



Come Lord and Heal Us.

An Advent Journey for Uncertain Times

**CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF BUNBURY
ADVENT PROGRAM**

2020

GROUP LEADER'S SHEET

The leader's role is to coordinate the smooth running of the Advent group. Two hours is a good length of time to allow and below are suggested times for each part of the program. If you or the group think more time is needed on a section, then please feel free to adjust the session to suit. Although two hours are allocated, this is only a guideline and your group is free to decide how much or how little time should be spent. You may find that the amount of time spent in discussion changes from week to week.

1. Gathering together

Welcome everyone, ask them to make themselves comfortable, and then suggest they pause in silence before the Lord's presence. You may like to select and listen to a meditative piece of music or to an appropriate hymn for Advent. Then, pray together the opening prayer for the week. (In the first week, allow a little extra time for group members to read the introduction to the program.)

(suggested time: 5 minutes)

2. Reading the Gospel:

The Gospel reading can be read directly from this program, or from a Missal if preferred. Allow some silent time at the end of the reading for group members to reflect on what they have heard.

(suggested time: 10 minutes)

3. Understanding the Gospel reading:

After reading the Gospel passage and the *Opening the Scriptures* section; group members should be encouraged to share their thoughts and reactions to the questions with everyone out loud. Participants should be encouraged to listen to each other without responding at this stage. (The family or individual can do the same.)

(suggested time: 20 minutes)

4. Reflecting on the Advent Theme:

After reading the *Paths to Healing* reflection, a group discussion can be structured around the questions included in the *For Reflection and Sharing* section. It is important to make sure that everyone who wishes to participate in the discussion is given the opportunity.

(suggested time: 30 minutes)

5. Pray the Intercessions together.

6. Conclude with the closing prayer.

(suggested time: 5 minutes)

7. After the prayer, organise anything that needs to be done for the next Advent Group gathering, e.g. Readers, perhaps tea/coffee break etc.

(suggested time: 5 minutes)

8. Living Advent Practice for the Week

These are some suggestions for how you might practice the Advent theme discussed each week, in your everyday lives. Encourage group members to try to practice at least one of these suggestions before your next Advent group get together, and share with other members how they accomplished this and how it made a difference to their week

WELCOME TO ADVENT 2020

Come Lord and Heal Us.

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Welcome to Advent in 2020 – the year of the pandemic!

We are living through a time of deep disruption, when the ‘normal’ order of life for so many has been utterly turned upside down. The mental, emotional and financial cost of this disruption is enormous. As of the time of writing these reflections, the WHO has confirmed over 47 million cases of infection, and over 1.2 million deaths. While some countries are doing well in suppressing the virus, other countries in Europe and North America are witnessing a spike in numbers. The situation remains unstable.

In the midst of life’s uncertainties the Church embraces the beginning of a new liturgical year. We dare to hope and believe that ‘God is with us’; and because God is with us we can ‘be with each other’ in real solidarity and love.

The season of Advent calls us to remember the past (the long awaited Messiah born in Bethlehem), to celebrate the present (Christ who is present and reveals himself to us in life, liturgy and community), and to look forward in hope to the future (Christ will come in glory to renew creation).

The focus of this Advent program will be the Sunday Gospels of Advent (Year B), and our celebration of the coming of Christ as the Divine Physician and healer into our broken and wounded world.

Sacred Scripture presents us with a beautiful image of Christ’s coming among us.

The prophet Malachi (in the last book of the Old Testament) has God saying, “But for you who fear my name, the Sun of justice will rise with healing in its rays” (Mal. 3:20)

In Luke’s Gospel, Zechariah speaks of John the Baptist’s role “to make known to people their salvation, the loving kindness of the heart of our God, who visits us like the dawn from on high” (Lk 1:78)

Christ comes among us as the rising sun at dawn, scattering the darkness with his healing rays, and renewing all creation. Advent waits in joy and hope for Christ the ‘*medicus humilis*’ (the ‘humble doctor’ of St Augustine) born in Bethlehem, who is present to heal us even now. Advent opens our hearts to Christ as we long for his light and cry out “Come, Lord Jesus”.

But the Advent mystery is more profound still! It is we who are called to bring forth Christ and his healing for others. His was a healing not only of physical sickness, but of our feelings of anger, of jealousy and division, of all that contributes to the breakdown of relationships, personal or social. We who long and wait for Christ to come and heal our world; we who receive Christ more deeply in this holy season; it is we who are called to bring forth Christ and his healing for others. We who celebrate Christ’s birth and coming must help his ‘birth and coming’ into the lives of others. We who receive his healing light must make that healing real for others. We must, as Pope Francis has said, “heal wounds and warm hearts”.

