

Journeying with the Magi

An Exploration of Advent in Prayer and Meditation



Session Two

PARISH OF ALL SAINTS WOKINGHAM
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Opening Prayers

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen

Days of heavy clouds stifling the sunlight;
the world burdened by greyness and gloom
**Open our eyes, Lord, to the coming of your light
lifting the burden of darkness from our lives.**

Chillness that seeps deep into bones;
hearts and spirits rigid with frost-hardness;
souls wrapped up against coldness and loneliness.
**Open our souls, Lord, to the warmth of your coming
melting the hardness that keeps us from you and from each other.**

Trees, branches bare against the steel skies;
Stems crumpled under weight of frost, weight of snow;
Last year's leaves, blackened and slippery underfoot;
Nature oppressed by wintriness, yet resting, awaiting rebirth.
**Cherish our hearts, Lord, oppressed by wintriness -
assure us of your coming of your call to new life.**

After a period of silence, we say together

**May this eternal truth be always on our hearts
That the God who breathed this world into being
Placed stars into the heavens
And designed a butterfly's wing
Is the God who entrusted his life
to the care of ordinary people
became vulnerable that we might know
how strong is the power of Love
A mystery so deep it is impossible to grasp
A mystery so beautiful it is impossible to ignore**

Amen.

*As we move and grow within the rhythms of Advent, may we sense the continuing
presence of the Holy Three.*

Deep peace of the Creator,

Gentle love of the Son,

Regenerative power of the Spirit

Amen

**Thou who art over us, thou who art one of us, thou who art: Give us a pure heart
that we may see thee; a humble heart that we may hear thee; a heart of love that
we may serve thee; a heart of faith that we may abide in thee. Amen.**

The Journey:

Last week, we discussed the journey made by the Magi. We looked at the passage in Matthew 2.1-12, and discussed the important inferences in the story; the Gentile significance, the loss of direction, the anticipation, the hope and faith of the three 'wise' men. We also talked about our journey of faith, the lifelong journey to meet and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord.

In the 'two further readings' homework from last week, we have two reflections on the importance of the Magi in our own spiritual journey. Andrew Demotses talks about 'the difficulty in following Christ' and the need for an honest and forthrightness approach to our faith. He reflects on how we can become discouraged when things seem to be going wrong and our prayers are not answered in the way we would like. He recognises the unfairness and injustice in the world in which we live.

But after laying out the difficulties in our faith journey, he does offer a solution. He claims that faithful obedience is the way to overcome the stumbling blocks in our path. Obedience to our calling and to our desire to meet Jesus.

To show how this is possible, he draws a similarity between the wise men, and ourselves:

If we are willing to reflect for a moment, I think we can catch glimpses of ourselves in the journey of these men. In a deep sense, they reflect the many dimensions of our own individual journeys of faith.

...arguing that the wise men were impelled by their faith in the importance of their journey, to set out on their search for the Messiah. They transcended the issues and difficulties of their journey and Demotses argues that we also need to show that same faithful obedience and take up the opportunity to 'follow the star'.



Sister Catherine Looker took a more analytical approach to the 'journey' arguing that the 'wise men' demonstrated spiritual life skills that we could all use on our individual journeys.

She began by talking about 'observation', arguing that not only were the wise men waiting for a sign to guide them, but that they also were prepared to see the sign when it appeared, and then, do something about it. Her thoughts on the importance of recognising the 'signs' in our lives, noticing the signposts and following the directions that God is giving us, are key, she says, to our personal journeys. She identifies that an important part in this process is asking ourselves what are we really seeking in life, what

gives it meaning and purpose and where does God fit in all this? All very good questions for this Advent period.

We should however be mindful of the distractions hinted at in our first reading. The Magi either took their eye off the star and followed their own charts or the star was not always visible to guide them. Subsequently they took a wrong turning, or made a 'logical' assumption that the baby would be born in a palace. They ended up of course, in Jerusalem to meet Herod. Advent is a time for 'keeping our eye on the ball.'

Sister Catherine goes on to talk about 'quality of presence', and the joy of finding true happiness and peace, warning however, that sadly, our culture drives us to always want more and this may make us 'restless' or unhappy when we compare our lives to others in a seemingly more desirable situations. Her recommendation is that we should pause and discern that maybe, we are already where God wants us to be at this particular moment in time, and it is here, where we should look to find true happiness.

Sister Catherine offers the thought that we may be guilty of assuming that God wants something spectacular from us to prove our worth, rather than being happy with who we are. Our spiritual journey is intensely personal but even as we grow and develop, we need to be honest with ourselves and with our calling, not wishing to be someone else or to aspire to something we are not ready to be. Faith is not always easy, and the journey is a long one. We shouldn't try and run before we can walk.

She ends with thoughts on discernment and urges us to ask ourselves:

How do we 'return home' after our encounters with Christ, and yet allow ourselves to be forever changed by these encounters? How do we keep growing in our spiritual journeys? How do we keep learning about ourselves in ways that hold the potential to deepen God's call to holiness as we find our way each day of our lives?



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Andrew Demotses

Reading: John 1.3-5, 6-9

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.'

