for each other might increase and overflow,' not just for our immediate church family or community, but for our global neighbours too. Christian Aid believes everyone deserves a full and dignified life, free from poverty. Wherever God's image-bearers are working to overcome injustice, we act in solidarity and hope with them.
- In Jeremiah 33:14-16, the prophet looks with hope towards a safe future for the city. In South Sudan, refugees like Shede also hope to live in safety. Conflict and the climate crisis are exacerbating poverty. Together with our trusted partners, Christian Aid supports people to forge new lives while waiting for the end of war. United by hope, we believe a brighter and more peaceful future is possible.
- The Gospel reading speaks of nations in perplexity and anguish over natural disasters. While Luke may heed these as signs of redemption drawing near, as we face the climate crisis today, we cannot forget our global siblings who live on its sharpest edge. South Sudan is ranked globally as the second most vulnerable country to natural hazards according to the 2023 INFORM Risk Index. An estimated 95% of the population depend on livelihoods, such as farming, that are threatened by changes in climate. As harvests fail and land for grazing livestock diminishes, the competition for remaining resources leads to conflict. As we pray for peace, we must also acknowledge the role that the climate crisis plays in exacerbating unrest and injustice.
- Paul frames his hopes to return to Thessalonica in prayer. In the same way, we recognise the power of prayer, particularly for transforming hope into action. The Christian Aid website has a library of prayers for different global regions and themes to support you.



Week Two: Peace

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

- There is a recurrent theme of 'preparing the way' in our texts today. Use them to reflect – how do we prepare for peace in a world filled with violence? We do not need to shrink away from naming and mourning the challenges we face as a global family. In grappling with the questions, we explore how to find hope. Where are the crooked paths, the chasms people disappear into, the hills far too high to climb, especially when the powerful keep pushing you back and adding to what you're expected to carry? In South Sudan, there is hope for peace and a return home, but so much work to be done by us all.
- In Philippians, the phrase 'And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what really matters.' When we stop looking only at what we want right now and see what the world needs to sustain itself, change begins and is unstoppable. Listening to the voices of those with lived experience of poverty, violence and oppression opens us to an overflowing love that can help us determine what really matters.
- Luke 3 begins by setting a backdrop against which the reader is to understand the text, and this is no accident. 'The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar' was a chaotic and corrupt period of history. Sympathisers were vying for power and Rome was dominating the region with brutal efficiency. Yet, as these 'powers' oppress those they occupy and scrap amongst themselves, the word of the Lord comes to John in the wilderness. In a rural backwater, the tides begin to turn. 'In the midst of the turmoil of your times' the word of the Lord can be found. In South Sudan, the backdrop could be 'the year the floods raged or the year the droughts sucked the land dry.' It could be 'the year of the General Election' or 'the year the election stalled and unrest erupted.' For Shede's family, it could be 'the year we had to leave everything behind.'
- What 'word from the Lord' are we hearing, and how will we respond? Luke goes on to describe a vision of paths being straightened, valleys filled and hills made low – level ground where all can travel safely. This imagery is a powerful metaphor for a level playing field, where unjust structural inequalities are dismantled, where bridges between communities can be built and where those who have been impacted most by climate chaos are compensated. 'Prepare the way of the Lord is a justice call in a time of chaos and crisis.

Week Three: Love

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Isaiah 12:2-6, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

- Called to prepare the way of the Lord. In a world riven with violence, a world divided so decisively that, in many places politics and theology have aligned themselves on one side or the other and scream at us from their far corners... how do we even begin to clear rubble, build bridges, level ground? John the Baptist offers some (seemingly) straightforward advice in Luke 3.

'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.' This is not simply about charity. It is about restoring and redistributing wealth. A coat could be taken by a landowner as collateral for a loan, but this left the borrower vulnerable. The coat kept them warm at night, protected them from the elements. Taking a coat that way was a sign of suspicion and disrespect. It was also a display of power and privilege. Share the second coat – return the dignity and ability to thrive that your actions and power have taken. See what I mean about straightforward advice?

Tax collectors asked the same, and John the Baptist said, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' But the system was complicated and corrupt. The tax collectors bid for an area, then paid their bid ahead to Rome. So, the money they kept was whatever they collected on top of the bid they made to Rome. The whole system was created to extract money from the poor, with none of it going back into the environment they lived in. It all went into the coffers of the Roman Empire. How does that resonate with structures today, where the poorest are taxed heaviest and see the least gain? How does that resonate in countries ravaged by climate change, when the money is leached out and they suffer? Soldiers also asked him and he said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.' How can we be peacemakers, not just peacekeepers? Without justice, peace will fall to pieces again. Enforced peace only bubbles and steams upwards under the pressure of unfair systems.

- Philippians also offers sage, but subversive advice. 'Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.' We are called to meet hate with gentleness, fear with gentleness, injustice with gentleness. Love like that is not for the faint-hearted. Show examples of this powerful antidote in your time of worship.
- In Zephaniah it says, 'do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst.' Again, there is a call to a different path that will lead us to a different day. Keep these promises near because we are all part of their coming. The path needs our feet if everyone is going to have a chance to travel well.



Week Four: Joy

Hebrews 10.5-10, Luke 1.39-55, Micah 5.2-5a

- Micah illustrates a prophetic vision of a secure and peaceful future. Internally displaced people and refugees, like Shede, long to live securely and in peace. Christian Aid's financial assistance programme offers immediate emergency support to families seeking refuge, so they can protect themselves and their children from hunger, malnutrition, and ill health. Together with our trusted partners, we can support people to forge a new life while waiting for the end of war.
- In Hebrews, the writer shares Jesus' mission to do God's will. Christian Aid believes that God's will is for our global neighbours to be able to live a full and dignified life, free from poverty. We also believe that Jesus calls his followers to love God, love their neighbours, and to seek justice for those who are oppressed.
- As we begin this last week of Advent, anticipating the Holy Birth alongside Mary and Elizabeth, we too are filled with joy. We celebrate fulfilled promises, and Mary's vision for a world of renewed justice and equality.
- Christian Aid's Carol, When Out of Poverty is Born, explores the themes of the Magnificat. We are encouraged to rejoice with Mary, but also to heed the prophets and not to lose heart as we wait for God's kingdom.