This program is designed to assist us to pray our way through Advent, and to help us become more of Christ’s healing peace in our times.

I am as always indebted to Dr Michael Jackson for his insights and support in this project.

God bless our Advent journey.

Fr Tony Chiera
Pastoral Office

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Opening Prayer

Father in heaven,

Our hearts desire the warmth of your love, and our minds are searching for the light of your Word.

Increase our longing for Christ our Saviour and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth.

We ask this in the name of our Lord,

Amen

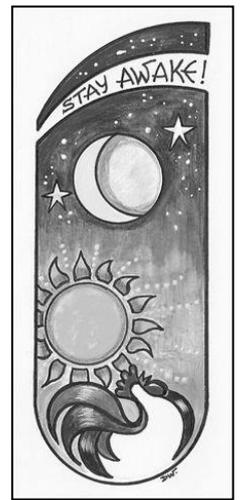
Gospel Reading

Mark 13:33-37

Stay awake! You never know when the Lord will come.

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come. It is like a man travelling abroad: he has gone from home, and left his servants in charge, each with his own task; and he has told the doorkeeper to stay awake. So stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn; if he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!'

The Gospel of the Lord.



Opening the Scriptures:

Advent in Year B takes us to chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel.

Jesus is at the Mount of Olives, looking across the valley toward Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple. He speaks to his disciples in this chapter about the future destruction of the Temple, the end of the world and the coming of the Son of Man at the end of times.

In our Gospel passage this Sunday, Jesus calls his disciples and listeners to 'stay awake'. In fact in a few short verses Jesus mentions this call four times! It is a call to be vigilant, prepared and attentive at every moment to the presence of the Lord in our lives.

To drive home his point Jesus tells a short parable about a travelling homeowner and his servants. While the master is away each servant has their own work to perform; but it is the doorkeeper who is especially singled out. The doorkeeper must watch for the return of the 'lord of the house', and be prepared to open the door whenever he returns.

Jesus concludes: 'What I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!'

Stay awake that you may recognise the Lord's presence in your midst, and respond with an open heart.

Question for Personal Reflection:

What is one thing you need to do this Advent to remain more attentive and alert to the presence of the Lord in your life?

Questions for Group Reflection:

What are some of the challenges we face today in remaining aware of the presence of God in everyday life?

How has 2020 and the pandemic helped you to “wake up” to what is truly important in life, and to the presence of God in your own life?

What can Parishes do to help us be more aware and open to God?

Paths to Healing:

The Prayer of Lament

The Jesus born in Bethlehem, announces at the beginning of his public ministry that he has come “to bring good news to the afflicted” (Lk 4:18). Soon after we find him going “round the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing all kinds of disease and illness among the people” (Mt 4:23). When Jesus calls his disciples, he associates them with his healing ministry and sends them out to “proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal” (Lk 9:2)

One of the ways that each of us as individuals can help to bring the healing of God into our troubled world, is by fervently embracing the prayer of lament. This is a biblical way of praying that is lost in many circles.

Lament is a heartfelt cry for help that comes out of a time of pain and suffering. It is very common in the Bible. In fact one third of all the psalms are ‘psalms of lament’. The blind beggar Bartimaeus in the New Testament cries out in a deep lament as Jesus walks by “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me” (Mk 10:47). Jesus himself, in his own agony on the cross, makes his own the words of Psalm 22, “my God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

Lament is the response of faith when we are overcome by chaos and brokenness. It is the hearts cry from the depths of our vulnerability. In lament we pour out our heart to God, and ask the questions “how long Lord?”, “Why Lord?”, “When will you deliver us Lord?” It is the prayer of those who are honest about their pain.

In these days of Advent we can cultivate the prayer of lament, and bring the pain of the world (and our own pain) into the presence of God. We could pray psalms such as Psalm 22, 42 and 88. Or we could cry out to God in our own words.

As we continue to watch reports from across the globe and see people in terrible situations of fear, sickness and suffering; as we hear of people closer to home battling mental illness and financial hardship; as we experience our own anxieties and uncertainties, let us join ourselves with this pain and cry out to God in lament.

The great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once said “When we pray for the other, we become the other”. As we pray for others during this Pandemic, we unite and identify with them in a sacred solidarity; and our prayer of lament wraps them in the embrace of God’s healing and love.

