



Wait, Trust, Commit

2021 Advent Course
Diocese of Monmouth
The Church in Wales



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Introduction

Advent is a wonderful but often overlooked season in the church calendar. For many it is associated simply with getting ready for Christmas, but Advent is much more than that. It is a season when we take time out to prepare for the coming again of Jesus, something we celebrate as we mark his birth at Christmas, but something we also await as he has promised to return one day. We wait, not looking up to the skies for something to happen, but we wait celebrating the gift of life and new life through Jesus. We wait, seeking to be more like Jesus as we look to follow his command to love God and to love our neighbour as ourself.

Perhaps this year, again following a challenging time for so many people, more than ever we can rediscover something about waiting, about longing. We wait in hope, we wait in expectation and we wait knowing that God has never failed to deliver on any of the promises he makes. In this short series there is a chance to think about our relationship with Jesus.

Advent, amidst all of the busyness of this time of year, encourages us to take time to reflect on our lives and on our relationship with God. We'll be looking at different bible passages and please remember, in your thoughts and discussions, to not be afraid to share what you think – you may well be surprised how many other people think the same things or have the same questions!

We've put this course together to help make this season a special time of reflection and expectation, of hope and trust and of re-commitment. Above all, we hope that you will make this season about Jesus and make it about you and your relationship with him and with the people and the creation around you.

Come Lord Jesus, Come...

Ven Ian Rees
Revd Becca Stevens

Some brief guidelines

- Sessions can be done 'in person' or online
- There is an ice breaker at the beginning of each session – some people like to do these, some don't – they're optional!
- Have a candle ready to light – towards the end of each session a candle is lit to focus on Jesus, the Light of the World, as people say together the Lords Prayer, listen to an Advent hymn and have the closing prayers
- Bring a bible to each session
- It's good to have the readings read out loud even if people are following them in their bibles

5 Steps To Get Going

Source: 'Dying to Live' – 2021 Lent Course – Diocese of Monmouth

1. Make a plan to promote your course

As with all things, taking a little time to plan a way forward goes a long way. In particular, think carefully about how you will encourage others to get on board with your Advent course:

- **Think about your 'target audience'** — Who are the people your group will be for? What stage of life are they in, and when are they most likely to be free? You may decide to hold more than one group in order to cater for different people in different walks of life. Consult with a few people who are most likely to take part to find a good day and time to meet.
- **Advertise generally** — Don't be afraid to advertise the course early as widely as possible. For many people, they need to hear a message several times, before they are in a place to seriously consider responding.
- **Invite people individually** — At the same time, people are most likely to respond to a personal invitation or word of mouth recommendation. Take a bit of time, either on your own, or with others in your Ministry Team, to list the individuals who you think would most benefit from being part of your Advent group. Then decide how to approach them individually to invite them to join in.
- **Have a clear signing up process** — Advertisers call this a 'Call to Action' and say it is key in eliciting a response. How will people sign up to be part of the group? Is there an online form? Can they leave a comment on a social media post? Do they need to email or call a particular person?

2. If online - Take time to get to know Zoom (or your preferred video platform!)

Many people are now familiar with Zoom, although other platforms are around, for instance Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. Each of these will have its own help or support section with directions for how to use it. Give yourself plenty of time to learn how to use your chosen software:

- **Zoom yourself!** — One of the best ways to build confidence in a particular program is simply to take time and play around with it. Did you know that with the click of one button, Zoom will allow you to set up a new meeting (in your private meeting room) with only you in it? This way you can learn and experiment safely, before your course begins. In particular, learn how to ‘screen share’ and find your way around the other ‘hosting tools’ along the bottom of the screen.
- **Recruit a Tech Person** — If you are really concerned about leading your group and managing the technology by yourself, you could recruit a ‘tech person’. They can handle the tech side and act as ‘host’ for the meeting in Zoom, leaving you free to focus on facilitating.

