

## An Advent journey

From past to present, travelling hopefully by Gill Page



### Reflection

It's an old joke: What do you think of nostalgia? Answer: Well, it's not what it was!

On Facebook there are many pages for people from a particular place or city to share memories and reminisce about the past. Old photographs are shared, and participants offer comments about how things used to be and how things have changed over the years. This is all well and good – up to a point! On one such page, focused on a particular city in the UK, a recurring issue concerns the Old Market Square at the heart of the city. Every time an old photograph of this area appears, one can predict the response with great accuracy. People bewail the loss of the trees (although there are still trees), the old fountains (there are new ones), and the removal of benches (seating is now in the stone surrounds). It was a lovely open space where people met. But they complain about, and/or fail to commend, the many new uses of the square, including a vibrant Christmas market complete with ice-skating rink; and a 'beach' in the summer providing families with a taste of the seaside (many miles away). Taken to extremes nostalgia can bog us down in the past, preventing us appreciating newer innovations and delights.

In Advent we are called to remember the past event of Jesus Christ entering our world and to look forward to his second reappearance in the future. The first of these is relatively easy as we prepare for the familiarity of the Christmas story, the nativity plays and the carols, the celebrations and the memories of Christmases past. The second confronts us with the unknown and with the possibility of change to our familiar world, and within ourselves.

In Advent we look back upon the good experiences of the past and then look forward, moving on in our journey. We cannot forget past experiences, but perhaps we can choose how we respond to those memories. We can reflect on how our past has shaped us, and how we use that as a base to spring forward in hope and expectation.

### Activities

- During this week, look at some old photographs of you and/or your family and friends. Notice the changes between then and now. Some may be difficult or even painful, such as ageing and decreasing mobility or

health, or the absence of someone who has died. But others (hopefully) will be more positive (we all have photos of a dodgy hairstyle or outfit!). Make a list – on paper or in your head, as you prefer – of the good things which have happened over the years.

- Take a look around your local area and/or take notice of local news items. Consider whether you might be called use your time, skills or resources (including money) to help someone or something (e.g. a local good cause).

### Thoughts and prayer points

- Give thanks for all that was good in your past.
- Pray for anyone who has hurt you. Pray that God might help you move towards forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Think about a person who has helped and supported you in some way. How might their example encourage you to help others?
- Thank God for sending Jesus into the world.
- Give thanks for joyful days, and let them give you hope of more to come.

### Listen

Music to help you reflect on this week's Advent theme.

Dear God (Piano), Hunter Hayes on *Dear God (Piano)*

 [bit.ly/youtube-deargod](https://bit.ly/youtube-deargod)

### Questions for reflection

- ▶ What is your immediate response to this image?
- ▶ How much of our lives lie 'below the surface'?
- ▶ What difference might it make if we were more open with one another – and God?



### A prayer

*Lord, be with us on our journey this week.  
Help us to value the past  
and to trust you for today and tomorrow.  
Amen.*

## An Advent journey

Repent and bear good fruit by Gill Page



### Reflection

I've always envied people who have lived all their lives in one place. Unlike me, they have probably managed to keep contact with childhood friends and feel rooted in their locality. Gardeners know that, to see a good crop of flowers or fruit, plants need to develop healthy root systems. And that takes time and patience – in contrast to some children I heard about who pulled seedlings up every day to see how the roots were doing! Those of us who have frequently moved home for work or family reasons perhaps need to think about how our roots can develop and grow, even when we are far from the place we might consider as 'home'. In my family, we have always tried to make the best of each situation we are in, knowing it to be temporary – home is where we are now. Returning to the garden analogy, another danger for plants is that they can become 'pot-bound' – that is, with roots so tightly compressed and constrained that further growth is stunted.

In our spiritual journeying, we need to retain a sense of rootedness if we are to bear fruit. We need to allow roots to develop – through prayer, Bible study, worship and good deeds. But we also need to prevent ourselves becoming spiritually pot-bound, by continually making room for growth – for example, by challenging our prejudices and preferences.

In this week's Gospel reading, John the Baptist calls people to repent, to turn away from thoughts and deeds which hamper growth, and to return to, or to discover afresh, or even for the first time, the roots of their faith. John points to Jesus, the one who will accept the fruits we offer and winnow out what is unhelpful in our lives.

### Activities

- Sow some seeds (e.g. some cress seeds on damp kitchen paper) – or something a bit slower growing that you can nurture as the winter progresses, ready for planting in spring. At the same time, commit yourself to a new activity that will help you to grow spiritually. Assess your personal progress as you monitor that of your seeds!
- If possible, get in touch with a friend you haven't seen for some time, and find a way for the roots and fruits of your friendship to grow.

### Thoughts and prayer points

- Remember a time when you felt particularly close to God. What was it about that time that you found helpful?
- Read Matthew 7.15-20. What fruits you are displaying in your life?
- Give thanks for all that keeps you rooted in your faith.
- Spend a few minutes in silence each day, allowing God to draw close to you and you to God.
- Remember some of the people who nurtured your faith. Could you help someone else to grow their faith?

### Listen

Music to help you reflect on this week's Advent theme.

Coventry Carol, Pentatonix on *Pentatonix Christmas*

[bit.ly/youtube-coventry](http://bit.ly/youtube-coventry)

### Questions for reflection

- ▶ What do you see in this image?
- ▶ Good roots, good fruit – how can you tell that your roots are good?
- ▶ What are the signs of good fruit in your community at the moment?