For Reflection and Sharing:

What has helped you pray during this Pandemic and lockdown?

How could you make the prayer of lament more a part of your Advent experience?

Intercessions

Response: ***Come, Lord Jesus***

Leader: Let us lift our voices in prayer and raise our heads in hope to the Lord who is our Saviour.

1. For the Church, that in the face of distress and anxiety, it may steadfastly proclaim a sure and certain hope for the healing of God’s promised redemption. ***Response***
2. For the world, that among nations made desolate by conflict and violence, justice and righteousness may flower anew. ***Response***
3. For those who are apprehensive about the cares of life, that the disciples of Jesus may bring them words of hope and deeds of love. ***Response***
4. For all upon whom advanced age or failing health brings fear, that they may be given the care necessary to live in safety and security. ***Response***
5. For all who work for social justice, that they may know that their work brings God’s promises to fulfilment. ***Response***
6. For our parish community, that the Lord may grant us abounding love for one another and so prepare us to stand before Christ who will come in glory. ***Response***

Pause for participants to offer personal intentions out loud.

Leader: We offer these prayers through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Closing Prayer

Prayer for those who have died from COVID-19

Merciful Lord,
In your earthly life,
you showed great compassion to the sick
and by your own suffering and death,
you won for us everlasting life.
You know that the world is suffering from the coronavirus
and that this dreaded virus has claimed countless victims –
people of every age, of every nation, and of all faiths.
We come before you to commend the souls of our faithful departed
who have died from the coronavirus.
When they struggled to breathe,
you were there as their Great Physician,
When they were separated from their loved ones,
you assured them with your abiding Spirit,
When they died without family at their side,
you were there as brother and friend.
May they know the joy of seeing your face
and feel the warmth of your loving embrace.
Welcome them into your heavenly kingdom,
where you live and reign for ever and ever.
Amen.

Living Advent: Practice for the week

In Australia, Advent comes during one of the busiest times of the year. The shops have already turned our attention to “Christmas”! Advent is so easily lost. Deliberately and intentionally take a few minutes each day for silence before God. Bring your “struggles” before the fullness of God; bring the pain of all the world and pray “Come, Lord Jesus”.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Opening Prayer

Father in heaven,

The day draws near when the glory of your Son will make radiant the night of the waiting world.
May the lure of greed not impede us from the joy which moves the hearts of those who seek him.
May the darkness not blind us to the vision of wisdom which fills the minds of those who find him.

We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord
Amen.

Gospel Reading

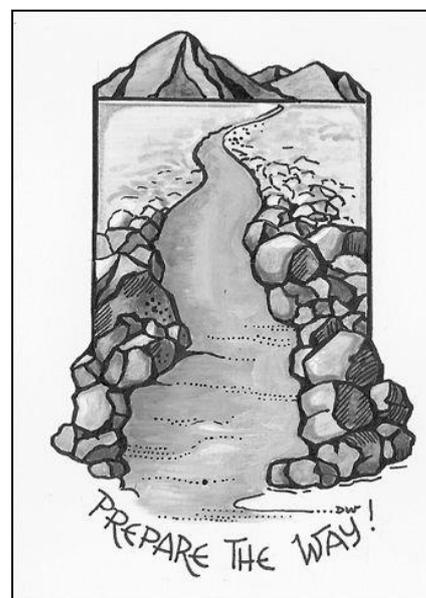
Mark 1:1-8

Make straight the paths of the Lord.

The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Look, I am going to send my messenger before you;
He will prepare your way.
A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
Make his paths straight,

and so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All Judaea and all the people of Jerusalem made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins. John wore a garment of camel-skin, and he lived on locusts and wild honey. In the course of his preaching he said, 'Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'



The Gospel of the Lord

Opening the Scriptures:

This Sunday's Gospel takes us to the beginning of Mark's Gospel, where Mark introduces his account of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a rather abrupt beginning to his Gospel story, with no mention of the infancy of Jesus. A strong sense of urgency pervades those opening verses.

The story of Jesus begins with the introduction onto the scene of John the Baptist. His coming is the fulfilment of ancient prophecies from Isaiah, Malachi and the Book of Exodus. God's promises in the past are being fulfilled in a special way now in the ministry of John the Baptist. He is 'Elijah', who was to return and announce the day of God's coming.

John prepares the way for the appearance of Jesus by preaching a ‘baptism of repentance’. This external washing ritualised a deep personal desire for change and the interior forgiveness of sins.

