

Advent 2024

A resource for parishes and small groups

Leader's guidance

Thank you for considering facilitating an Advent reflection group in your parish. This resource invites parish participants to journey through the Advent time of preparation and anticipation, in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world.

Each week we will focus on one of four Advent themes – hope, love, joy and peace – and reflect on one of the Sunday readings.

Getting ready

Identify a suitable space and time and advertise your gathering. One of the best ways of promoting the Advent reflections will be through personal contact and invitation. You could also advertise on social media, perhaps by setting up an event page, and in Church newsletters.

If possible, ask in advance if you want anyone to read the scripture passages or prayers, so that they can prepare.

On the day

This is not intended to be a prescriptive list but rather some suggestions. You will know your community best!

- Set up chairs in a circle so that everyone feels equally involved.
- Greet participants as they enter. Tea, coffee and biscuits on arrival are always appreciated and encourage people to chat informally.
- Ask individuals to introduce themselves to the group by saying their name. If people do not know each other well, you might invite them to share a little more as an 'icebreaker' such as what has brought them to the group or their favourite Advent/Christmas tradition.
- If you have a large group (more than 12) consider forming small groups to allow individuals more time to speak. If you do form small groups, you may like to gather everyone and let groups report briefly on their conversations.
- Encourage people to participate by acknowledging and valuing all contributions. Invite, but don't pressure, quieter individuals to share.
- Introduce CAFOD as the international aid and development organisation of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. If possible, you may wish to show a short film explaining our work, such as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7a0t0XUwkao&t=215s>

Week 1: Hope

Opening prayer

As we light the first candle on our Advent wreath, may we be awake to the signs of God's coming reign all around us. Lord, fill us with faith and courage, so we may proclaim that your hope is at hand. Amen.

(Light the first candle in your Advent wreath.)

Scripture

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And 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, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:25-28)

Reflection

As the calendar year draws towards its close and the days grow darker and shorter, a new Church year begins, and we enter the Advent season looking ahead for the coming of the light.

As always, we begin our Christian year with waiting. We wait in anticipation for the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas and we wait in hope for the day when Jesus comes again.

Yet, this is not passive waiting, as this startling reading from Luke's Gospel makes clear. Amidst chaos and distress, as people faint in fear and with the very powers of heavens shaken, we are called to stand tall and lift up our heads. Rather than allowing fear and confusion to paralyse us as we see the many problems in our world, we look up. We eagerly await and work for the coming of God's reign in our midst.

Christ is here, calling us to "keep awake", and trust that his light within us is stronger than the darkness. On this first Sunday of Advent let's join Saint Paul's prayer, asking God to increase our love for all people, so that we can bring hope and healing to all creation.

For discussion

- On difficult days, what gives you hope? What signs of hope, near or far, have lately come to your attention?
- In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes: "Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile" (#55). When have you witnessed 'bold' hope?
- How might your hope for the future help you to work for justice now?

Closing prayer

We stay awake, watch and wait,
for we do not know the hour
or the day of your arrival.

Come, Lord, bringer of hope.

Create in us a desire
for a world transformed
to reflect your glory.

Come, Lord, bringer of hope.

Lead us in your ways,
as together we make a change,
to dispel the darkness of poverty.

Come, Lord, bringer of hope.

Week 2: Love

Opening prayer

As we light the second candle on our Advent wreath, we rejoice in God's love for us and our love for each other. Lord, help us to share your love.

(Light the first and second candle on your Advent wreath.)

Scripture

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough places shall become level ways,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3:1-6)

Reflection

It was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Herod was tetrarch in Galilee. Annas and Caiaphas served as high priests. By placing John's preaching in this context of the political and religious leaders of the time, Luke reminds us that God breaks into our history and continues to send his messengers into the fabric of our everyday life.

Even as we eagerly anticipate our future encounter with the Lord in fullness, we are called to come together to make a straight path for the Lord today. One way we can do this is through supporting the global Caritas International family, of which CAFOD is a part. The word Caritas is Latin for love.

Tetiana Stawnychy, President of Caritas Ukraine, said “There is something about the way the Caritas family works. It's a community – a community of people who are supporting one another and there is a strength in that of solidarity. And you feel it both at the level in Ukraine and you also feel it with you, with our supporters from outside of Ukraine, that together we are creating this one community, this solidarity that is acting in opposite to war, in opposite to destruction and chaos.”

Preparing the way of the Lord means more than hoping for the final fulfilment of God's promise. It means actively recognising God is at work in the world and joining in this work, participating in the creation of a better world for all people.

For discussion

What makes you feel loved? How do you share love with others?

John the Baptist preaches a baptism of “repentance”, which describes a change of mind and heart. What change of mind or heart could help you walk more in God’s way of love?

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes: “By its very nature, love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others as part of a continuing adventure that makes every periphery converge in a greater sense of mutual belonging. As Jesus told us: “You are all brothers” (Mt 23:8).” #95
What might this mean for us as individuals and as a community?

