

*Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.*

## Call to Worship

Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honour  
and power and might  
be to our God for ever and ever!

*Revelation 7.12*

Welcome to my reflection for The Cotteridge Church on Sunday 1st November 2020. Today is All Saints' Day. But who are the saints? Who are we giving thanks for today? What are the characteristics of the saints? What have saints to do with us? I'll return to those questions later.

The first thing that comes to mind for many people when the word 'saint' is mentioned are maybe Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - probably accompanied by a rhyme - the writers of the four Gospels. Or maybe they think of the four patron saints of the nations of British Isles for example. St Andrew of Scotland, St David of Wales, St George of England and St Patrick of Ireland. Four very different saints with different backgrounds. Andrew was one of Jesus' first disciples. Patrick and David were both bishops here in the British Isles in the 5th and 6th centuries respectively. As for George, well he may or may not have existed at all, but his story seems to date from 3rd century Palestine and represents the battle between good and evil. Saints of old. But what about saints today.

Let us pray:

## Opening Prayer

God of holiness,  
your glory is proclaimed in every age:  
as we rejoice in the faith of your saints,  
inspire us to follow their example  
with boldness and joy;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

*Church of England - Common Worship (Additional Collects)*

In my previous post I served at St Andrew's, West Bromwich. Behind the communion table was a very splendid reredos. In the centre was Jesus. Then, left to right, there were depictions of George (Patron of the Nation), Andrew (Patron of that church), Michael (patron of a former Mission Church nearby) and Chad (Patron of the Diocese of Lichfield).

I once had a school party visit and, when they were sat in the choir stalls, I asked them who the depictions were. I asked who's the Patron Saint of England? A lad popped his hand up and boldly answered .... David Beckham!

All of these big name saints have their own feast days - except David Beckham - so why do we need an All Saints' Day?

The word 'saint' is derived from the Latin 'sanctus', the Greek 'hagios' and the Hebrew 'qadosh'. These words were applied to God, to people, to places, and to objects. In relation to people, places or objects it meant being hallowed, consecrated or set apart. They certainly didn't assume a high moral quality that we associate with the word saint today.

In his letters Paul only ever refers to saints collectively. He addresses all followers of Jesus in that way and starts his letters to the saints at Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi and other places. No assumption of perfection is made, as is clear from the contents of the letters.

It was only later that the term was applied to individuals, first to those who gave their lives for the faith, to early bishops and abbesses and those following strict religious orders - monks and nuns.

Eventually it became a title of honour, particularly after death, and a persons name was placed on a list, or canon of saints, from which we get the word canonised. Although the Roman Catholic Church has a formal system of canonisation other churches don't, and many saints were named before Rome started its formal process. Don't mention it on a Saturday night in Cardiff or Dublin but neither David or Patrick were ever formally 'canonised' by Rome.

All Saints is when we remember those who have faithfully followed Christ in all generations but are not known by name. But also those who follow today. We are all called to be "saints". In our baptism we are 'set apart' to follow Christ. We are hallowed or consecrated. But what qualities are we called to show, where is Christ's work in our lives and where can Christ's presence be found?

Our Gospel reading:

## **Matthew 5 .1-12 (NRSV)**

- 1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.
- 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:
- 3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- 5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- 6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- 7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
- 8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- 9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- 10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
- 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This isn't list of characteristics that we are to aim for! It may be a particular vocation or calling to make a vow of poverty for example - but people being forced into, or born into,

# All Saints Day

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poverty is not clearly not God's will. On the other being merciful or peacemaking are clearly laudable qualities. What's going on? What is this list about?

The word translated here as 'blessed' is the Greek word 'makarios'. Some other versions translate it as 'happy'. It is found mostly in Revelation, where it is used in the sense of entering into holiness, and in Luke, in the context of transformation of life. Blessed are those who work for the Kingdom of God.

## Blessings and Questions

We say 'blessed are those who mourn',  
but why is there mourning?  
We say 'blessed are the poor',  
but why is there poverty?  
We say 'blessed are those who are persecuted  
for doing right',  
but surely that is wrong?  
We know how our world should be, Lord,  
but reality is different.