The message of John was clear, stark and direct. Jesus is not far away. Now is the time to get ready. If you want to share in his Spirit, prepare yourselves. Seek a genuine and sincere change of heart.

Question for Personal Reflection:

Repentance is a real change of mind and heart as well as a re-ordering of one’s priorities. Where in your life at the moment do you sense God calling you to change?

Questions for Group Reflection:

What do you think needs to change in our communities and parishes so that we may respond more truly to Christ and the needs of others?

Where do you see people truly responding with compassion and love in the lead up to Christmas? Share some stories and examples.

Paths to Healing:

The Life of Family

This year has put the spotlight on our homes and family life in a dramatic way. The lockdowns during the year have meant spending more time with each other at home (or more time alone if we live alone). Spending more time at home has been both a blessing and a challenge.

There are many parents in Australia who now feel more connected to their children, and have discovered new family habits and rituals to keep them together. But there are other parents and families ‘buckling’ under the pressures of these times, and sadly we hear of violence in the home and other destructive behaviours.

It is important for us as Christians to pause for a moment and remember that our family and home is the ‘domestic Church’. It is here in the bonds of family life, love and faith that we dwell with God, and God with us. So while the family faces great challenges, it is also the community where God’s presence and healing flows in a special way.

In these days of Advent, as we await Christ’s presence and healing for our world, the family is a privileged place for mediating this healing to each other.

In March 2018, Pope Francis wrote to us about ‘the Call to Holiness in today’s World’ (*Gaudete et Exsultate*). In this exhortation he speaks beautifully of the common life we share in family, parish or any community. He reminds us that our life together, especially in families, is “made up of small everyday things” (p143). Jesus himself asked his disciples to pay attention to the details and the small everyday things of life.

“The little detail that wine was running out at a party
The little detail that one sheep was missing
The little detail of noticing the widow who offered her two small coins
The little detail of having the fire burning and a fish cooking as he waited for the disciples at daybreak” (p144)

These little details of our life together are to be ‘cherished’, the Pope says, because they are the “details of love” (p145). Since these everyday small deeds are love in action they allow God to touch our lives and heal us.

In these busy days leading up to Christmas, and as we keep an eye on the pandemic, there are many ways we can strengthen our family life. These are times for greater patience and tolerance, as we try to be aware of each other and the pressures we are experiencing. These are also times for truly listening and seeking to understand each other, as we consciously make time to attend to one another. This is the time to develop a greater appreciation of the gifts and qualities of other family members, and of their quietly hidden acts of love and service...the time to be sensitive and aware of the extra things one could do around the house to ease the burden of others.

“Come Lord and heal us in our homes and families.”

For Reflection and Sharing:

What do you think strengthens family life?

More Australian families prayed together during lockdowns. What would help families to keep praying?

Intercessions

Response: *Come, Lord Jesus*

Leader: Praying with constant joy and filled with the compassion of Christ Jesus, let us offer intercession on behalf of all.

1. That the church may be a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. ***Response***
2. That those who govern nations may plant seeds of peace for a harvest of justice and unity. ***Response***
3. That worldly pride may be brought low and the earth’s afflicted lifted up on the pathway of God’s justice. ***Response***
4. That those exiled from their homes by violence and terror may soon exchange the garments of sorrow for robes of rejoicing. ***Response***
5. That our prayer and our presence here in this group may encourage the sick and homebound of our parish community. ***Response***
6. That the One who began the good work of the gospel in us will carry it through to completion up to the day of Christ Jesus. ***Response***

Pause for participants to offer personal intentions out loud.

Leader: We offer these prayers through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Closing Prayer

Prayer for those who have died from COVID-19

Merciful Lord,
In your earthly life,
you showed great compassion to the sick
and by your own suffering and death,
you won for us everlasting life.
You know that the world is suffering from the coronavirus
and that this dreaded virus has claimed countless victims –
people of every age, of every nation, and of all faiths.
We come before you to commend the souls of our faithful departed
who have died from the coronavirus.
When they struggled to breathe,
you were there as their Great Physician,
When they were separated from their loved ones,
you assured them with your abiding Spirit,
When they died without family at their side,
you were there as brother and friend.
May they know the joy of seeing your face
and feel the warmth of your loving embrace.
Welcome them into your heavenly kingdom,
where you live and reign for ever and ever.
Amen.