3. Set ground rules depending on your group’s size and context

As meeting online is very different to face to face, and may be new to some in your group, it can help to agree some basic ‘online etiquette’ at the beginning of the course. A lot of this may well depend on your group’s size and context:

- **Muted or unmuted** — In a smaller group of less than ten people, it is possible to hold a video conference where everyone is unmuted. This is certainly the most natural way of holding a conversation together. However, in larger groups, audio interference and echoes can creep in. If this is the case, it may be easier to ask people to mute themselves, and then unmute in order to speak.
- **Breakout Rooms** — Similarly, in a group larger than ten, you may like to use the ‘breakout rooms’ function to split up to enable better group discussions. Will these breakout groups stay the same throughout the course or change each week? What size will they be? Usually no smaller than four people, and no larger than ten is a good rule. Would you like to recruit a facilitator for each smaller group or leave them to manage themselves?
- **Respect & Confidentiality** — People will be invited to share their own personal experiences throughout the course. What boundaries will you set around respect and confidentiality at the outset, in order to ensure a safe space for all the participants?

4. Make the material your own

Don't be afraid to block out, switch up, add to or move around the material we've provided to suit your own group! Some groups require more initial material to fuel the discussion, others can chat for hours quite happily right off the bat. Find the right medium for your group:

- **Don't feel you have to cover everything** — If your group is making slow progress, you might feel the need to speed through the material in order to cover it all. Please don't! Your group's learning journey is more important than doing everything in the book — and there's no test at the end!
- **Decide what material to circulate to group members** — It may well be helpful to send a copy of this PDF to each group member, or to send them a print copy. Alternatively you could copy/paste just the sections you'll use each week, and either put them in an email for participants to look at, or in a powerpoint to be shared on screen.

5. Be a facilitator, not a preacher or teacher!

Finally, as you begin your Advent course, remember that your role is to facilitate discussion and not to teach, or even preach at, the group members:

- **Encourage and nurture the discussion** — As a facilitator, your role is to encourage natural discussion among the group. Be careful not to speak for long periods yourself, and instead ask plenty of open questions (there are lots of these in the material). If the discussion is struggling to get going, you can also ask gentle probing questions to encourage participants to share more of their thoughts or experience. Be careful, though, not to interrogate anyone! And don't try to force anyone to speak who doesn't want to — sometimes people need space to sit and listen.
- **Don't be afraid of silence** — When the discussion gets started, as well as during times of prayer, there may be periods of silence. Don't be afraid of this! Many people need time to reflect and consider before they feel able to speak. If you are nervous, then count to ten in your head after asking a question — chances are someone else will always speak up before you reach ten! Similarly, count slowly in your head (or just breathe slowly and deeply), to ensure you have allowed plenty of space for silent prayer.

Remember! The journey is as important as the destination — There are no required learning outcomes to this Advent course, or assessments at the end! Your role as facilitator is not to impart knowledge or learning, but to allow people the space to explore for themselves. Embrace all the twists and turns, changes of tack and tangents that this involves. And enjoy the uniqueness of your group and its members! Then you can be sure to have an enjoyable, and fruitful, Advent journey.



Session 1



Icebreaker

“Two Truths and A Lie”. If a small group, then each person takes a turn and makes two true statements and one false one, in any order. The other members each make a guess as to which statement is the lie. The person then reveals who, if anyone, guessed correctly. If a larger group ask for a few volunteers.



Opening 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. **AMEN.**

(Source: Cafod)



Reading – Isaiah 42:1-9



Commentary – part 1

Isaiah is the prophet who guides our journey through Advent as we prepare for Christmas. Advent is a season of joyful anticipation, and Isaiah invites us to look forward to the coming of the Messiah, to prepare the way of the Lord. Isaiah urges us to straighten out our crooked ways, tear down our mountains of misdeeds, and fill in the valleys of our bad habits. Advent is also about the arrival of the reign of God, a kingdom of justice and peace, and Isaiah urges us to obey the Lord's instruction, walk in the ways of peace, follow the promptings of the Spirit, and be just in thought, word and deed.

The first few verses of Isaiah 42 make it crystal clear that the main work of this servant will centre on justice. Can you find the three times in the first four verses where the word "justice" rings out from Isaiah's poetry?

They are:

The servant will "bring forth justice" in 42:1;

he will "faithfully bring forth justice" in 42:3;

he will "establish justice in the earth" in 42:4.

This famous Hebrew word for Justice, mishpat, is nothing less than a calling card of the prophets of Israel.