We confess that the world is broken:  
some of it by our own doing,  
some of it against our will,  
some of it because that's just how it is.

For the wrong that we can change,  
grant us resolve.  
For the wrong that we cannot change,  
grant us strength.  
For the wrong that wounds us,  
grant us healing.  
Amen

*Fay Rowland (a teacher, and author of church resources)  
(Taken from 'Prayers from the Heart' URC Prayer Handbook 2020)*

The saints are God's workers. Flawed individuals, in a flawed world, but called, set aside, hallowed or blessed through our call to follow Christ. In showing compassion in a time of pandemic, working for reconciliation in a time of political division, speaking calmly and quietly when all around are loud and aggressive. God's Kingdom is an upside down Kingdom where the values of the world are reversed. To live and proclaim that is the role of the saints!

## True Saints

As many as the leaves  
golden in autumn  
blowing along the streets  
are your saints.

As precious as bales  
gathered in the barns  
or stored at the field side  
are your saints.

As strong as the rocks  
graining the hillsides  
or forming the river bed  
are your saints.

As widespread as frost  
glazing the meadows  
and coating the branches  
are your saints.

As strange as it seems  
grace makes possible  
that me and my neighbour  
are your saints.

*Terry Oakley (URC Worship Book)*

## Closing remarks

What about those questions I posed at the beginning:

Who are the saints? - Those who follow Jesus Christ.

Who are we giving thanks for today? - innumerable people, past and present, who serve God.

What are the characteristics of the saints? - Ordinary people with a love for God and Jesus Christ.

What have saints to do with us? - We are the saints of God set consecrated for God's service.

## Closing Prayer

Holy and merciful God,  
write the values of our hearts and lives;  
and help us,  
with all your saints and angels,  
to seek your face  
and happily walk in your ways. Amen

*Ruth Burgess  
(in 'Candles and Conifers', Wild Goose Publications).*

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next Sunday is Remembrance Sunday and that will be the focus of my reflection as we recall the sinfulness of war and remember those who have lost their lives in conflict.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

*Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.*

*God is our refuge and strength;  
a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46.1)*

Welcome to my reflection for The Cotteridge Church on Remembrance Sunday 2020. As well as war memorials at the centre of communities, many factories have their own. In Bournville Lane the Cadbury's memorial tells us that a total of 2148 workers served in the First World War and 218 died. It's a typical casualty rate, 1:10 of those who went didn't come back. Not all of those were employed at the Bournville site of course. More about that in a moment. But first a prayer of penitence. Let us pray:

## **Opening Prayer of Penitence**

We fight over land that is not ours.

Forgive us our arrogance.

We put a price on resources that are priceless.

Forgive us our greed.

We create divisions and labels that separate and humiliate.

Forgive us our hurtfulness.

Too often we fail to learn from our mistakes and reconcile our errors.

Forgive us our wrongdoings.

We will remember that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.

Amen

*Fiona van Wissen*

*(from 'Winter', Edited by Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications)*

A couple of years ago I was involved with a very different Remembrance event to normal. A friend, who was working as a consultant with a company called Knighton Foods, asked if I would be able to dedicate a memorial to six men from that factory who'd been killed in the First World War. It was the centenary of the end of that conflict. Knighton Foods is in the tiny village of Knighton in rural Staffordshire and has strong links to Birmingham. It's where Bird's Custard Powder is now made! Invented by Arthur Bird in his Birmingham Chemist's Shop in 1837.

A hundred years ago though Knighton was a Cadbury's site. It's where milk was gathered, condensed, and then shipped to Bournville by canal. Most of the men who worked there came originally from the Bournville area - including those who died in the First World War.

One of this men was William Rupert Kitchen, a milk condenser, whose poignant story reminds us of the families as being the wider victims of war. He went missing in action on 21st March 1918. Six days later, and still unaware that he'd died, his wife Daisy gave birth to their only child, William Arthur Kitchen. They are just one of the countless stories of ordinary people caught up in the tragedy of war.

## **The ordinary people**

We remember today all the ordinary people  
ripped from their towns and villages,  
torn from their families  
to serve their country in war.