Living Advent: Practice for the Week

Each of us is called to be a 'messenger' of God in this world.
Contact someone in your family, parish or community who you know needs to
hear an encouraging word at the moment. Spend a little time with them.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Opening Prayer

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ever faithful to your promises and ever close to your Church:
the earth rejoices in hope of the Saviour's coming,
in his presence now with us, and looks forward with longing
to his glorious return at the end of time.

Prepare our hearts and remove the sadness that hinders us from feeling the joy and hope
which his deepened presence will bestow, for he is Lord for ever and ever.
Amen.

Gospel Reading

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There stands among you, unknown to you, the one who is coming after me.

A man came, sent by God.
His name was John.
He came as a witness,
as a witness to speak for the light,
so that everyone might believe through him.
He was not the light,
only a witness to speak for the light.



This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, 'I am not the Christ.' 'Well then,' they asked 'are you Elijah?' 'I am not' he said. 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.' So they said to him, 'Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?' So John said, 'I am, as Isaiah prophesied:

a voice that cries in the wilderness:
Make a straight way for the Lord.'

Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, 'Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the prophet?' John replied, 'I baptise with water; but there stands among you – unknown to you – the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap.' This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Opening the Scriptures:

Midway through Advent we turn to the Gospel of John. It is 'Laetare Sunday', the Sunday of joy. Christmas is near and a profound sense of joy echoes through this Sunday's readings. The Gospel today makes clear that John (the Baptist) is sent from God to 'testify' and give 'witness' to the Light. As John testifies to the Light, others will come to believe and have faith in Jesus the 'Light of the World'.

When some priests, Levites and teachers of the Jewish people are sent to question John about his identity, he is adamant. John is not the Messiah, nor Elijah or the prophet to come. John wants to make sure that his role is not mistaken for that of Jesus. He is simply one crying in the desert urging people to prepare for the Lord's coming; and he is not even worthy to remove his Master's sandals.

John cleared a path for the coming of Jesus, and ever since then 'the lives of believers have been the pathway through which the Messiah has entered the world'. (Bergant)

Question for Personal Reflection:

How do you give 'witness' to the light of Christ in your life?

Questions for Group Reflection:

Share some of your memories and experiences of people who have drawn you closer to Christ during 2020. What was it about them that made such a difference to your life and faith?

John was a humble man who knew his place as a servant of Christ. Where do you see humility and service today? At home? In your parish? In the world? In what ways have they contributed to the healing of the world?

Paths to Healing:

The Local Community

We live in communities and neighbourhoods. These are the towns and cities where we work and interact with each other; the places we gather to shop and socialise; the places where we live as next door neighbours. It is precisely here in society, that Christians are called to mediate the healing of Christ, who "comes like the dawn from on high".

While the pandemic has affected (and is still affecting) millions of lives in many ways, it is particularly the suffering of the most vulnerable among us that has come to light during this time. One need only remember the elderly, those who live alone or have some form of medical illness, and those who are struggling materially, to sense the magnitude of the hardship being endured through this pandemic. Many are shocked to hear of 'food insecurity' as an everyday issue in Australia today!

Pope Francis calls us to "draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we can recognise the suffering Christ" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 210). He reminds us that "God's hearts has a special place for the poor" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 197); and we see this so dramatically revealed at Bethlehem where God becomes poor, born in utter vulnerability and poverty. When the Pope calls Christians to "draw near" to those who are suffering among us, he does not mean that we are simply to develop programs to assist them, critical as these are. Rather, he says we are to approach them with a certain loving 'attentiveness', which considers the other "in a certain sense as one with ourselves". (*Evangelii Gaudium* 199). "We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voices to their causes,...to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 190).

How does one make real the healing of Christ in a time of uncertainty, fear and anxiety? It may be that in a time of 'social distancing' and uncertainty, we deliberately smile more when we are out shopping, or in a café. At a time when one cough can turn heads in a shopping aisle, we are the ones who do have a greeting and a smile for strangers! Beyond a smile and a wave in our streets and towns, it may be that we make a more concerted effort to provide food and everyday necessities in our communities – to truly support St Vincent de Paul, or some other community service group.

Some of us were shocked recently to learn that a school leavers' activity during an end of year 'scavenger hunt' on the east coast was to 'spit on a homeless person'! How wonderful it would be if some of the healing work of Christ that is done in our communities this Christmas, is published for the encouragement of all.

For Reflection and Sharing:

Some have suggested that there was a 'softening' between people during the height of the lockdown. Did you notice people becoming more aware of each other during that time? People being more willing to 'reach out'? Share some examples with the group.

Who do you think is struggling the most in your town during this pandemic? Where do you see the healing of Christ at work – even beyond your parish?