Find and compare with these bible references:

Amos 5:24

Hosea 2:19

Micah 6:8

They all use the word justice at prominent places. Perhaps most famously, Amos 5 describes with gleaming metaphor the need for justice to "roll down like waters".

In Isaiah 42 verses 6-7 we have the reminder that the servant is to be "a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness". God calls them to righteousness (justice) not for themselves alone, but for the nations. Isaiah reminds people that God has not abandoned them but is at work among them, restoring them to be a blessing.



Questions

Can you think of situation in our communities and the world where justice needs to be brought?

This Advent as we wait where do we need to shine light? What do we need to include in our prayers? And whose eyes need to be opened?



Commentary - part 2

For people today who all too often find themselves in a state of chaos and despair, this powerful depiction of the (suffering) servant in Isaiah 42 may speak in the following ways: First, in the midst of those times when we aren't sure if up is down or down is up, we need to accept the fact that we often are no more than "bruised reeds and "dimly burning wicks" as Isaiah 42:2-3 depicts. As the songwriter and theologian Leonard Cohen says so beautifully in his song, "Anthem": "Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, but that is where the light gets in." That is where the light comes in.

God's grace and power works exactly there where we are broken, where we are most fragile — a perspective captured in the New Testament text of 2 Corinthians 4:7-9: "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

Second, in the middle of these most difficult times, when we feel helpless and out of control, we learn from the example of the suffering servant that we should seek to cultivate the power that we do have in our vulnerability. Even in the midst of the worst of circumstances, we still have the power to make a difference in the lives of the people around us. Not the power of the worldly institutions but a power that grows out of compassion, out of being concerned with the needs and concerns of the other. Even in the most disturbing of days, we have the ability to do good things, to look beyond our own problems, and to direct our focus to others.



Questions

Being vulnerable can be hard but this passage shows us that Jesus identifies with us in our vulnerabilities and chaos. Author Brene Brown describes vulnerability as the birth place of courage, connection and compassion. Do you agree with that description? What do you like/dis-like about it?

Can you think of a time when we have seen beauty in the brokenness?

Light Candle and say together the Lord's Prayer

Reflection Hymn

O come, o come, Emmanuel

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, light of the world,
the prophets said you would bring peace
and save your people in trouble.

Give peace in our hearts at Christmas
and show all the world God's love.

AMEN.



Session 2



Icebreaker

The facilitator begins by saying the name of any country, city, river, ocean or mountain that can be found in an atlas. The next person must then say another name that begins with the last letter of the word just given.

Each person has a definite time limit (e.g. three seconds) and no names can be repeated.

For example -

First person: London, Second Person: Niagara Falls, Third Person: Switzerland.



Opening Prayer

God of hope, be with us in our Advent journey
to the stable and beyond,
be with us in our meeting
and in our travelling together,
be with us in our worship
and our praying together,
be with us in our Advent journey
our God of hope. **AMEN**



Reading – Psalm 121

Commentary – part 1

The City of Jerusalem is built on mountains and surrounded by mountains. Psalm 121 is one of the 15 'Songs of Ascent' (Psalms 120-134) which were songs sung by pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem for one of the Annual Feasts. Another theory has been that these were psalms representing the 15 steps leading up to the Temple in Jerusalem. There's no reason why they couldn't have been both.

Psalm 121 is a psalm of great trust, throughout it we are reminded of God's constant care and protection. Verse 1 takes us to the hills, looking up to 'our help'. Again over the centuries there has been some question about what these hills are – are they the hills on which the Temple stood? are they the hills of Jerusalem as the Pilgrims made their way to the great City? or were they the hills on their journey towards Jerusalem, hills which could have contained some dangers?

Again, it doesn't really matter because what this psalm is reminding us is that God is our 'keeper', our protection, always. In those hills, wherever they may be, we have with those early pilgrims, the chance to look up and reflect on God as our protector, in whom we can trust always.

Alexander the Great told his soldiers, 'I wake that you may sleep'. What an amazing privilege that must have been for the soldiers in his care. However we have the greatest privilege of knowing that throughout the night hours, or the dark times in our lives, God watches over us with constant care.

Questions

Where are the 'hills' around us?