We remember today the people  
left behind to keep things going  
in factories, on farms,  
on the streets blitzed by war.

We remember today the people  
who lost their lives in war  
and those left behind  
who never saw their loved ones again,  
who grew up without a parent, a sibling,  
a partner or a friend,  
who never discovered love again  
and who grew old alone.

We remember today all the ordinary people  
on either side of the conflict  
whose lives were changed forever,  
all those who paid the price of freedom.

And, in our remembering the ordinary people,  
we remember that the cost of war  
will always be too high  
and paid for by ordinary people.

*Liz Crumlish, Spill the Beans*

Remembrance Sunday is always a difficult occasion to preach on or reflect about. There are so many different themes. It's easy for it to become focussed only on the military, or only on this nation. It's also easy to forget the non-combatants who died, such as the members of Quaker Field Ambulance units. We also need to remember civilian deaths on all sides, in all conflicts. Remembrance is about all of these, allies of the past and enemies too. In today's reading Jesus calls us to love our enemies and those who persecute us.

## **Matthew 5 .43-48 (NRSV)**

43 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the

unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

War is sinful! It may be unavoidable. Some Christian theology suggests it may even be justified. Remembrance Sunday is not an occasion for such debates. Instead we wear our symbols of remembrance and recall those who've been victims of wars long ago, of more recent years, and of today. Silence is an important part of that and, after appropriate words of introduction, I invite you to reflect for two minutes in silence and imagery.

## From the darkness of death

From the darkness of death,  
God calls us into glorious light.

From the tumult of war,  
God call us into the beauty of peace.

Children of light,  
God calls us today to remembrance.

In light and in peace,  
We will remember them.

*(A time of silence follows).*

Through our living may your light shine  
and through our prayers may your love be known.

**Amen**

*Spill the Beans*

The Gospel reading today finished with the verse:

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”. (*Matthew 5 .48*)

This is part of the quest for righteousness to which God calls us. Loving our enemies, and forgiving those who hurt us, are challenging, difficult and - even with the passage of time - sometimes impossible. It calls for a perfection and love that are beyond our capability. We are always dependent on the mercy of God. We are permanently in the position of sinners who must always pray ‘Forgive us our debts’.

Forgiven by God may we find the strength to work towards the peace, reconciliation and forgiveness that is part of the pursuit of the fulness of righteousness that is God's Kingdom.

## Let us go from this place

Let us go from this place  
with minds that never forget,  
with hearts that grow in hope,  
with lives that shine Christ's light.  
Let us go to serve,  
to reconcile,  
to bring peace  
and to stand united  
as children of the light.

And may the blessing of God,  
Creator, Peacemaker, Peace-bringer,  
go with us all  
this day and every day.  
Amen

*Roddy Hamilton, Spill the Beans*

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Also there's a link below, and on the resource site, to more details about the Knighton Foods commemoration in 2018.

Next Sunday I'll tell you a little about another group of workers who also paid the ultimate price, in this case victims of industry - the 22 men lost in the Pelsall Colliery Disaster of 1872.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

### Notes:

Article: Knighton Foods commemorates employees who died during WW1

<https://knightonfoods.com/news/article/knighton-foods-commemorates-employees-who-died-during-ww1>



*Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.*

*I lift up my eyes to the hills-  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.*

*(Psalm 121 .1,2)*

Welcome to my reflection for today, Sunday 15th November 2020. Last week we remembered those who have died in war. This week we remember those who've died while carrying out their jobs; in industry, agriculture, commerce, or - as with the NHS staff who've died during the current pandemic - while caring for others.

Birmingham and the Black Country are vastly different areas; historically, culturally and linguistically. But both areas are rooted in industry, and have been for several centuries. Our opening prayer today is adapted from one I wrote some years ago for the Black Country Circuit of the Methodist Church. It picks up the theme of some of the historic industries of the Black Country; chain making, mining, glassmaking and iron founding.

Let us pray:

## **Opening Prayer**

Lord, we come together,  
praying for your guidance for our ministry.

Lord, we pray that you will:  
Strengthen the chains  
that link us together as churches  
and with our fellow Christians.