Intercessions

Response: *Come, Lord Jesus*

Leader: With thanksgiving, let us make our prayers known to God who is always near.

1. For all those baptised in water and anointed with the Holy Spirit: May we serve the world by proclaiming the good news of the One who is coming. ***Response***
2. For all those nations at war with one another: May they turn from conflict toward mutual and lasting respect. ***Response***
3. For all in need of food or clothing, for those deprived of adequate housing and suitable employment: May these blessings soon be theirs. ***Response***
4. For all those who are victims of greed, fraud and the abuse of power: May the judgement which the Messiah brings separate the wheat of integrity from the chaff of injustice. ***Response***
5. For those in our community who will find the coming Christmas season a time of anxiety: May we support them with our prayers and assist them with our resources. ***Response***
6. For this group gathered together to pray: May our gentleness and love be known to everyone. ***Response***

Pause for participants to offer personal intentions out loud.

Leader: We offer these prayers through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Closing Prayer

Prayer for those who have died from COVID-19

Merciful Lord,
In your earthly life,
you showed great compassion to the sick
and by your own suffering and death,
you won for us everlasting life.
You know that the world is suffering from the coronavirus
and that this dreaded virus has claimed countless victims –
people of every age, of every nation, and of all faiths.
We come before you to commend the souls of our faithful departed
who have died from the coronavirus.
When they struggled to breathe,
you were there as their Great Physician,
When they were separated from their loved ones,
you assured them with your abiding Spirit,
When they died without family at their side,
you were there as brother and friend.
May they know the joy of seeing your face
and feel the warmth of your loving embrace.
Welcome them into your heavenly kingdom,
where you live and reign for ever and ever.
Amen.

Living Advent: Practice for the Week

One of the most powerful ways the 'light' of God shines in this world is through the practical love we show others – especially the most vulnerable. Contribute to St Vincent de Paul Christmas hampers and appeals this week. Leave a gift in the Christmas giving box in your local supermarket.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Opening Prayer

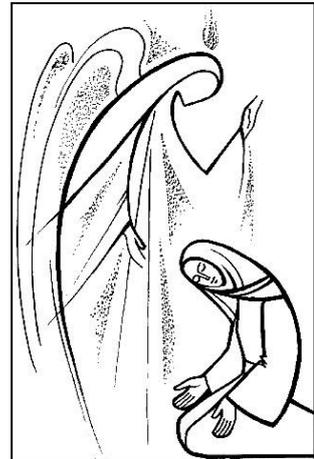
Father, all powerful God, your eternal Word took flesh on our earth
when the Virgin Mary placed her life at the service of your plan.
Lift our minds in watchful hope to hear the voice which announces his glory
and open our minds to receive the Spirit who prepares us for the deepening presence
of the Lord come among us.
We ask this through Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Gospel Reading

Luke 1:26-38

You will conceive and bear a son.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?' 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you' the angel answered 'and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.' 'I am the handmaid of the Lord,' said Mary 'let what you have said be done to me.' And the angel left her.



The Gospel of the Lord.

Opening the Scriptures:

The Gospels for the fourth Sunday of Advent always tell of some event immediately preceding the birth of Jesus. This year (B), we turn to Luke's Gospel and the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel.

The announcement of the conception and birth of Jesus to Mary, signals that the long awaited time of the Messiah's coming is at hand. God is finally fulfilling his plan and responding to the hopes and dreams of his people!

God chooses a young woman who is making wedding plans in an insignificant little town in Galilee, to be the Mother of the Messiah. She, a virgin, will give birth to a son who is to be called 'Jesus' (God saves).

Mary is at first 'deeply disturbed' by the angel's greeting, not knowing what all this means. On hearing that this son she is to bear will play a central role in God's plan for the world, she questions 'how' this can happen as she is a virgin. The angel declares that she will be overshadowed by God's power and Holy Spirit, and that the conception will be God's doing. Finally, Mary embraces the 'impossible', with all the hardships it will entail, and accepts the will of God for her life. With her acceptance the Word becomes flesh.

Mary accepts her mission, trusting God in all his mysterious ways. And so, 'Christ is now in history...and in the womb of his people' (Romero).

Question for Personal Reflection:

In the lead up to Christmas, how am I being called to say 'YES' to God's presence within me and others?

Questions for Group Reflection:

Mary embraced the 'impossible' in her life, while trusting in God's grace. What are some 'impossible' challenges we face today as Christians and parishes? How can we draw on the grace of God more deeply?

