

Parramatta City Uniting Church

28 November 2021

Advent 1



WELCOME

Today we celebrate the first Sunday in Advent. The beginning of a new year with all of our hopes and dreams in God's promises to the world. Welcome to this time of worship as we turn our attention to all that God reveals to us. Wherever you are, may God's Spirit lift your spirit as we notice together the signs of God's coming to us.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The purple carpets under the jacaranda trees
The agapanthus bursting into bloom herald this Advent season.

Decorations in the shops, coloured lights on houses and gatherings with family and friends, begin the festivities of Christmas.

The Jesus story is all around us, but we can be too busy to let it shape us. So let us take a breath and ponder the Jesus story of love, compassion, generosity and the hope of peace on earth. Let us worship God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We acknowledge the Burrumattagal people of the Darug Nation, the first inhabitants and the traditional custodians of the land which our congregations usually meet. We pay our respects to their ancient culture, their elders past and present and their emerging leaders. We acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who now reside within this area. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT WREATH

Advent is a time of waiting and preparing to celebrate Jesus' birth. The wreath is round to remind us of God's unbroken love. And the green branches speak of new life and the four candles remind us of the gifts that God has given us. Hope, Peace, Love and Joy. The Center candle is the Christ candle and will be lit on Christmas day.

On this first Sunday in Advent, we celebrate God's gift to us of Hope. A hope that invites us to imagine a world where God's way is embraced and valued. A hope that challenges us to not be afraid of the things that are wrong with the world but to work with one another for a better world.

The flickering flame reminds us that our hope is lived out in prayer and action and can be fragile. We need one another to remind us that our hope is in God's promises.

(Candle is lit)

May it be that hope springs up in us and emboldens us to imagine God's dream and embrace God's promises.

Song: Christ be our Light

Longing for light (Christ be our Light)

Bernadette Farrell

With permission Onelicense #A626308

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Longing for light we wait in darkness longing for truth
we turn to you
make us your own your holy people
light for the world to see
Refrain
Christ be our light
shine in our hearts shine through the darkness
Christ be our light shine in your church gathered today | 2. Longing for peace our world is troubled longing for
hope many despair
your word alone has power to save us
make us your living voice. Refrain |
| | 4. Longing for shelter many are homeless
longing for warmth many are cold
make us your building sheltering others
walls made of living stone. Refrain |

3. Longing for food many are hungry
longing for water many still thirst
make us your bread broken for others
shared until all are fed. **Refrain**

5. Many the gifts many the people
many the hearts that yearn to belong
let us be servants to one another
making your kingdom come. **Refrain**

OPENING PRAYER AND AFFIRMATION

As we accept God's invitation to prayer let us turn our thoughts toward that which has blessed us, those who have encouraged us and the signs of hope in God's promises.

Loving God,

Our news sources, social media and isolation sometimes make it so hard to experience the many blessings that surround us each day. They can make it hard for us to see what is right with the world and they can almost obliterate the beautiful acts of kindness, the solidarity in a smile and the pleasure of giving and receiving the simplest of gifts. We need your help to see how love is at work in our world and in our lives.

As we emerge from isolation, as we face a world that will never be the same, as we lament the relationships lost, the dreams shattered and the changed landscape of your church, we need your spirit to help us embrace your hope.

Let us look for the signs of your presence in the world in which we live and in the lives of one another.

For the blessings of generosity in wealth, in kind and in spirit

For the blessings of commitment to find a more sustainable way to live

For the blessings of solidarity in those who offer comfort and

For the blessings of this planet sustaining life and renewing creation when we give it a chance

For the blessings of friendship, community and love

For the blessings of the prophets among us who challenge us and hold out hope for us

Loving God, for these and every blessing around us – with give our thanks

As we turn our attention to the many blessings around us we can also see how easily we can be lulled into negativity and behaviours that destroy goodwill.

If we have been less than generous

If we have been caught up in our own struggles

If we have been thoughtless in our use of resources

If we have preferred to notice other's failings and failed to see their value

If we have succumbed to insecurity and fear mongering, self righteousness or arrogance

Forgive us

What you ask of us is hard, but not too hard.

By your spirit, by your grace, by your community you provide us with all that we need and you never give up on us.

So sustain our hope, set our paths on your way and let us be grace-filled people of blessing. Amen.

Words of Assurance

People of God, hear these words:

'the kingdom of God is near.'

'the kingdom of God is among us!'