Lord, we pray that you will  
break the chains  
that imprison us as living only in the past,  
and that prevent us having the courage  
to venture into the future.

Lord, we pray that you will:  
Help us to mine  
the rich seams of your love that already exist  
in our towns and in our churches.  
May your love fuel the fire of our desire  
to serve you anew each day.

Lord, we pray that you will:  
Inspire us to live our lives  
in such ways that, through us,  
your love sparkles as does light  
through the finest crystal.  
May others catch in us a glimmer of your glory,  
a reflection of you in the way we live our lives.

Lord, we pray that you will:  
create in us, not hearts cast as iron,  
but hearts that are warmed  
with such a knowledge of your love  
that we may be moulded anew each day  
so as to be effective in your service  
and that of all people. Amen.

Mike Claridge

Mike Claridge

Yesterday, the 14th November, was the anniversary of a disaster in one corner of the Black Country many years ago. 1872 to be precise. The Pelsall Colliery Disaster claimed the lives of 22 miners. The oldest was 70, the youngest just 13, one of five teenagers to die. At 9 am, when most of the 100 miners at work had retreated to ground level for breakfast others, including Michael Cash, stayed at work. As he swung his pick into the rock he may have been singing the rhyme "The Jolly Miller" or "The Miller of The Dee" because, when a flow of water sprung from the rock he called out "Come and see the River Dee!". That spring became a torrent within seconds. Unbeknown to the miners they'd penetrated older mine workings. The pit filled with water, drowning or trapping the 22 men and boys below.

What is now a tranquil, tree covered area on Mouse Hill, Pelsall, soon became the centre of attention for the nation. National and local press were on the scene. The railway company had to lay on special trains because people wanted to come and see the rescue in progress. An old photograph shows the scene at the pit head. Three bodies were found, drowned, after five days of pumping. It was another two days before the mine could be entered and then 18 bodies were discovered, dry, in what had been an air pocket. All had suffocated - they'd had time to eat their snap before their lamps failed - one was found in the position of prayer, others died huddled together for warmth. One body was never recovered, lost in the silt that filled several of the passageways where eight horses also lay buried.

The bodies were taken to The Station Hotel, now a private house, where the inquest was held. The mortuary was the "long room" behind the pub, and that still stands today too.

The funeral took place on 25th November at St Michael's Church, Pelsall. The coffins of 20 miners, one having been buried privately elsewhere, were carried across Pelsall Common, now green and with plentiful trees, but then described as a "scraggy heath". After the service in the packed church the twenty bodies were buried together in a new vault to which and a granite monument was added two years later.

The disaster left 13 women widowed and over 20 children fatherless. Thanks to a national appeal the families, and their descendants, received a pension - the last payment from which was paid until well into the 20th Century! Bibles were presented with to some of those who'd worked in the rescue attempt and also to the widows of those who'd died. A photograph shows the widows receiving their bibles from George Selwyn, Bishop of Lichfield.

**Job 28 .1-6, 9-11 (NRSV)**

- 1 'Surely there is a mine for silver,  
and a place for gold to be refined.
- 2 Iron is taken out of the earth,  
and copper is smelted from ore.
- 3 Miners put an end to darkness,  
and search out to the farthest bound  
the ore in gloom and deep darkness.
- 4 They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation;  
they are forgotten by travellers,  
they sway suspended, remote from people.
- 5 As for the earth, out of it comes bread;  
but underneath it is turned up as by fire.
- 6 Its stones are the place of sapphires,  
and its dust contains gold.
- 9 'They put their hand to the flinty rock,  
and overturn mountains by the roots.
- 10 They cut out channels in the rocks,  
and their eyes see every precious thing.
- 11 The sources of the rivers they probe;  
hidden things they bring to light.

The Pelsall Colliery Disaster was 148 years ago. Sometimes we think that industrial deaths these days are few and far between. But it is a stark reality that more people die at work each year than are killed in war and conflict. Many of these deaths are preventable, all of them are tragedies. I've focused on this today because yesterday was the anniversary of events in Pelsall long ago, but there is a Workers Memorial day every year - on 28th April - and I'm sure we'll return to the theme then. But for now, after a prayer, we'll keep a minutes silence for reflection and, although accompanied by images of the Pelsall Memorial, we'll remember those who've died carrying out their jobs recently - especially those who've contracted Coronavirus at in their workplace.

