



## ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS

*By Simon Barrow*

**Advent** is a time of waiting and expectation, as the possibility of revelation and revolution slowly dawns – the birth of a new era in Christ, challenging the religious, social and political assumptions of the governing empire. God’s realm is one where the *status quo* is turned on its head: the first end up last, the last come first. A divine reversal. Our reflections for 2014 reflect the theme of AlterNATIVITY. Below you will find a biblical reading, short thought and action/prayer through to **Christmas**. In the second section are four meditations for each of the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas Day in the Western tradition (*God’s alternative, God’s invitation, God’s surprise, God’s peace and God’s birth*). Greetings, too, to those who follow the Eastern calendar, to searchers, sceptics and believers alike... all who puzzle over the appearance of Jesus and what it might mean in a complex, contemporary world.

### PART ONE

#### **1 December**

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.” (Isaiah 43. 2)

Our waiting for the arrival of God’s deliverance is punctuated by suffering and anxiety. Today is also World Aids Day.

Action: support the churches’ work on HIV/AIDS -  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21098>

#### **2 December**

After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come here, and I will show you what must take place after this." (Revelation 4. 1)

Advent offers a glimpse of a transformed future for those living at the edge.

Action: Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church's winter homelessness shelter is run by C4WS, and we host them one night per week -  
<http://www.c4wshomelessproject.org/>

### **3 December**

And Simon and those who were with him pursued him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Every one is searching for you." (Mark 4. 36)

While we search for Jesus, he is looking out for all those pushed to the margins by cruelty and neglect.

Action: support the victims of modern day trafficking:  
<http://kahaila.com/charity/ellas-home>

### **4 December**

God looked for justice,  
but behold, bloodshed;  
for righteousness,  
but behold, a cry! (Isaiah 5. 7)

In Advent we are reminded of the very different realm God is inviting us to share.

Action: Help turn remembrance of bloodshed into active work for peace -  
<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/annualappeal2014>

### **5 December**

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2. 5)

The coming One brings healing of body, mind and spirit.

Action: Follow the journey of a Christian Aid health worker in Kenya -  
<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/whatwedo/in-focus/hiv-malaria-health/delivering-healthcare/>

### **6 December**

The angel said, "You must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings." (Revelation 10. 11)

Christ calls us to speak the truth in anticipation of the future God will gift us.

Action: Support Amnesty International's campaign against the silencing of dissident voices - <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/issues/Free-speech>

### **7 December**

"The one who is coming will be highly honoured all around the world. And he will be the source of our peace." (Micah 5. 4)

Christ's difficult peace is not an undisturbed life, but a sense of restored community that impels the church to put reconciliation into action.

Action: Join Ekklesia's discussion about whether and how a 'peace church' is possible - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21111>

### **8 December**

"The people have refused the waters of Shilo'ah that flow gently, and now melt in fear." (Isaiah 8. 6).

In rejecting the gentleness of God and the fragility of the earth, we bequeath a bitter future. But in Jesus' coming a whole new future becomes possible.

Action: Explore the possibility of a Fossil Free Christmas - <http://gofossilfree.org/uk/>

### **9 December**

"And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars." (Rev 12. 1)

Mary is simultaneously an ordinary woman and the one who gives birth to a new life for the whole world.

Action: Help the Girls Network, which supports an positive future for young women worldwide. Find out more here - <http://thegirlsnetwork.org.uk>

### **10 December**

"No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man." (Mark 3. 27)

Strengthening the weak and finding a new kind of gentle strength in the company of Jesus is part of anticipating his coming.

Action: London Citizens, of which Bloomsbury Baptist is part, wants to 'reweave the fabric of society'. Find out more here - <http://www.londoncitizens.com>

## 11 December

“Wail, for the day of the Lord is near!  
It will come as destruction from the Almighty.” (Isaiah 13. 6)

God’s coming is a threat to patterns of domination, slavery and violence to which we have become too accustomed.

Action: Poor Brazilians won a David v Goliath struggle for land and justice. Find out more here - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21088>

## 12 December

“And he said to them, ‘Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand?’” (Mark 4. 21)

Standing by the light of the coming Christ in a world that often lives under the darkest shadows is a constant challenge.

Action: Pray for those who witness for peace in Israel-Palestine. Find out more here - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21101>

## 13 December

“And after these things I saw another messenger come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory.” (Rev 18. 1)

True power, shown in Christ, brings hope, not fear; light, not darkness.

Action: Reflect on how God’s creation nurtures us into hopeful response. Read more here - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/20282>

## 14 December

Peter asked, ‘Who then is the faithful and wise steward?’” (Luke 12. 42)

God’s inviting presence is not something that can be quarantined to certain times of the week or year.