We are forgiven and we are loved.

Thanks be to God

ALL AGE MESSAGE - Patrick's Curiosity by Rhonda White

Patrick was home alone. Everyone was out being busy preparing for Christmas. Already the Christmas tree was up and there were already some presents under the tree. He'd checked and yes there was one for him.

"Now Patrick don't you go worrying that present." Said his mum as he poked and squeezed and rattled it. He could tell by its shape that it wasn't a new bike. It was too small. It wasn't a playstation because it was too light and it wasn't a puppy because it was too quiet and still. They were the things that he had put on his Christmas list. He simply couldn't think what the present could be.

"I want you to leave that present alone until Christmas morning." Said his mum.

That had been a few days ago. Try as he might he could not contain his curiosity. Every time he looked at the Christmas tree all he could see was the present with his name on it. Sometimes he thought it was even calling his name.

And now he had the house to himself. What if he had just a tiny peek. He could carefully lift the sticky tape so as not to tear the paper and then he might get at least a little clue as to what it could be. He knew he should wait but it seemed like his curiosity was going to swallow him up. So very carefully he lifted the present and started to work at the sticky tape being very careful not to tear the paper. After what seemed like forever he got a piece of the tape off only to discover that there was another piece underneath. Patrick was very patient and very careful but just as he almost had the tape off there was a loud bang of the front door and in walked his mother.

"Patrick!" she exclaimed "if you are doing what I think you're doing I am very disappointed."

Patrick felt very ashamed. "I'm sorry mum" he said, "I just can't help it, it's like I'm going to explode if I don't know."

Surprisingly, his mum said she understood and she took the present away and put it back under the Christmas tree. Then she sat down next to him and told him this story from another time and culture.

Once upon a time, when the world was new and everything was goodness, there lived a woman called Pandora. She was very talented. She had been given the gift of curiosity, the gift of speaking. She was also given a clay jar to look after with strict instructions to never open the jar. Well, you can imagine what happened. Her gift of curiosity became a problem for her and thinking that she could just take a peek she carefully twisted the lid. But as soon as it was loose it flew open and out of her hands

and suddenly the room was filled with all sorts of dark things, worries and gossip and fear and lies were flying around the room and then out the window. Pandora tried to put a lid on the jar but it was too late, everything that was bad in the world had escaped. She put the lid back on the jar and then wept and wept. How ashamed she felt. When her husband came home he heard her crying and she confessed to what she had done. But as she took the lid off again to show him that it was empty there at the bottom of the jar was the tiniest glow, she tipped the contents into her hand and it felt warm and somehow good. Her shame and her sadness seemed to lessen by this little warm glow.

“who are you?” she asked.

I am hope, said the warm glow. You can release me into the world too and wherever the bad things are I can help.

And with that she let hope fly around the room and out the window and surprisingly even though she couldn't see it anymore she could still feel its warmth and comfort. Hope didn't leave her and then she knew what she had to do. She had to take hope to the world.

“Patrick, waiting and preparing for Christmas reminds us of God's gift of hope to the world. That's why we wait and wonder about our Christmas presents. It's not just what's in them that's important but the waiting and wondering reminds us of God's gift of hope. God's promises for the world are our hopes too. That's why we wait.”

Patrick felt like there was much to think about. He wondered what hopes God might have for the world and he wondered what hopes God might have for him?

Even as he thought about it he felt a warm glow take away his shame. This gift of hope is a powerful thing he thought. And as he looked at the present under the Christmas tree, he knew that hope would help him to wait.

SONG:

Be still for the presence of the lord.....

David J Evans

With permission CCLI 70307

1. Be still for the presence of the Lord
the holy one is here
come bow before him now,
with reverence and fear
in him no sin is found
we stand on holy ground
be still for the presence of the Lord
the holy one is here

2. Be still for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around
he burns with holy fire
with splendour he is crowned
how awesome is the sight
our radiant king of light
be still for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around

3. Be still for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place
no work too hard for him
in faith receive from him
he comes to cleanse and heal

**to minister his grace
be still, for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place**

SCRIPTURE READINGS –

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 NRSV

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Luke 21:25-36 NRSV

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

RESPONSE - In this sacred story we hear God speak / **Thank you God for your words of life**

REFLECTION - BY RUTH WIVELL

In Advent we are waiting for two events. Two overwhelming, unplanned, earth-shattering events.

We are waiting for one thing that has already happened. And we are waiting for one thing that has not yet happened.

