Our God Comes Close

An Advent Course for the Gospel Reflections from the 1st Sunday of Advent until the Feast of the Holy Family

2026



THE GOD WHO SPEAKS



Be on your guard, stay awake.
For you do not know when the time will come.
Mark 13:33-37

Reflect on this image:

What do you see?
To where are your eyes drawn?
To where is your heart drawn?

First Sunday of Advent

Be on your guard, stay awake.
Mark 13:33-37

This passage is the conclusion of Jesus' teaching as he sat in the Garden of Olives looking across at the Great Walls of the Temple. It is just before the events that will lead to his death. This can seem a strange place to start our new Church Year and our preparations for Christmas. The Church deliberately places this text on the First Sunday of Advent to remind us of what it is we are to be prepared for. It is a very particular time. Jesus calls it a 'Kairos' which implies a time whose meaning and importance is much more that the moment itself. A defining time in all our lives which changes everything.

Yet to see it, realise it and enter into it so that we are changed, we have to be waiting for it, reading the signs of the times. Hence the emphasis on awareness, staying awake, not just going with the flow. So Jesus encourages his disciples before he, the Master, goes on a journey. They all have their own tasks and duties, and he specifically tells the doorkeeper to keep awake for his return but also to give access to those who seek him. This is the role of all of us by baptism, to live our everyday lives as to be an open door for others to enter God's Kingdom. Advent then becomes a time of remembering God's promises and Jesus' birth, life and teaching, to reveal his presence to us now and also in the promise of life in him in the future.

The 'Kairos' can happen at any time. Jesus mentions the four watches that marked the night hours in his world - evening, midnight, cockcrow and dawn. We do not know exactly when Jesus was born but he calls us to be waiting for his next coming among us, whenever that may be. Our practice in Advent prepares us to live in faith and hope today and in expectation of a final fulfilment with him.

The great English Benedictine monk, historian and Doctor of the Church, the Venerable Bede (c.673-735 AD) taught his monks to watch in three ways:

Watching with continuous prayer - aligning our hearts with God.

Watching by doing good works - living out the gospel of charity.

Watching through pastoral care - looking after others in our churches and communities.

It remains a good model.



Questions for Reflection or Group discussion

1. How can I watch and wait more deeply this Advent?
2. What do I do to create oases of silence and calm reflection in my week or month?
3. Can I develop a new spiritual habit of being more present to God in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord of the Watching,
Fill us with faith, love and the hope of salvation.
May we be ready to greet you with joy whenever you come again.
Amen.



Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Mark 1:1-8

Reflect on this image:

What do you see?
To where are your eyes drawn?
To where is your heart drawn?

Second Sunday of Advent

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Mark 1:1-8

Mark's Gospel doesn't have a genealogy like Matthew and Luke, but its short opening sentence would have shocked its first hearers. "*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.*"

"The beginning" would have taken Jewish listeners back to the words of Genesis, already a claim is being made that this text is as momentous as the beginning of Creation! Then "the Gospel", *evangelion* in Greek, means a proclamation, usually by a herald of the Emperor, of news that is world-changing e.g. an Empire has fallen and been defeated, or a Son has been born to the Imperial family. So immediately the hearers would have wanted to hear this earth-shattering news. Then, we read the name - Jesus – a very ordinary Jewish name. People would have wondered who is he? And Mark answers – the Christ! For Romans, Christ means an anointed one, an Emperor or King, but for Jews he is the longed-for Messiah.

And just to hammer it home "the Son of God". Not a son of God as the so-called divine Emperors liked to claim, or Jewish Kings sometimes claimed, but "the one and only Son of God!" There was enough in that sentence to keep people talking and thinking for years to come and that was Mark's deliberate purpose. No-one would forget that opening.

Mark weaves texts from the prophets (Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1) focusing on a figure who will prepare the way for the Messiah. And names him as John the Baptiser. He is already at work in the wilderness, baptising in the waters of the Jordan all those who are waiting for the coming of the new age. Even John's clothes recall the great prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). And this all takes place in the desert which the Hebrew slaves originally crossed to become God's people. The whole history of Salvation is swirling into focus and fulfilment. The wilderness is again the place for a new liberating Exodus, calling God's people to hope and renewal. The people seeking renewal are not going to the great Temple in Jerusalem but into the desert.