Action: Take some time out for personal reflection on your journey here - <http://stranzdocs.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/morning-prayer-from-iona.html>

## 15 December

Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.’” (Mark 6. 4)

It is those who are closest to us who often find it most difficult to hear.

Action: Pray for Christians in cut-off Bethlehem this Christmas - <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/bethlehem-christmas>

### **16 December**

“The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city.” (Jeremiah 26. 12)

The words of outsiders and prophets can be uncomfortable and challenging to the status quo.

Action: Pray for Christians and other minorities in the Middle East - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21170>

### **17 December**

“If the house is honourable, let your peace come upon it.” (Matthew 9.13)

God’s peace requires our receptiveness to take hold and last.

Action: Pray and act that Christmas truces can become the norm not the exception - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21168>

### **18 December**

“John replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely.’” (Luke 3. 14b)

Jesus’ forerunner talked and acted for the whole of life to be Godly, not just a ‘spiritual corner’.

Action: Find out about Christian Aid’s tax justice campaign - <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/actnow/trace-the-tax/>

### **19 December**

“And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.” (Luke 1. 10)

God is to be found not in ‘religious spaces’ alone, but wherever people seek in earnest.

Action: Reflect with Jill Segger on ‘the redirected gaze’ - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21127>

### **20 December**

“And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.” (Luke 1. 30)

In the most threatening moment, God can be there with a message of hope and blessing.

Action: Read Rachel Mann’s ‘Christmas in the margins’ -

<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21167>

## **21 December**

“For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy.” (Luke 1. 44).

The old woman Elizabeth was not expecting the good news God’s messenger brought to her.

Action: Find a new neighbor and show them the Christmas spirit.

## **22 December**

“For God has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.” (Luke 1. 48)

Mary’s song is one of hope for the world, especially the downtrodden.

Action: Support the global women’s treaty for freedom and dignity -

<http://www.globalissues.org/article/166/womens-rights>

## **23 December**

“And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all marveled.” (Luke 1.63)

John the Baptist’s voice was prophetic and challenging in a world where people were abandoning the love and justice of God.

Action: pray for those who speak up courageously for what is right around the world - <https://www.24-7prayer.com/just24-7/howtoprayforjustice>

## **24 December**

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.” (Luke 2.1)

As we prepare for Christmas, remember those whose movements are policed, monitored or prevented by abuse of power.

Action: Find out about freedom of movement concerns from Amnesty

International - <http://www.amnesty.org/en/human-rights-defenders/resources/defense-of-human-rights>

## 25 December

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2. 14)

As Jesus is born among us, we are reminded that the glory and pleasure of God is peace and just relations among the people.

Action: join the discussion about what the Christian community can do to make peace possible here - <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21179>

## PART TWO

### **First Sunday in Advent: God's alternative**

Advent, the season of expectation, arrived for us in 2014 on Sunday 30th November.

In biblical times it started with an unexpected messenger (angel) announcing an ordinary event in an unlikely place to a lowly person.

A woman called Mary, living in a town called Nazareth, is told she will give birth to a son, Jesus, who will be God's person to change the world. “Yeah, right... “.

Why on earth would God choose a backward place and an unknown person to begin the drama of incarnation – the divine disclosed for us in human flesh?

In conventional terms, when God is thought of as almighty and inscrutable, things don't happen like this.

They especially don't happen like this in barns in places such as Nazareth. Surely a mansion or a cathedral in a major world capital is where we would expect God to come to us?

“Can anything good come from Nazareth?” asks Nathaniel incredulously in St John's Gospel. “Come and see...” replies Philip.

That continues to be the invitation today. But where shall we look for this God who is revealed in and as Jesus? Where do we anticipate finding and meeting God-in-the-flesh in today's complex, bustling world?

Modern Nazareth is a predominantly Arab and Muslim city in a Jewish state, embroiled in immense political and religious conflict.

The Holy Land has often been anything but in temporal terms. It has seen much injustice and violence. To receive God in Jesus somewhere specific is not about claiming territory, it is about a change of heart issuing in a change of behavior.

The nativity invites “alterNATIVITY” in the way we see God, each other and the world. Then it encourages us to put that alternative view into practice – as hospitality, sharing, forgiveness, peacemaking and right-doing. That’s where we will find Jesus – and not just at Advent or Christmas.

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## **Second Sunday in Advent: God’s invitation**

“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,” writes St Paul in the Epistle set for today in many churches.

‘Believing’ isn’t primarily a head matter, like assenting to a set of abstract propositions.

St Augustine speaks of ‘believing into’ God, which is more like immersion than sitting an exam.

The Christ who comes to us this Advent invites us to join his community and to practice the virtues that build peace instead of enmity among peoples.

This ranges from the adventurous (like those from Christian Peacemaker Teams who go into dangerous conflict zones to try to break down barriers) to the mundane (acts of hospitality and welcome when, frankly, we’re not in the mood).

