

From Darkness to Light

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Advent Sunday, 30th November 2025

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-12, Isaiah 11:1-9, Luke 1:26-38,
Revelation 21:22-22:7

Introduction: Who's coming?

At a primary school assembly last year I asked if anyone knew what Advent meant – no one did. So I explained that it meant “coming”, and asked who was coming? Can you guess what the response was from the first child I asked? Santa Claus.

One of the traditional secular songs we hear at this time of year is *Santa Claus is coming to town*. Although you might think it has nothing to do with Advent, actually I think it very much does. The song warns children that how they've behaved will determine whether or not they get presents when Santa comes and that “He sees you when you're sleeping,/ He knows when you're awake./He knows if you've been bad or good,/ So be good for goodness' sake!”¹

For Christians Advent isn't just about preparing to celebrate the coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem, but about preparing for his Second Coming as Judge of the world. Like Lent, the seasonal colour of Advent is purple, the colour of repentance. God does indeed see us, and knows our thoughts, words and deeds, both good and bad. He knows all about the evil in the world, the selfishness, violence, exploitation, and the indifference to the suffering of others

¹ Santa Claus is comin' to town (1934) by J Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie. See

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Claus_Is_Comin%27_to_Town

which enables evil to continue. He also sees the efforts of those who work for peace, who bring help to the suffering, who give generously of their time, gifts and money to further the work of his Kingdom.

From darkness to light

The theme of this service is “From darkness to light”, represented in the darkness with which the service began and in the lights of the choir’s candles as well as our electric lights! As we listen to or read the news, we can feel overwhelmed by the darkness of what we learn about – the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Sudan, the terrible suffering of the people of Gaza over the past two years, the recent natural disasters, exacerbated by climate change, such as the terrible flooding that has just happened in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka, not to mention the terrible fire in the tower blocks in Hong Kong. In our own country we are aware of the growing mental health crisis, especially among children and young people, the daily struggles of people on low incomes, and many other problems. Most of these problems are caused by, or at least contributed to, by human selfishness, anger, or negligence.

The Advent Prose

The inspiration for the choice of this evening’s Bible readings was the text of the first anthem we heard, *Drop Down ye Heavens* by Anna Lapwood. The words come from a traditional liturgical text for Advent, called the “Advent Prose”. This takes verses from various chapters of the book of Isaiah, which between them express a recognition of the lost state of the world, a desire to repent, a plea to God to

bring salvation, and a message of comfort and hope. Lapwood's anthem picks some of the more positive verses of the original text.

Our first reading this evening, from Isaiah chapter 64, includes some of the other words of the Advent Prose. This passage (which, incidentally, is in poetry, not prose) seems to have been written after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC:

Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins².

The writer understands that the disaster which has befallen his people is as a result of their turning away from God, and interprets the destruction of Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah as punishment by God. But in addition to acknowledging the rebellion of God's people, he also recalls God's acts of salvation in the past, and calls on God to intervene and come to their aid in their time of distress.

Are we prepared to face the problems of the world today in the same way that the Advent Prose suggests? First of all, we need to honestly acknowledge the role that human sinfulness has played in creating the misery and destruction we see around us. This includes honestly recognising not only our direct involvement in this, but also how indirectly we contribute to the suffering of others and the destruction of the planet and its natural life. Are we taking seriously our responsibility to shop ethically, reduce our carbon footprint

² Isaiah 64:11 NRSV

and give generously of our own resources to relieve the suffering of others?

Acknowledging our sin is a first step. The second is to act positively to change our behaviour and attitudes. What practical things will we do when shopping (including for Christmas presents), and in making decisions about how we use our money and time?

The hope of salvation

Our second reading this evening was another prophecy from the book of Isaiah, this time a vision of a world ruled over by the Messiah, who will govern with the wisdom, integrity and justice that comes from the Spirit of God; a world where the lion will lie down with the lamb, where

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea³.

The story of the Bible is the story of God's plan to bring redemption to a good world spoiled by sin. In choosing Abraham as the founder of the nation of Israel, and in making a covenant with Israel through Moses, God was laying the foundations for a rescue plan that would lead to the sending of his Son to break the power of sin and death through Jesus' Cross and resurrection. The culmination of this plan will be the restoration of all things, represented by the Second Coming of Christ as King and Judge of all. This is how the vision of Isaiah will be fulfilled.

³ Isaiah 11:9 NRSV

Our last reading from the end of the book of Revelation⁴ describes the final state of a restored humanity, forgiven and healed, living with God in a beautiful city, the new Jerusalem, refreshed by the water of life and healed by the leaves of the tree of life, which we first came across in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Bible. This is a picture full of hope, the assurance from God that he will not allow evil to reign for ever.

Responding with obedience

In view of all this, we can face the reality of evil in the world with confidence, rather than despair. God is not unaware of the problem of evil, and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we can see how his plan of salvation has already been put into effect.

But this should not lead us to complacency. God has always called people to co-operate with him in his good purposes in the world. A prime example of this is the calling of Mary, as we heard in our third reading. Mary models the response that God is looking for from us. The angel reveals God's plan and the part that Mary is to play. She responds with trust and obedience:

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”⁵

This Advent, let us listen to what God is saying to us, and follow Mary's example in trust and obedience. Let us offer ourselves to God, to be beacons of Christ's light and agents of

⁴ Revelation 21:22-22:7

⁵ Luke 1:38 NRSV

his love in the world, as we sang in our second him this evening:

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in your church gathered today⁶.

⁶ *Christ, be our light!* by Bernadette Farrell © 1993 Bernadette Farrell