As we journey through Advent, we are not told to proclaim ourselves, but to humbly seek the way of renewal. We do this alongside all those who desire life, especially those who are oppressed and marginalised in our own time. We do this in repentance and confession, hope and spiritual renewal, that the way of the Lord may be seen among us. This passage invites all of us to "prepare the way of the Lord".



Questions for Reflection or Group discussion

1. Where do I seek the path of wisdom in my life? To make straight the way of the Lord?
2. Is there anything for which I need to repent and seek forgiveness? Or anyone I need to forgive this Advent?
3. Can I develop a new spiritual habit of trusting God when tested in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord of the wilderness and the river Jordan,
as we hear the voice crying out, and the waters of baptism rise up,
teach us how to quell the noise around us and clear the way for your presence.
Amen.



There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Reflect on this image:

What do you see?
To where are your eyes drawn?
To where is your heart drawn?

Third Sunday of Advent

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
John 1:6-8, 19-28

This Sunday, called *Gaudete* or *Rejoice Sunday*, emphasises that the message John the Baptist shares, is that the one who is coming is the one who will realise the prophecy Isaiah had proclaimed:
"to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, the opening of the prison for those bound, the year of the Lord's favour." (Isaiah 61: 2-3a).
We rejoice because what Isaiah had proclaimed to the poor, Jesus lived among the poor and made it happen.

John is a humble witness. The word in the Greek New Testament for witness is *martyrein* from which we get 'martyr'. When the Jewish experts from the Temple came to interrogate John, they tried to confuse him with quick-fire questions. Was he the Christ? Was he Elijah come-back? Was he a prophet? To all these questions, he simply answers no.

He knows what he has been called to be. He uses the words of the Prophet Isaiah calling his people back to their faith in an earlier age: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord."

This discussion takes place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising. The religious authorities stand so close to the Word and John, his forerunner, yet remain completely blind to Jesus' presence, the one for whom they have been waiting for so long.

The Gospel puts before us this remarkable man who knows his role is to decrease so that the coming Christ can increase - that God's ultimate Word can take centre stage. The Church never replaces Christ. We are called to point to and recognise his coming in every time and place, into lives that still seek him. This is the good news we are still called to bear witness to. Like John before us, may it give us joy.



Questions for Reflection or Group discussion

1. How can I witness to the light this Advent? And who needs to see this light most?
2. Where do I hear the voice of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness of my own life?
3. Can I develop a new spiritual habit of prayerful renewal in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord of the Light,
Thank you for sending your servant, John, to witness to that Divine Light.
May he guide us in the way of truth and overcome the darkest of shadows in our lives.
Amen.



Behold! You are to conceive and bear a son.
Luke 1:26-38

Reflect on this image:

What do you see?
To where are your eyes drawn?
To where is your heart drawn?

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Behold! You are to conceive and bear a son.
Luke 1:26-38

The Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary marks the central moment of the Incarnation. Mary's 'Let it be done to me', her free 'Yes to God' marks a new beginning in the Divine Human relationship fractured in the story of the pride of the first humans in Genesis. As a result Mary is often referred to as the new Eve.

The Archangel Gabriel addresses Mary in Luke 1:28 as *"Kecharitomene"* traditionally translated from the Greek as "full of grace" or "favoured one". This title is unique in the whole bible and is only addressed to Mary. Christian theology has interpreted this gift of God's grace, from the first moments of her existence, as a new start in human history. She has the freedom to say a complete yes or no to God, uninfluenced by previous sin.

Then Gabriel lays out before her God's will that she bear a Son who will fulfil the messianic hopes of God's people and he will initiate a new and eternal Kingdom.