- a) The 'hills' where we see fear and danger
(these might be places or people or events – local, national or worldwide, which worry us or threaten us in some way; or they might be circumstances in which we find ourselves, or perhaps worries about the church)
- b) The 'hills' where we look for protection



Commentary - part 2

It's incredible to read of the faith of the psalmist in Psalm 121. There seems to be a complete assurance of God's constant protection. Whilst that's something that I'm sure we all recognise, living with that knowledge can sometimes be more difficult. Lots of us, perhaps all of us, seem to have weak moments, moments when our faith is tested, moments when we perhaps even wonder where God is.

We can constantly pray for a stronger faith and one of the things we perhaps need to do in order to develop that is to let go of so many things. Jesus talks about the faith of infants (Luke 10:21-24) because in the minds of infants there are so few distractions. As we grow up and grow older we allow our thoughts, our opinions, our ideas and even our unconscious bias to cloud things. There are so many things we need to strip away to allow God to penetrate our minds and our whole lives more deeply.

There's a story about a little boy who was shouting for his mother because he'd got his hand stuck in a small jar of money – as his mother arrived to help him he asked her, 'Would it be easier if I unclenched my fist and let go of the money I'm holding?'

Of course, a clenched hand was needed to hold on to the money but it was also the very thing that was stopping the boy from getting his hand out of the jar – releasing the money meant his hand was free. In order to trust God more completely, there may be things we need to release, things in our lives that we can do nothing about, things that can only be entrusted to God.

Hebrews 13:14 says, 'For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.' That looks ahead to our eternal home, but it can also remind us to look beyond ourselves and our own abilities or worries and look to God. Trusting isn't always easy for us but when we trust in Jesus, we're not trusting in something or someone completely unknown, but in the person whose life, death and resurrection we read about in the Bible and in the person by whom millions have lives have been transformed ever since.



Questions

What are those things in your life that you might need to let go of?

Is it the fear of looking silly in some way, or not knowing enough to speak up about your faith? Is it the fear of your faith getting in the way of something you do? Is it a politically correct politeness? Is it busyness with other things?

Are there things we, as a church, need to let go of?

Light Candle and say together the Lord's Prayer

Reflection Hymn

Hills of the north rejoice

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

Closing Prayer

God of hope, who brought love into this world,
be the love that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
be the peace that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
be the joy that dwells between us.

God of hope, the rock we stand upon,
be the centre, the focus of our lives

always, and particularly this Advent time. **AMEN**



Session 3



Icebreaker

Go around the group and ask each person to state their name and attach an adjective that not only describes a characteristic, but also starts with the same letter of the name

e.g. generous Greg, dynamic Dave.

Write them down and refer to them by this for the rest of the evening.



Opening Prayer

In this Advent of expectation draw us together in unity, that our praise and worship might echo in these walls and also through our lives.

In this Advent of expectation draw us together in mission, that the hope within might be the song we sing, and the melody of our lives.

In this Advent of expectation draw us together in service, that the path we follow might lead us from a stable to a glimpse of eternity. **AMEN**

Lord Jesus, Son of God, Saviour of the world

**Be the centre of all that we are,
and the life that we lead**

Lord Jesus, Light in this dark World,
illuminate our hearts and minds

**Be the centre of all that we are,
and the life that we lead**



Reading – Luke 5: 27-32



Commentary – part 1

There are a number of examples of Jesus ‘calling’ people to follow him that we can read about in the Bible (amongst them Luke 5: 1-11; 6:12-16; 9:59-62). The encounter between Jesus and Levi (It’s important to note that Levi became Matthew, a name by which he is better known to most of us!) is a very interesting one.

Jesus didn’t keep the right company according to the religious authorities. He called fishermen to follow him. They knew however that if this whole venture failed, if somehow they had got the wrong idea about Jesus, they could go back to their fishing. It was a trade that was always going to be needed there. With Levi (Matthew) things were very different. He was a (probably) wealthy tax collector, working for the Romans and very unpopular with many people because of that. Giving up his job would mean there was no going back to it and it meant giving up, as well as his job, wealth and status. But he did it gladly.