We are waiting for the birth of the Baby Jesus. We are waiting for the light of the world to come. The light who reveals to us God's love.

And we are also waiting for this other event. We are waiting on the Second Coming of Christ. We don't seem to talk about the Second Coming much. It's perhaps one of those embarrassing aspects of our faith that we are not quite sure about.

And maybe that's part of the reason why the waiting that's required for this event is a quite a bit harder. Perhaps, too, if we're honest with ourselves, for those of us who are privileged enough to have an education, possess citizenship, hold property, the Second Coming will not be good news. It will be a tilting away from the order and the systems that made us so privileged and made others so poor. In this way, perhaps the waiting is mixed with a kind of dread.

But still we wait. And in Advent we turn to the stories in the Bible that tell us about this kind of waiting. Year after year, we hear the stories of the prophets—Jeremiah, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary—all of whom are pointing towards a new thing that will make a massive difference to our world.

We are waiting in the way we were in lockdown last year. Do you remember what it was like at Easter 2020 when we didn't know what the future would hold? Now we know what life after the pandemic looks like and most of us in this privileged place are living in that reality already—we are able to hug our family members and eat together with friends. But remember what it was like before we knew things would work out in this way?

We were waiting and we weren't quite sure what we were waiting for. There was no counting down the days on a calendar with a daily chocolate and Bible verse. We were counting up the days we'd been housebound and home-schooling. We were unsure about whether we had enough dried beans and toilet paper. We were counting up the death toll.

It was hard, and, of course, for our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world it remains so.

During this time, the voices of our modern-day prophets rang out clearer than ever before. Voices of Common Grace, Greta Thunberg, and the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements reminded us that things are not right in our world. Our prophets have reminded us that things have been very wrong for a very long time, but also that there is an opportunity to "stitch a new garment" (Sonya Renee Taylor).

In this way, prophets not only foretell the future, but they tell us the truth. It's the hard truth about the reality of things as they are now. But it is also a truth that we can hope in, because it is God's truth. It is the truth that God is working to overturn things and we can be a part of it.

In this way, the hope the prophets have, and that we are called to have, is a muscular kind of a hope. It's not a conviction that everything will turn out fine. It's not a "she'll be right, mate" sort

of hope. It's really the assurance that what we are doing here—working for peace and justice as Jesus has shown us—has meaning, regardless of what happens to us (Vaclav Havel).

It's a hope that tells us to look honestly at things as they are, and to try to imagine things as they might be, were we to allow God to work in the world. It's the hope that Jeremiah has as he weeps over Jerusalem, as he calls out brokenness and sin. It's the hope he has as the city crumbles before his eyes. It is the hope he has as he assures the faithful that the devastation caused by various invasions would be reversed by God. Jeremiah and the people would have to wait a long time—600 some years—for the new Davidic line found in Jesus.

So it is with Jeremiah that we wait for the Baby Jesus who will reveal God's love, justice and righteousness in his lifetime. And we are waiting in the way that Jeremiah was—as unsure and as faithful as he was—as we wait for the Second Coming.

As a cluster of congregations, we are also in another kind waiting that might feel like a much smaller version of the Big Wait for the Second Coming. We are waiting, discerning what might be next for our cluster and our congregations. We know that God is calling us to something new, something that will express God's love, justice, and righteousness even more fully. But we're not sure how will this happen. It's exciting on the one hand, but, on the other, it can also be a source of frustration, exhaustion, and fear.

The Basis of Union beautifully sums up who we are and what we are doing during Advent, our season of experimentation, and indeed at all times: “The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.”

On that note, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians offers us encouragement on our way. This letter is actually the earliest New Testament text we have. The Christians of this period were certain that the Second Coming was just around the corner, and you get the sense of this imminence in Paul's letter as he expresses his joy in the Thessalonians.

He delights in them, not because they are perfect in their Christian life and faith, but because of their faith itself, and their lifestyle which marks them out from the secular society in which they live. He prays that most of all, they will be filled with love for one another and for everyone. He then prays that they will be centred in God so they will be blameless (not perfect) before God and welcomed with joy into the kingdom.

Let me be a bit like Timothy who tells Paul about the church in Thessalonica. I would like to share with you the good news that individuals have told me recently about the spirit of their congregations.

Northmead wrestles with different societal issues out of a desire to meaningfully connect with their community. They do works of justice related to issues of climate change, and they have a commitment to advocacy work with the Sydney Alliance. They sustain one another through their hospitality as they share food and stories, as with their pre-COVID morning teatimes.