What inspires you most about Mary and her response to God?

Paths to Healing:

The Parish Community

Pope St John Paul II described the Parish as "the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters". It is the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ living at the 'grassroots' level of our communities!

This Parish Community, our 'spiritual home', continues to bear the marks of the health crisis affecting so much of our world today. Protocols for cleaning, distancing, and gathering together remain in place; and we are still adjusting to the changes in our liturgy necessitated by the pandemic.

In the meantime our parishes find themselves in the midst of an Australian community dealing with many other challenges. There are many signs of emotional and economic strain all around us, as well as uncertainty about the future. So, how can our parishes be communities of healing? As Advent draws to a close, how can our parishes 'be' the presence and 'coming' of Christ into these fragmented times.

The words of Pope Francis are helpful here. The parish is "a community of communities, or sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey..." The parish must truly be "in contact with the homes and the lives of its people", and be "an environment for growth in the Christian life." (*Evangelii Gaudium* 28).

To be a more effective sign of Christ, the parish is called to constantly grow in love and unity. In a world of individualism, anxiety and sometimes superficial relationships, people long for a deep sense of belonging and communion with each other. The parish that shines within the local community for

its unity and love truly becomes a sign of healing and hope. The parish that actively works for reconciliation and forgiveness among its members, will be a sure sign that Christ the healer is among us. The parish that fosters authentic community is vital today. It must help its members to invest time and energy in engaging personally with each other, and provide opportunities for meaningful conversation. Sometimes conversation remains very much at a surface level in our parishes. Today as we face the uncertainties of life we need ‘spaces’ where we can truly speak and listen to each other.

Our parishes are also called to be welcoming and reflective communities, where people beyond the parish are able to bring their searching questions for meaning today. Parishes must reach out and invite those who are seeking meaning and community in the midst of the pandemic, and offer them support, love and guidance.

Finally, the truly healing parish is the deeply prayerful community, centred on Christ, full of compassion and love, especially for the most vulnerable.

For Reflection and Sharing:

Share some good news stories about how your parish is responding to the needs of the most vulnerable in your community at this time.

What is happening in your parish to foster a sense of love and community among parishioners?

Intercessions

Response: *Come, Lord Jesus*

Leader: Placing our trust in the Lord who provides for the needs of his flock, let us pray.

1. That the church, renouncing any desire for worldly power, may seek only to serve in the name of the Lord. ***Response***
2. That all the nations of the earth, forsaking violence and vengeance, may greet one another as brothers and sisters. ***Response***
3. That Christians may hasten to the aid of those who are in anguish of body, mind or spirit. ***Response***
4. That those who await the birth of a child may delight in the mystery and miracle of childbirth. ***Response***
5. That those who are travelling at this time of year may reach their destination safely and find refreshment and joy in the hospitality they receive. ***Response***
6. That we who pray together may translate our prayers into a living witness of striving to do God’s will. ***Response***

Pause for participants to offer personal intentions out loud.

Leader: We offer these prayers through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Closing Prayer

Prayer for those who have died from COVID-19

Merciful Lord,
In your earthly life,
you showed great compassion to the sick
and by your own suffering and death,
you won for us everlasting life.
You know that the world is suffering from the coronavirus
and that this dreaded virus has claimed countless victims –
people of every age, of every nation, and of all faiths.
We come before you to commend the souls of our faithful departed
who have died from the coronavirus.
When they struggled to breathe,
you were there as their Great Physician,
When they were separated from their loved ones,
you assured them with your abiding Spirit,
When they died without family at their side,
you were there as brother and friend.
May they know the joy of seeing your face
and feel the warmth of your loving embrace.
Welcome them into your heavenly kingdom,
where you live and reign for ever and ever.
Amen.

Living Advent: Practice for the Week

Jesus is born into our world to reconcile and heal a broken world. This week, seek forgiveness and reconciliation in your life. Pray for those who have hurt you. Apologise to someone you have offended or hurt. Celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. Walk away from destructive conversations or gossip.

Final Prayer

God of comfort,
these times seem so uncertain, so scary.
The world seems darker than it has in the past
and I am less sure of myself.
Maybe that's a good thing;
maybe now I am turning to you
with a realisation that I need you so much more
and that my life is not in my own control.
Let me not forget all of those around the world
who are frightened at this moment.
Help those who are victims of terrorism and war.
Be with those who have lost so much in the past year.
Hold us all in your loving arms and let us be comforted
by the strength and peace you want so much to offer us
through the birth of your son, Jesus.
Thank you for the many gifts you offer us.
Amen



We share this poem written from the experience of a
"Lockdown Easter" this year.
It captures much of our Advent program and brings such hope.