Closing prayer

We repent and are sorry
for the damage we have caused
to our earth and one another.

Come, Lord, bearer of love.

Guide us as we seek
to straighten the paths of injustice
and prepare a way for you.

Come, Lord, bearer of love.

Lead us in your ways,
as together we make a change
and reach out in love to others.

Come, Lord, bearer of love.

Week 3: Joy

Opening prayer

As we light the third candle on our Advent wreath, we celebrate the good news of great joy for all people brought by the coming of Christ. Lord, help us share your joy.

(Light the first, second and third candle on your Advent wreath.)

Scripture

The crowds asked John the Baptist, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunic is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptised and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorised to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptise you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. (Luke 3:1-18)

Reflection

John the Baptist places a demanding expectation before the people of his day. His words are direct, clear and explicit: share what you have, be honest, do not oppress people.

When a missile was shot down over the roof of her apartment in Kherson, Irini knew it was time to get her family of four to safety. They were relieved to find a new house, away from the front line but knew they would struggle to survive the harsh Ukrainian winter without money or fuel.

Thankfully, determined local experts at Caritas were able to help the family with fuel so that they would have heat during the worst months. The family gathers in just two rooms to help everyone keep warm in the freezing conditions.

Despite the challenges, Irini shows the kind of open-handed generosity that John the Baptist speaks of today, sharing her firewood with others who were not able procure any themselves. She says: "For me, warmth means family, peace, friendship, support."

Today is Gaudete Sunday (Latin for 'rejoice') and as we dwell on the words of John the Baptist and the example of Irini, we are reminded of the joy that is offered to us in living out the gospel, in the concrete actions of sharing and loving that bring new life to the world and to us.

For discussion

- When has joy come to you in unexpected ways? How have you shared joy with others?
- What connections can you make between joy and justice?
- How can we sing a song of joy, even in difficult times?

Closing prayer

In times of despair,
we seek comfort in your presence.
We wait in hope for you.

Come, Lord, source of joy.

Move us to be good news in our world
and to stand alongside
our sisters and brothers in need.

Come, Lord, source of joy.

Lead us in your ways
as together we make a change
so all people may rejoice and be glad.

Come, Lord, source of joy.

Week 4: Peace

There are 2 versions of the week 4 resource. The first is for those groups meeting during Advent and the second for groups who gather in the Christmas season.

Week 4: Peace (Advent)

Opening prayer

As we light our candle today, we pray for our troubled world, so full of conflict. Lord, help us to be a people of peace.

(Light the first, second, third and fourth candle on your Advent wreath.)

Scripture

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Luke 1: 39-45)

Reflection

In today's gospel, Mary and Elizabeth, having both received surprising news of their pregnancies, are preparing to become mothers for the first time. While it is joyful news, it is also challenging. We witness them turn to each other in love and embrace the promise that God will be with them.

The two women affirm, share and celebrate the blessing they have been given. In their joyful encounter they support each other as they look forward to what God is doing in and through them.

And then Mary bursts her great song of praise, the Magnificat. She sings of the great reversal when the powerful are pulled down, the lowly lifted up, the hungry fed and the rich sent away empty. Shalom, the Hebrew word for "peace", means the end of war and conflict, but it also means being in right relationship with God, each other and the planet. It is of this deep peace, the peace of compassionate justice, that Mary sings.

For discussion

When you picture peace, what images come to mind?

What steps can we take to make a just peace a reality?

Jesus is born amongst the oppressed and those in poverty. How does that impact our celebration of Christmas?

Closing prayer

We listen to your word
as it whispers in our hearts:
"Do not be afraid."

Come, Lord, prince of peace.

Grant us the courage
to build peace in our homes,
our local community and our world.

Come, Lord, prince of peace.

Lead us in your ways,
as together we make a change
and share your peace with all.

Come, Lord, prince of peace.

Week 4: Peace (Christmas)

Opening prayer

As we light our candles today, we pray for our troubled world, so full of conflict. Lord, help us to be a people of peace as we celebrate your birth.

Scripture

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2: 8-14)

Reflection

"Fear not." With these beautiful words the angel of the Lord greets the shepherds and the heavenly host sing of peace on earth.

In our war-torn world, awash with division, many people are afraid. We see the suffering caused by conflict in the Middle East, Ukraine and other places.

But today we can also hope for restoration and healing, for the baby lying in the manger is the Prince of Peace.

This Christmas let us pray that that we will commit to God's vision of a just peace and seek to build a world where no one need be afraid of violence, oppression or poverty.

For discussion

When you picture peace, what images come to mind?

What steps can we take to make a just peace a reality?

Jesus is born amongst the oppressed and those in poverty. How does that impact our celebration of Christmas?

Closing prayer

We listen to your word
as it whispers in our hearts:
"Do not be afraid."

Welcome Lord, prince of peace.

Grant us the courage
to build peace in our homes,
our local community and our world.

Welcome Lord, prince of peace.

Lead us in your ways,
as together we make a change
and share your peace with all.

Welcome Lord, prince of peace.

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