Let us pray:

**We remember .....**

Lord God, your son was a carpenter and knew the hard graft of labour,  
we remember all who have died in workplaces around the world.  
We pray for those whose lives have been considered less important  
than profits to be made,  
and for those who have been knowingly placed in harm's way.  
We pray for the safety and well-being of workers,  
and for workplaces where workers are valued and respected,  
and treated with fairness and dignity.  
Amen.

(adapted from a prayer by Michelle Rath)

(Minutes silence)

## **We move on .....**

Living God,  
Reach out to all for whom the future seems uncertain or unwelcome,  
and bring the assurance that even in the darkest moments,  
the greatest challenges,  
the most worrying times,  
you are there working out your purpose;  
able to bring light out of darkness,  
hope out of despair,  
joy out of sorrow,  
and good out of evil.  
Grant the confidence that there is nothing in heaven or earth,  
in life or death, in the present or the future,  
that is able to separate us from your love. Amen.

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Also there's a link below, and on the resource site, to more details about the Knighton Foods commemoration in 2018.

Next Sunday is the final Sunday of the church's year - The Feast of Christ the King - and there'll be an appropriate reflection.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

## **Notes:**

### **For more about Pelsall Colliery Disaster:**

<https://www.pelsalltimes.co.uk/pelsall-hall-colliery-disaster>

[http://www.ccmhs.co.uk/pelsall\\_hall\\_1872.htm](http://www.ccmhs.co.uk/pelsall_hall_1872.htm)

### **For more about Workers Memorial Day:**

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/international-workers-memorial-day-iwmd>

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**Call to Worship: Psalm 100**

- 1 *Make a joyful noise to the Lord,  
all the earth.*
- 2 *Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his gates with singing.*
- 3 *Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people,  
and the sheep of his pasture*
- 4 *Let us enter his gates with thanksgiving.  
and his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him, bless his name.*
- 5 *For the Lord is good;  
his steadfast love endures for ever,  
and his faithfulness to all  
generations.*

Welcome to my reflection for today, Sunday 22nd November 2020 - The Feast of Christ the King. We started with Psalm 100, a psalm depicting a joyful procession of all people into God's presence. Entering God's gates and courts envisages a great palace of a mighty king, but one who shows steadfast love and faithfulness.

Let us pray:

**Opening Prayer**

Great and wonderful God,  
how good to enter your gates  
and to gather in your name.

How good to know  
that you are the eternal God,  
and we are your beloved people.

How good to sing in praise of you,  
to pray,  
and stand in awe of your greatness.

You, Creator of the universe.  
You, Author of time.  
You, who sustains all life.

We give you thanks, Gracious God;  
how good it is to be here.  
How very good to be here. Amen

*Karen Campbell  
(in 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)*

Like it or not monarchy dominates history - or at least written history. Periods of history are defined by who was on the throne; Elizabethan, Jacobean, Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian to name just a few. Kings and queens have given their names to pubs, streets and, of course places; Kings Norton, Kings Heath, Kingstanding, Rowley Regis are just some of the local ones. Whether you want to or not you can't escape imagery of royalty and royal patronage.

We can't escape imagery of kingdom and kingship in the bible either. In these reflections we've often looked at parables that reflect something of the Kingdom of God. We've seen that the Kingdom of God is an upside down kingdom. The poor and disadvantaged are exalted and the mighty are humbled. A kingdom where royal favour can't be earned but is freely given - a gift beyond measure to which we are called to respond. Today we hear the final parable in Matthew's Gospel. A parable of sheep and goats, and of a judgmental king. But as always there's a twist. (*video version: The parable is retold here by the Revd Phil Summers*).

### **Matthew 25 .31-46 (NRSV)**

31 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

37 Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

44 Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?"