Easter 2020

And where is Jesus, this strange Easter day?
Not lost in our locked churches, anymore
than he was sealed in that dark sepulchre.
The locks are loosed; the stone is rolled away,
and he is up and risen, long before,
alive, at large, and making his strong way
into the world he gave his life to save,
no need to seek him in his empty grave.

He might have been a wafer in the hands
of priests this day, or music from the lips:
of red-robed choristers, instead he slips
away from Church, shakes off our linen bands
to don his apron with a nurse: he grips
and lifts a stretcher, soothes with gentle hands
the frail flesh of the dying, gives them hope,
breathes with the breathless, lends them strength to cope.

On Thursday we applauded, for he came
and served us in a thousand names and faces
mopping our sickroom floors and catching traces
of that corona which was death to him:
Good Friday happened in a thousand places
where Jesus held the helpless, died with them
that they might share his Easter in their need,
now they are risen with him, risen indeed.



Malcolm Guite
"God and the Pandemic" N.T. Wright

Ten Ways to Keep a Holy Advent

Advent is a time to keep watch for the unexpected comings of God, to prepare our own hearts to make room for Him, and to be ourselves signs to the world around us of divine compassion and justice.

In a month that is already far too busy and rushed, these ten practices are not offered as one more to-do list to work through, but as ways to slow down, take a breath, pay attention, and make room in our lives for God.



Interrupting

Breaking the flow of habitual patterns can prompt new kinds of noticing and stimulate awareness. Once a week, or once a day, practice difference, welcome, surprise.

Take a route to work, the shops or school that you have never used before. What do you see? Go for a walk in a place or at a time that is not usual, and pay attention, trying to notice details of colour, movement and shape before words and labels start to fill your head.



Silencing

At a fixed time each day, spend 5 or 10 minutes in wordless silence before God. Pay attention to how your soul wants to use that quiet time.

Spend one whole evening in total stillness and silence. Turn everything off, light a candle, abstain from books, music and television and stop the talking in your head. Listen. Who is knocking at the door of your heart? What are your deepest longings trying to tell you?



Waiting

Make every experience of waiting in daily life a time of prayerful attention to the hope and desire within you. What are all of the things you are waiting for? But what are you *really* waiting for?

Practice attentive and patient waiting. While waiting for your evening meal to cook, take the time to appreciate the effort that has gone into preparing the food you will be eating; be aware of those who will not be eating a meal this evening; be grateful for the gift of food.



Listening

When you are out in the world, pause and close your eyes. Concentrate on what you can hear. Make those sounds the subject of a prayer. Spend some time each day in a place of stillness where you can listen to your heart, and listen for God.

In conversations with friends, family or strangers, listen for what wants to be heard.

Spend some time each day with music that awakens your heart and evokes the beauty of holiness for you.



Watching

Rise early one morning to watch night turn to day. Fit your prayer to the slow rhythm of the dawn. Pick a day to watch both the sunrise and the sunset from a place that is not usual for you.

Notice the faces of strangers. Where do you see Christ in these faces?

Watch a movie that focusses your attention on the traces of God in our world and in our lives.



Praying

Cultivate a daily prayer practice, at a set time if possible, and keep it faithfully, even when (or especially when) you are pressed for time or distracted.

For at least part of one day each week, every time you enter a new space or begin a new activity, invite Jesus to be there with you by saying “Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus”.



Reflecting

Select a book for daily spiritual reading.

Meditate on the daily readings for Advent.

Write in a journal a few times each week. Try beginning with “I am waiting for...” or “I am longing for...”



Loving

Visit the sick, the lonely, the sad, and the prisoner. Practice random acts of kindness. Pray that you may be a sign of Christ to everyone that you meet. Pray every day for the person that you find it the hardest to pray for.

Whenever you are in a public place, spend some time praying for everyone that you see around you. Make a conscious act of seeing Christ in every face.



Giving

Volunteer somewhere that you have never helped before. Send money to a good cause.

Make a donation to a food bank or Christmas Appeal.

Pick one social concern that engages your attention and entrust it through prayer to God’s mercy and care.

Make a change in your own way of living that will contribute to “a new heaven and a new earth”.



Receiving

Pay attention. Stay awake. Be ready. Open the door of your heart to welcome the “God of Surprises” who knows you by heart.