And he was so glad about it that he threw a party to celebrate. He invited all his tax collector friends for this ‘great banquet’. This was a great act of commitment on behalf of Levi and Jesus. Levi was proudly showing off to his friends that he had started life afresh. He had met someone who had changed his life completely and he wanted to introduce that person to as many people as he could. Some would hopefully want to get to know Jesus better. Some perhaps would just think Levi had gone a bit strange! Others may well have been disappointed or even angry at the new direction Levi was taking. It didn’t matter if they weren’t happy though, Levi wanted to tell people about his commitment to Jesus.

I read of an occasion where a Californian cotton merchant who was selling cotton to China invited a large group of Chinese dignitaries for dinner at his house. People sat at tables in the garden and on each table the cotton merchant put some of his Christian friends as well, not specifically to evangelise people, but to introduce his guests to some lively Christians who could enjoy a party with good food and fun as well. That may of may not be the way we would do things, but it shows us something of the excitement that Levi felt about meeting Jesus and how he wanted his friends to meet him as well.

In addition to the commitment Levi made to Jesus though, Jesus was also making a commitment to Levi. Jesus knew, just as on many other occasions in his earthly life, how his actions would be seen by some. He was eating with tax collectors and sinners. In the Middle East, then and to a large extent now, sitting down at a table to eat with someone meant full acceptance. To eat at a table with someone is to say that you have no reservations about them. That is the message of commitment Jesus is giving to this group of people, and of course, it is the message that he gives to each one of us as well.

Questions

Commitment is a two-way thing. Jesus has already shown his commitment to us through his life, death and resurrection, so what is our commitment to him...

- a) What do we understand by commitment ?
- b) How do we show our commitment to our faith to other people ?

Final Commentary

Like Lent, the colour in our churches for Advent is purple. The two seasons however feel very different. In Lent we are preparing ourselves not just for Easter but for the pain of Holy Week as well. In Advent we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, preparing to welcome him afresh into our lives as we wait in joyful expectation not just for Christmas, but also for the Second Coming of Jesus.

The Second Coming of Jesus is something that we regularly proclaim as we say the words of the Creed but something that we perhaps tend to overlook. It seems so distant, so unpredictable, and yet, there it is in the words of both the Apostles and the Nicene Creed which we use in many of our church services (Amongst the many Bible verses promising the Second Coming of Jesus it's worth looking at these - Matthew 24: 42-44; Acts 1:10,11)

One of the dangers when we ignore the second coming is that we, consciously or not, believe we're 'there', wherever 'there' is, or that we've 'made it'. That's a dangerous thought because it can lead us to fight and work for all kinds of things to do with preserving what we've got and where we are and how we do things.

With Jesus, we are to live now, but also to live in expectation of the second coming. We are to be active in our service of God and other people, but we are also to be watchful and reflective, contemplating where we are in our relationship with God and wondering how we can improve that relationship.

Through this short course we have thoughts about waiting for Jesus, trusting in Jesus and committing to Jesus. We're reminded that in our waiting, trusting and committing we are visible signs of God in our communities whether we like it or not and whether we think it or not!

We are also reminded though as we recognise the wonder and the gift of the birth of Jesus of the love that God has for each one of us. As we journey through Advent, we can remind ourselves of that love as we 'wait' in joyful expectation for Jesus to come again; as we 'trust' in his constant care and protection day by day and as we 'commit' ourselves to follow him and serve him always.



Questions

Each of the following verses relate in a way to the themes we have considered. Discuss briefly in what ways and what they might mean to us.

Romans 12:1,2 – Trust / Commitment

1 Peter 4:19 – Waiting / Trust

Hebrews 12: 1,2 – Trust/ Commitment



Light Candle and say together the Lord's Prayer



Reflection Hymn

Come thou long expected Jesus

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



Closing Prayer

In this season of expectation, we prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah,
into the bustle of our lives and the hard to find moments of solitude
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah
into our homes and situations along with friends and families
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah
into our hearts, and those often hidden parts of our lives
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah
For beneath the surface of your story
is an inescapable fact. You entered this world
as vulnerable as any one of us
in order to nail that vulnerability to the cross.
Our fears, our insecurities and our sins
all that can separate us from God
exchanged by your Grace for Love.
We cannot comprehend the reasoning
only marvel that Salvation comes to us
through a baby born in a stable,
and reaches out to a world in need.
In this season of anticipation
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah

Purify our hearts, sanctify our lives
That we might serve you faithfully this day and all days. **AMEN**