### A prayer

*Lord, we thank you for the roots of our faith.  
Strengthen those roots within us,  
so that we may bear good and abundant fruit.  
Amen.*

## An Advent journey

### Acknowledging doubt and despair by Gill Page



#### Reflection

When I spend time with the Taizé, a community in France, we often sing a song that speaks of Jesus as our 'interior light' and asks that he won't let our doubts and our darkness speak to us. It is so easy dwell on doubts, darkness and despair, especially when we are awake in the night and finding sleep elusive. How comforting it is, then, to find that we are not alone at such times. Even the great saints of God, including John the Baptist, could be – and were – assailed by doubts and times of despair.

The prophet Isaiah understood these feelings. He recognised that there are times when our hearts feel like barren deserts and are waiting for the chance to blossom again. Sometimes our circumstances make us feel dark and cold and barren. For example, bereavement can make us feel like this – as can other kinds of loss, such as loss of friends, of familiar surroundings, of a job, or possessions or a sense of identity. It is easy to misunderstand these normal and natural feelings and to let even more darkness creep in, perhaps in the form of guilt. We tell ourselves that 'Christians shouldn't feel like this', so we must be a poor Christian – or perhaps not even a Christian at all.

Look what Jesus suggests as a remedy for John's attack of doubt. He asks him to see what the disciples have seen, all the good things that have been happening. He wants John to extend his vision beyond the confines of his present prison, and he wants his followers to share all the good news that they can.

Advent is all about the coming of the Light of Christ. It is that light which enables us to see things as they really are. It is that light which can enter our darkness and dispel it to the margins. We pray for that light to illuminate our hearts and minds.

#### Activities

- Light a candle or tealight in a darkened room. Watch how it flickers and falters, but doesn't go out. Think about your faith. Does it seem almost to go out at times, and at other times feels as if it is burning strongly? Remember that this variation is natural and normal – it was also the experience of John the Baptist!
- Light a few more candles/tealights alongside the first one. Notice how much brighter the light is now, and how much greater the warmth. And how much more steady – when one candle stutters, another will be burning strong

and clear. This is a lovely image of how we can support one another to overcome the darkness in us all. When you feel unable to pray, others will be praying for you – and you will have your turn to pray for them.

#### Thoughts and prayer points

- Do I recognise when my faith is fluctuating? What can I do to rekindle the delight I once had in it?
- What can I do to encourage others when they are struggling in their Christian experience?
- Think about your local community: where is light shining? (Consider both church and non-church settings.)
- Look for light in the darkest of news item – e.g. when people come together to help each other.
- Give thanks for the Advent light, and for the promise that Jesus is always with us.
- When you open the curtains and it's light outside, thank God for the light which comes again and again, in the mornings and in our souls.

#### Listen

**Music to help you reflect on this week's Advent theme.**

Paris (Refuge), All Sons & Daughters on *Paris*

**WEB** [bit.ly/youtube-paris](http://bit.ly/youtube-paris)

#### Questions for reflection

- ▶ What do you see when you look in the mirror?
- ▶ When do you experience doubt and despair?
- ▶ What good things would you like to share?



#### A prayer

*Lord Jesus, light of the world, flood our hearts with your light, warmth and love this Advent. Help us to pass that light on to others so that, together, we may conquer all darkness. Amen.*

## An Advent journey

Changing your mind by Gill Page



### Reflection

It is often said that it is a woman's prerogative to change her mind – a sweeping generalisation! In this week's Gospel, it is a man who changes his mind. Joseph had made his mind up to turn Mary away. It was the easiest way to a quiet life! But he changed his mind when he realised that God had a very different plan.

We sometimes have very fixed minds about whom we should accept into our Christian community. Ideally, a church should reflect the wider community around it. Think about that for a moment. On that basis, who is missing from our Christian community? Are we prepared to accept, without judgment, those who are richer or poorer, those of differing ethnic backgrounds or sexuality, those who are outcasts from society – all of whom are still part of our wider community?

During the last few years, those of us who live in the UK have experienced all the troubles of the Brexit process. Families have disagreed among themselves. Friendships have been severed. Some people have been made to feel unloved and unwelcome. When views are strongly held it can be impossible to change our minds. But, leaving the politics to one side for a moment, we could all try to change hatred for love, intolerance for acceptance and hostility for welcome. Could that be our Advent challenge this year?

### Activities

- Practise the hospitality of smiling this week: smile at someone on the bus, or someone who visits your home. It could become catching!
- Bring to mind someone whom you find it difficult to get along with. Write their initial of their first name in the margin of this sheet. Pray for that person every day this week. Pray that God will show you how to develop a positive relationship with that person. See if you change your mind as a result.

### Thoughts and prayer points

- Reflect on how it feels to be left out. Try to remember a time when this was your experience.
- Have you been challenged to change your mind about a person or group of people?
- What might have happened if Joseph had not changed his mind about Mary?
- Are first impressions always the correct ones?
- Remember that changing your mind isn't always a weakness; it can take great courage and need a lot of strength of mind.

### Listen

Music to help you reflect on this week's Advent theme.

Starts With Me, TobyMac feat. Aaron Cole on *The Elements*

**WEB** [bit.ly/youtube-tobymac](http://bit.ly/youtube-tobymac)

### Questions for reflection

- ▶ What do you see in this oil painting?
- ▶ What was the last significant risk you took?
- ▶ When is it okay to change your mind?



### A prayer

*Lord, help us to hear your voice as Joseph did. Give us the courage to change our minds, if needed, and to do your will. Amen.*