Mary is perplexed, but there is no coercion here. She asks for clarification and Gabriel gives it. The Holy Spirit will "overshadow" her, God will make this possible. In the history of Israel there is an overshadowing of the divine at key moments of God's saving action. The cloud that overshadows the Ark of the Covenant by Day and the pillar of fire by night. In later Jewish thinking this is referred to as the Shekinah, the mysterious merciful presence of God, that makes itself felt in times of need. This overshadowing will see Mary become the new Ark of the Covenant; as it is she who has been chosen to house the Holy One in her womb. And if she needs any other evidence, of God's benign will in all of this, the Angel tells her that her old cousin Elizabeth, long beyond normal childbirth has conceived and will bear a Son who we know as John the Baptist.

Still no doubt bemused, Mary responds freely, *"May it be done to me according to your word"*. In the life of faith God asks for our human cooperation but does not demand it. This remains the pattern throughout the whole of Jesus ministry.

Mary is for us the 'Mother of God' but she is also the first and most perfect disciple whose obedience and faith mirror what the entire Church is called to be.



Questions for Reflection or Group discussion

1. In what ways is the Holy Spirit inviting me to follow Mary's pure heart this Advent?
2. When have I found it easy to say yes to God? When have I found it hard?
3. Can I develop a new spiritual habit of welcoming unexpected angels and holy visitors in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord of the Archangel and of the new Eve,
nothing is impossible for those who welcome your word.
May Jesus make his home in us and dwell forever in our hearts.
Amen.



Orthodox icon of the Nativity.

Today a Saviour has been born to us.
Luke 2:1-14.

Reflect on this image:

What do you see?
To where are your eyes drawn?
To where is your heart drawn?

Christmas Season:
Mass during the Night

Today a Saviour has been born to us.
Luke 2:1-14

The Gospel starts with the seemingly absolute power of the Roman emperor Augustus decreeing a census of all the Empire so that he could levy taxes to maintain his power. Thus setting in motion the return of Joseph with his pregnant wife Mary to his village of origin where the census had to be registered. A week's journey of nearly one hundred miles. In the process, an ancient prophecy is fulfilled that the Messiah, of the house of David, will come from Bethlehem.

It was a very small village which never appeared on an ancient map. A village of poor subsistence farmers. The stable would have been a cave linked to a house where the animals were kept. The name *Bethlehem* in Hebrew (*Bet Lachem*) means "House of Bread." Mary would have given birth on a bed of straw and then wrapped her newborn in swaddling cloths and placed him in a feeding trough or manger. From his birth, Jesus occupies a space meant for food. Later he will speak of himself as the "Bread of Life."

We hear of the Angels making his birth known to the shepherds, the poorest, who lived out on the hills among their sheep and were despised by almost everyone. Even at this early moment in the Gospel a pattern is emerging of God seeking out the marginal, the poor and the frail. This is the consistent pattern of Jesus' ministry. Even Jesus' swaddling clothes symbolise the human fragility of his flesh and foreshadow the burial clothes at his death. But they speak eloquently as a sign to the shepherds. The shepherds would wrap their most perfect lamb in swaddling cloths, to protect it from being marked when bringing them as an offering to sacrifice at Passover. Luke perhaps is suggesting that it is Jesus who will become the spotless lamb to be sacrificed at Passover in time to come.

The angels proclaim: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Caesar Augustus used such language to speak of the peace which he, the divine emperor had brought to the world. Luke deliberately subverts this to celebrate a new world order breaking out in the birth of this little child among the poor of the earth.

The peace he will bring, the shalom of God's creation, is an altogether different peace.



Questions for Reflection or Group discussion

1. How much do popular culture, worldly power and fake news dominate my mind?
2. Up to this point in my life, what role has the birth of Christ played in my journey?
3. Can I develop a new spiritual habit of peace-making in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord of the shepherds, the marginalised and poor, we come before you with wonder and joy.
Thank you for showing us the way to salvation, wrapped in gentleness and grace.
Amen.



The Word was made flesh and lived among us.
John 1:1-18

Reflect on this image:

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Christmas Season:
Mass during the Day

The Word was made flesh and lived among us.
John 1:1-18

John's Gospel begins with a wonderful poem, the Prologue, which lays out the great themes of the Gospel in a number of parallels - death/life, light/darkness, truth/lies, grace/sin and the themes of witness and freedom/slavery. The remainder of the Gospel will develop these in Jesus' teaching, his life death and resurrection.