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

In the beginning, Lord
I was alone
Like the earth
before your Spirit moved over the waters.
I was formless and empty
and darkness filled the depths of my heart.
Then, it was as if you declared
'Let there be Light'
and out of the darkness
I began to see hope
like a shimmering ray of love
breaking through the parting clouds
at the conclusion of the night.
In the beginning, Lord I was alone
but when I saw you in the light I was no longer afraid.
You held out your hand
and though I had a choice
I had no choice
because to refuse
was to embrace again the darkness.
In the beginning, Lord I was alone
now I am again a part
of your creation
loved, wanted, needed, family. In the light of your presence
I hold out my heart that others
might glimpse through it your reflection
and be drawn from the darkness that I once embraced
into the light of your sunrise
the brightness of your face

Silent then Group reflection. Read this prayer again and if you feel called to, share your feelings with the group)



The Journey: Expectant Hope

How good the news must have sounded to John the Baptist in his prison cell! The more we get to the heart of scripture the better we can understand that the characters we read about were all human beings just like us. John who devoted his life to prayer and fasting to prepare people for the coming of Jesus, is apparently rewarded with incarceration and impending death. But then comes the message of hope: don't worry, everything is going to plan – death is not the end, even the dead are raised to life.

'Happy is the man who does not lose faith in me'

As we continue to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, we too should be full of expectant hope. As we get ready to celebrate this new birth, it must happen that the word will become flesh within us, opening our eyes and ears to the wonder of what God means to us. It is ironic, really, that more than at any other time of the year we are likely to have less time for God during this hallowed season – and I speak from bitter experience. For years I have been a slave to the pride of perfection: all the Christmas cards must be sent, the parcels beautifully wrapped, and hours spent agonising over whether so-and-so would like this or that. I have in effect spent my Advent in panic. No matter how hard I worked, so-and-so already had such and such (and I didn't send cards to the people I received them from!)

One of the ways in which we can follow John's message of repentance is to be prepared to fail, to be humble enough to opt out of what the world makes of Christmas, to make a radical pruning of our Christmas activities. We need to give ourselves time to reflect on this great mystery of how it can be that Almighty God can take human flesh, and as a man communicate directly to the people the message of eternal life. It is a tragedy that we find ourselves preoccupied instead with tinsel and wrapping paper, running in a race against time that only ends when the key is turned on the last cash register on Christmas Eve.

Twenty-four hours later, all our efforts, like the wrapping paper, are torn up and forgotten and we watch the queues for the January sales assembling on our TV screens!

What we are really anticipating and awaiting in joyful hope is liberation from that kind of slavery. So let us pray for the wisdom to ponder this great mystery we are about to celebrate, and to be lovingly attentive to its meaning and purpose in our lives.

Delia Smith

Silent then Group reflection. Read this reflection again and if you feel called to, share your feelings with the group. Is Delia right or is she missing the point?



The Journey: Closing Comments

Advent is a season of repentant preparation. The meaning of repentance is quite different from that in widespread postbiblical Christian understanding. Although many Christians still think of repentance as primarily contrition, i.e., being sincerely sorry for our sins, and maybe even making reparation, the biblical meaning however, emphasises the issue of change.

To repent is to turn to God. In the Old Testament, the Jewish experience of exile shaped its meaning as a return from exile to the place of God's presence. To repent therefore was to turn to God, or maybe even return to God. In the new Testament, there is an added nuance. To repent means to start seeing things in a new light. Do you remember that Sister Catherine's number one life skill was observation? After the wise men had seen the baby, they heeded the words of an angel in their dreams, and they went home 'by another road'. They literally no longer walked the same path but followed another way home.

But what then does Advent as a season of penitential preparation mean for us? Christmas is about light coming into the darkness of our individual lives, about our 'return from exile', and about the birth of Christ within us. The line from the 19th Century hymn, 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', affirms this personal meaning:

O holy child of Bethlehem...be born in us today'

Like the Magi, we are also invited to search for God in the humility of a fragile baby and to travel home, transformed. That 'journey' will take us to a new place. We need to continue our journey with an open and challenging mind.



Closing Prayers:

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lifting the burden of darkness from our lives.**

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melting the hardness that keeps us from you and from each other.**

Trees, branches bare against the steel skies;
Stems crumpled under weight of frost, weight of snow;
Last year's leaves, blackened and slippery underfoot;
Nature oppressed by wintriness, yet resting, awaiting rebirth.
**Cherish our hearts, Lord, oppressed by wintriness -
assure us of your coming of your call to new life.**

Into the love of the Holy Three

We place ourselves this day

Into the care of the Holy Three

**We place all that we have been,
all that we are
and all that we shall be**

Into the peace of the Holy Three

**We place all those things
that might trouble or cause us concern**

In the name of the Creator

We ask a blessing of calm on us

In the name of the Son

We ask a blessing of peace on us

In the name of the Holy Spirit

We ask a blessing of healing on us

*May the peace and love of the Creator be ours; the peace and love of Christ be ours, the
peace and love of the Spirit be ours, as we journey inward during this season of
reflection. Amen*

Homework:

The first and most important step in your Advent journey is to slow down, pray, and read. If you don't follow God's direction in all things, you *will* 'take your eye off the ball'.

Make a point to specifically pray about Advent and how God wants you to approach the season. Ask Him for guidance, for creativity, and for clarity of mind.

Then begin reading through Scriptures associated with Advent. For your convenience, I have compiled a list of Advent Bible passages so you can have a starting point for reading.

Work through these Scriptures over the next week and write down passages, words, inspirational insights that occur to you. We can start by discussing these next week.

- Isaiah 40:9-11
- Isaiah 52:7-9
- Genesis 3:8-15
- Isaiah 40:1-5
- Genesis 15:1-6
- Deuteronomy 18:15-19
- Psalm 89:1-4
- Isaiah 11:1-10
- Micah 5:2-3
- Zechariah 6:12-13
- Malachi 3:1-6
- John 1:1-8
- John 1:9-18
- Mark 1:1-3
- Luke 1:5-25
- Luke 1:39-80
- Isaiah 7:10-139
- Luke 1:26-35
- Isaiah 9:2-7
- Matthew 1:18-25
- Luke 2:1-20
- Matthew 2:1-2
- Luke 2:21-35