45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Dividing sheep and goats was, I'm told, a thing that shepherds did at evening. Sheep were hardier than goats and could stay in an uncovered sheepfold. Goats on the other hand needed shelter, of a cave maybe.

Jesus uses that imagery of separating a flock to make a distinction between people who have responded to those in need and those who haven't. Matthew places the parable in the context of a final judgement when people will be held to account for what they have or haven't done.

The twist in this parable is that it's the king who is depicted as being in need. The idea of a king who was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned sits in stark contrast to the image of the majestic throne room that starts the parable.

The key to this parable is that those who've seen people in need of food, water, welcoming, clothing, comforting and visiting don't know who it is that they have encountered. 'When did we see you hungry?' they ask. "Whenever you saw one of those who was in need" he replies.

In acts of compassion, and in striving for justice, Christ the King will be encountered in unexpected ways, places and people. In encountering Christ we will learn more of the wonders of that amazing grace that is poured out for each and everyone of us.

Sheep and goats both follow herd instincts. Sometimes we're the same. It's easy to 'go with the flow' or to allow ourselves to be influenced by others - for good or bad. But we are called to follow God in Christ, so often depicted in scripture as a shepherd, on a journey that doesn't follow the values of the world. When we see injustice or those in need it's sometimes easier to turn our backs and walk away. But we are called to follow Christ the Shepherd King on the steep and rugged pathway that leads to the only true kingdom, a kingdom of love and peace, justice and righteousness.

## Sheep?

Why is injustice so beguiling?

Of course, when we name it -  
point it out -  
no one wants to believe they are on the side  
of the unjust.

Yet how easily we drift along,  
benefitting from the unjust systems  
which uphold the ways of the world.

We wish there was no 'rich and poor',  
but are grateful to live comfortably in our comfort.  
We wish nations did not oppress their neighbours,  
but are thankful to live in a nation  
counted amongst the powerful.

We abhor racism and prejudice,  
but are slow to recognise those traits in ourselves.  
We do not always think things through,  
but accept our place in the way things are.

They say that sheep tend to follow,  
without a thought to where  
they are being led.  
Were you right, then, to compare us to sheep?

And yet you, yourself promise to be our Shepherd,  
tending to your beloved flock.  
So cut through the beguiling tones of injustice  
and let us hear and follow you.

*Karen Campbell*  
(in 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)

I once heard about a nun, working in a homeless shelter. Each evening, before the shelter opened its doors, she prayed with the other volunteers. Let her prayer be ours:

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
we know that you will be one  
of those people we encounter today.  
Help us to welcome all,  
as we welcome you.  
Amen

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next Sunday is the beginning of Advent as we prepare to celebrate again the birth of Christ at Bethlehem and prepare for that time when we will meet him face to face.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!



*Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.*

### **Call to Worship:**

Lord, stir up your might,  
and come to save us!  
Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine,  
that we may be saved.

*Psalm 80 vv.2b,3*

Welcome to my reflection for the First Sunday of Advent (29th November 2020). This is a time of watching and waiting. Watching with hope for the arrival of the Kingdom of God in its fullness. Waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem but also his promised return.

Let us pray:

### **Opening Prayer**

God of birth,  
we watch in fear for your coming;  
scared of the pain and risk,  
the struggle of new life emerging  
and our own capacity to bear it.  
God of waiting,  
wait with us.

God of the future,  
we watch in hope for your coming;  
anticipating an unknown future,  
uncertain of the named reality,  
not sure of the form it will take.  
God of waiting,  
wait with us.

God of celebration,  
we watch in joy for your coming;  
expectant with promises of freedom,  
eager for new possibilities,  
delighting in the gift of birth.  
God of waiting,  
wait with us.