It opens with a beautiful reflection on how God's Word was, before all time, and then how the Word was involved in every aspect of the creation. So that everything in creation can lead us back to its source. The opening words "In the beginning was the Word…" take us back to the opening words of the book of Genesis. In encountering the *Word made Flesh* - in encountering his words - we are in touch with the creative source of all things. The claim that Jesus is the divine made human is clear.

Yet there is more, his life is a light for us, in other words through him we are invited to share in the very life of God. In Genesis we hear that God created humanity, in the image and likeness of God he created them, male and female he created them. It is now through the *Word made Flesh* in Jesus that we can contemplate what we are called to image, and by contemplating him we can grow in his image and likeness. Later, Athanasius the great bishop of Alexandria, would summarise this in his work on the Incarnation: "God became man so that man might become God."

And how did this happen? John tells us: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
The word for flesh here is *sarx*. It is the living stuff that we, and all living things are made from. There is nothing then in creation that cannot manifest the life and creative love of God, and it is for this reason that we are to reverence all life and protect and sustain it. In Jesus and in his life, death and resurrection, his words and healings and in his reconciling love, we have access to God's light, even in the darkest experiences of life. We are called again and again to encounter God's Word: in the flesh of his brothers and sisters whose flesh he shares, and with whom we share this planet, and whose sufferings call out to us for relief.



Questions for Reflection or Group discussion

1. How does the Word made Flesh shape my faith and decision-making?
2. In what way can the Kingdom of God give me purpose and hope?
3. Can I develop a new spiritual habit of embracing God's grace in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord of the Word made Flesh,
Thank you for pitching your tent in the manger's straw.
Today, the many prophecies of old have been fulfilled anew in glory and in love.
Amen.



Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, by Joakim Skovgaard.
Viborg Cathedral, Denmark.

For my eyes have seen your salvation.
Luke 2:22-40

Reflect on this image:

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Sunday in the Octave of Christmas:
The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

For my eyes have seen your salvation.
Luke 2:22-40

Luke gives us the most detailed account of Jesus' infancy. Today's gospel describes the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. This is celebrated on 2nd February as the Feast of the Presentation (or Candlemas).

Luke tells how the parents, Mary and Joseph, devoutly fulfil the Mosaic Law by travelling to Jerusalem forty days after Jesus' birth. In this they were meeting two Old Testament requirements: ritual purification of the mother after giving birth recorded in Leviticus 12, and the consecration of the firstborn son in Exodus 13.

Luke tells us Joseph and Mary made an offering of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons". This was an allowance made in the book of Leviticus 12:8 in cases where the family could not afford to offer a sheep. Luke is telling us the family of Jesus lived in poverty.

But something remarkable happens, a devout older man, Simeon, who believed he would see the Messiah before he died, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. He comes into the Temple to pray and while everyone else is ignoring this poor couple and their baby, he goes to them, takes the child in his hands and sings a prayer celebrating the presence of God's salvation in this child. He further prophesies that the child will be a light to the gentiles and for the glory of his people. Simeon declares himself now content to die having seen the vision of universal salvation for all. Then in turning to Joseph and Mary, he makes it clear that this will not come without change, disruption and suffering for the child's mother.

Luke is already hinting at what will come at the end of Jesus' earthly life. The only other person who notices anything is an 84-year-old widow, Anna, who virtually lives in the Temple praying. She echoes Simeon's message and begins to speak to others of the future of the child. These two are among the *anawim,* the poor of God, those who have remained faithful to the words of the prophets. They alone seem to have identified something of the mystery of this little baby.

Then the parents return to Nazareth, continuing in the love and care for their child. Luke tells us that in their care he grew strong, filled with wisdom and lived in God's favour.



Questions for Reflection or Group discussion

1. Who comes to mind when thinking about prophetic examples of following God?
2. What is it about those people that is inspiring to me?
3. Can I develop a new spiritual habit of praying to the Holy Family in the coming year?

Prayer

Lord of every promise,
You have spoken throughout every generation. As Simeon held the infant Christ in the Temple, may my heart echo his ancient song today: for my eyes have seen your salvation.
Amen.



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