Westmead is a congregation sustained by prayer and Bible-study. They are hospitable to community groups around them even as they support these folks—like immigrant mothers—to be hospitable among themselves. They see a practical or spiritual need, and they do their best to respond, believing that Jesus is among them and in everything they do.

Centenary welcomes people from all nationalities as they creatively bridge language divides. Their love is shown in the way they wrestle with difficult issues together while remaining hospitable to one another. And they care deeply—practically, spiritually, and emotionally—for one another during and following crises.

Leigh Memorial expresses God’s love as people care for each other and for those outside the church who struggle. They see themselves as being a part of a bigger mission—the Parramatta Mission—which is exciting even as it is challenging. There is a place for everyone. Even though each member is on a different journey, they are all trying to reveal God’s love.

I invite you to pray with me the words that St Paul has given us. Hold in your hearts and minds all our congregations gathered here. Hold, too, the Fijian congregation whose heart for mission is realised as they serve the community. Thank God for the ways that Jesus has been revealed in the faith and life of all our congregations. Pray that in Advent, and in our longer period of experimentation and discernment, that we might open the door just a little more to the love, justice, and righteousness that Jesus is calling us to.

Let us pray:

How can we thank God enough for you
in return for all the joy that we feel
before our God because of you?
Night and day we pray most earnestly
that we may see you face to face
and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.
Now may our God and Father himself
and our Lord Jesus
direct our way to you.
And may the Lord make you increase and abound
in love for one another and for all,
just as we abound in love for you.
And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness
that you may be blameless before our God and Father
at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.
Amen.

SONG: Lord Jesus we belong to you (Because we bear your name) (TIS 686)

*John Wilford Kleinig
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**1. Lord Jesus we belong to you
you live in us, we live in you
we live and work for you
— because we bear your name.**

**2. Help us receive each other Lord
for you receive the least of us
and come to us in them
— because we bear your name.**

**3. Help us receive each other Lord
for you receive the least of us**

**4. Let us acknowledge those as friends
who use your name to right a wrong**

and come to us in them
— because we bear your name.

but have not joined us yet
— because we bear your name.

5. Let nothing that we do or say
offend the weak so that they fall
and lose their faith in you
- because we bear your name.

6. Keep us from missing out on life
give hands that help and single sight,
and feet that walk your way
— because we bear your name.

7. You are the salt that cleanses us,
so clean us out and make us fit
for common life with you
— because we bear your name.

PRAYER FOR OTHERS

Gracious and loving God,
As we begin our Advent journey of preparation for Christmas, we pause to think about our world and its needs and how we might be bearers of hope.

Help us to want what you want for our world and for others
We pray for generosity and a willingness to share. We particularly think of those who are hungry, homeless or hope-less. Increase in us our capacity to share.

Help us to want what you want for our world and for others

We pray for peace.
We particularly think of those who are living in places of terror – for those who are constantly afraid. We pray those living in war zones and places of civil unrest, we pray for those living with domestic violence and we pray for those terrorized by mental illness. Increase in us our capacity to be a peaceful presence in our world and in our relationships.
Help us to want what you want for our world and for others

We pray for goodwill.
We particularly pray for all who are caught in the machine of consumption, where greed and looking out for oneself is the norm.
We pray for those who have experienced injustice and who find it difficult to hold on to hope.

And we pray for those who are vilified, outcaste or patronized because they are different. Increase in us our capacity to bring goodwill into our world and our relationships.

Help us to want what you want for our world and for others

We pray for healing.

We particularly pray for those who find this time of year a time of sadness. For those who miss loved ones, for those who are estranged from their families, for those who are ill and for those whose hearts are broken. Increase in us our capacity to bring healing through your gifts of hope.

Help us to want what you want for our world and for others

Amen.

BLESSING

May hope shape your comings and goings in this week ahead
May God's blessing be apparent to you and to all you meet
The blessing of the one who creates you
The blessing of the one who guides you
The blessing of the one who enables you
Be upon you now and forever. Amen.

BLESSING SONG – May the feet of God (Christmas Blessing) TIS 779

Aubrey Podlich 1946-

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**May the feet of God walk with you
and God's hand hold you tight
may the eye of God be on you
and God's ear hear your cry**

**May the smile of God be for you
and God's breath give you life
may the child of God grow in you
and God's love bring you home**