For most of us, most of the time, it is in the ‘ordinary’ that God’s spirit comes, offering peace and joy in small moments where what is in our heart and what is on our lips and in our actions is all of one piece.

However, for that to be the case, we need to be paying attention.

Attention is what Advent is all about. And in a world of almost continual distraction it is far from easy.

Jill Segger writes: “I have always felt that Advent is a rather Quakerly concept. Its sense of quiet and attentive waiting sits well with our understanding of worship.”

Worship is not the sound we make, but the quietness of God entering our hearts and changing them, slowly and patiently.

It is a focus on what is really worth-it, as distinct from all the shiny baubles that promise much but deliver little.

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### **Third Sunday in Advent: God's surprise**

In chapter 11 of Matthew's Gospel Jesus speaks of his forerunner, the spiky and angular prophet known to us as John the Baptist.

Meanwhile John, imprisoned, is enquiring after Jesus. Is he really the promised Messiah, God's person, the one in whom we see God in a new light involving new possibilities for the world?

Jesus responds in two ways. First, he says that the signs of God's coming into the world are that the blind receive sight, the people are set free, and the reign of death is challenged – because it cannot stand against God's reign of life and love.

Second, he gently chides his followers. What were you expecting, he asks them: someone wearing the soft colours and clothes of the royal court, or a wild looking man in the desert?

People anticipated that the Messiah would be a king. And they were right. But this king, Jesus, was to be like no earthly monarch.

No cringing servants, vast riches and standing armies for Jesus. Instead he spent his time primarily with the outcast of traditional religion and establishment politics, showing how God's love is based on grace not favour.

As we approach Christmas, that is the challenge to our anticipation and celebration.

Will we be ready for the surprise that Christ's coming brings with it, and will we be waiting in the right places for his arrival?

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### **Fourth Sunday in Advent: God's peace**

The Epistle set for today speaks of "the peace of God, which passes all understanding, and that will keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Jesus the Christ."

This prayer is known and used by many Christians one used to end worship services or times of prayer and reflection.

First, it reminds us that the *shalom* or *salaam* (peace) of God is something that goes well beyond our limited notions of the absence of conflict.

God's peace is about the restoration of relationships, harmony between people and the earth, and the reconciliation of all things in the divine purpose.

That is something we can only begin to imagine, but we can get a taste and a promise of it in even the most ordinary aspects of life.

The peace which Christ enfleashes for us is something that can only be shared in community, but which at the same time has to grow in our hearts and minds in order to be real and sustainable.

In that sense we are wise not to think of ourselves either as lone individuals or as part of some anonymous collective, but as persons-in-commune – unique people who need each other just as we need to the love of God to free us from enmity, rivalry and fear.

This is the costly peace that Jesus brings into the world for us. Are we ready for it? What shall we do to honour and practice it?

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## **Christmas Day: God's birth**

What is that we are faced with when we contemplate the birth of Jesus in the east?

For Christians the extraordinary claim is that, in the shape of this vulnerable baby conceived in lowliness, born in obscurity and welcomed most by outsiders, God has come to us in the flesh.

We would be wise not to try to figure this out in philosophical terms, but to receive it in human ones – in the very terms on which incarnation speaks, in the flesh.

This is not because God's commitment to revealing the divine in what is thought of as non-divine is beyond serious reflection.

It is because the idea that we know enough about what God can and cannot be in order to be able to decide whether the Christmas story is 'fact or fantasy' (as we like to put it) vastly overestimates the capacity of the mortal to grasp the immortal.

We cannot 'own' God in Christ, either in intellectual or material terms. Christians above all need reminding of this.

What is born for us in and as Jesus, the grace of God that changes everything, is beyond calculation and beyond ownership.

Above all, it is way beyond our using it as a 'religious weapon' to assert the superiority of some (probably ourselves) above others.

No, Jesus breaks all the rules of domination, power through coercion, possessiveness and religious or social superiority. That is why those who operate by those standards are out to kill him.

Instead, the Christ invites us to join him on the journey to God. A journey where the first find themselves last, and those considered last lead the way. Where the unexpected becomes usual. And where the love of power gives way to the power of love.

Welcome, Jesus! We know that if we take you seriously we will never be the same again. Help us to welcome that idea, rather than to try to resist it or turn it into a product.

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- \* Christmas truce? Help make it permanent: <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21032>
- \* The AlterNATIVITY Advent Calendar (with Bloomsbury Baptist Church): <http://christmas.org.uk/docs/calendar/index.html>
- \* Advent: God's alternative agenda: <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21096>
- \* More on Advent from Ekklesia here: <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/advent>
- \* More on Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church here: <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/bloomsburybaptistchurch>
- \* Visit the ALTERnativity website: <http://www.alternativity.org.uk>

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