*Jan Berry  
(in 'Candles and Conifers', Wild Goose Publications)*

As today is the beginning of Advent it marks the start of a new church liturgical year - the cycle of seasons that run from now, through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter and onwards into Pentecost and the Sundays that follow it. For the next twelve months many of our Gospel readings will be from Mark's Gospel. Like the other gospels there are stories that lie behind their style and the way that the writers use the teachings of Jesus. We're going to hear this weeks Gospel reading in three parts starting with words that may seem threatening and unnerving:

**Mark 13 .24-27 (NRSV)**

24 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. 27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

It's believed that Mark's Gospel was the earliest of the four Gospels to be written. But even this Gospel wasn't written until more than 30 years after the events of Jesus' death and resurrection. That's important when trying to understand this text. In the years 66 - 70 AD there was a widespread revolt in the territory of Judea - the part of the Holy Land that includes Jerusalem. The occupying Roman Empire responded mercilessly and crushed the revolt. In doing so they laid waste much of the area. For the inhabitants of Judea it must have seemed that the 'sky had indeed fallen in'. Mark was writing at around this time and used that imagery to remind those earliest Christians to keep hope - Jesus Christ has promised he would return. If this was indeed the end times - for so it must have seemed - he would be there to gather them together. It's a common theme in New Testament writings that Christ would return soon - but when?

**Mark 13 .28-31 (NRSV)**

28 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The other evening I was sitting in the study when I heard an owl hooting in the trees outside. I've heard it for several nights now. But it was another bird that made the news this week. Apparently swallows are starting to stay here all year round. Usually they migrate on an incredible journey to southern Africa during our winter. But some are still around. It isn't good news - particularly for the swallows - as the number of flying insects on which they feed are unlikely to be sufficient for the swallows to survive. It's a sign in nature perhaps that all is not well. And certainly, in this case, one swallow certainly doesn't make it summer.

In that passage you've just heard Jesus refers to signs in nature. The fig tree, he points out, starts to show signs of new leaves before summer arrives but heralds its approach - but only to those who are attentive to such things. Be alert then, says Jesus, be attentive. Like the fig tree heralding that summer is near there will be signs of the approach of the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.

**Mark 13 .32-37 (NRSV)**

32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to

be on the watch. 35 Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

Stay awake! That's the message of Jesus that Mark is emphasising in today's Gospel reading. It was the expectation of the earliest Christians that Christ would return imminently. Especially when they saw signs of destruction and turmoil around them - as if the the sky was falling in. As the years, decades and centuries passed Christian expectation and theology changed. Kingdoms, powers and dominions came and went. Jesus reminded us in today's Gospel that even if heaven and earth pass away, his words will remain. God's word is a living word, speaking afresh to each generation, a revelation to all of God's gift to us all of himself, unreservedly. As a living word it continues to evolve and we are called to be vigilant - vigilant for God's purposes unfolding and for the coming of the fulfilment of the Kingdom.

### **Amidst the chores and hassle ....**

Lord God,  
made known in Jesus  
and present through your Spirit,

this Advent-tide  
we might look for you  
by scanning the horizon,  
or watching for a visitor at the door,  
or by waiting for a notification  
to pop up on a screen ...

Alternatively,  
we might notice you  
already beside us as we  
labour over a mountain  
of Christmas cards - and rekindle  
friendships and re-affirm our love.  
In stretching our minds and finances  
to offer suitable gifts,  
might we remember that our Christmas giving  
is triggered by your gift of yourself to us?

As we hear again familiar stories  
from far away and long ago,  
may our giving and our loving  
be refreshed by our knowing once again  
that you are here for us,  
then and now  
and forever.

*Ian Fosten*  
(in 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)

On the resource site you'll find links to a range of Advent material; for study, worship and action. Being alert to God in Jesus Christ is about seeing what God is doing in and through other Christians. Material provided there is from the Joint Public Issues Team and looks at issues of justice. Sessions are organised around the four titles of God in Isaiah 9 .6 "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace". I commend it to you as a way of staying alert and ready this Advent - tide.

Let us pray:

### **Closing Prayer**

In the strength of God the maker we are going on a journey.  
In the friendship of Jesus we are going on a journey.  
In the safeguarding of the Holy Spirit we are going on a journey.  
A star is shining. Angels are busy.  
Mary is pregnant. Joseph is packing.  
Advent is coming. It's time to go.  
May God bless us with hope  
and wonder as we travel. Amen

*Ruth Burgess  
(in 'Winter', Wild Goose Publication)*

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site, and also the Advent material for you to enjoy.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!