

Company of Preachers
October, 2020,
Advent





Introduction

I was brought up in the Church of Scotland, which is a Presbyterian Church. It is a relatively moderate Presbyterian Church and is now very similar in its ecclesiology, its way of being Church, to the Uniting Church here in Australia.

Each year, on the first Sunday in December, we started singing Christmas carols in Church, and we didn't stop until around the second Sunday in January the following year.





Advent



Growing up, I knew nothing about Advent, and during my first year as a Scottish Episcopalian, the denomination I chose as an adult, I remember feeling quite resentful that for most of December, we sang Advent hymns that I didn't know and couldn't sing.

Of course all that changed, as I realised the narrative power of the Bible stories we read during Advent, and as the beautiful tunes of such hymns as *O Come, O Come, Immanuel* made a deep impression on me and became better known. I learned of the newness and freshness and hopefulness of this season which begins each new liturgical year.



- I learned about the discipline of waiting for the coming of Christ (Nativity, in our hearts, at the end of time). I learned that what sounded like major excavation works: lowering mountains and raising valleys, making pathways straight and smooth was actually a metaphor for the deep inner work of welcoming Christ.
- And I was touched by the desire of God to comfort God's own people that we read in Isaiah 40. These are people who are to be fully reconciled to God, and the text prefigures our own reconciliation through Christ; we and they people who are to become heralds shouting from the mountaintop the coming of God into our midst.





Advent

Eventually Advent became my favourite liturgical season, because of its potential to engage the imagination theologically and spiritually. This season is peopled by an expected Messiah; by angels and prophets and kings and (very prominently) the lowly; and of course by Emmanuel (God with us).

Advent is full of significance: of reconciliation, of expectation, hopefulness, of excitement; and yet all this is meted out with a measure of self-understanding that we would never be entirely ready for that coming, and there is a little regret in that; but that God would generously give us the comfort of it nevertheless.

Today I would like to share with you my love affair with the season of Advent, because I have experienced it as sheer gift and as a great joy in my life. This has led me to want to share the ministry elements of the season with the people in the various congregations where I have served. And that includes sharing the preaching! (More to come on that...)



Advent



History of Advent



Context

St Perpetuus (6th Bishop of Tours) (presided 461-490CE) proclaimed a three-day-a-week fast each year from St Martin's Day November 11th until Christmas Day.

The Council of Tours (567CE) made this fast more rigorous for some: ordered monks to fast every day in December until Christmas.

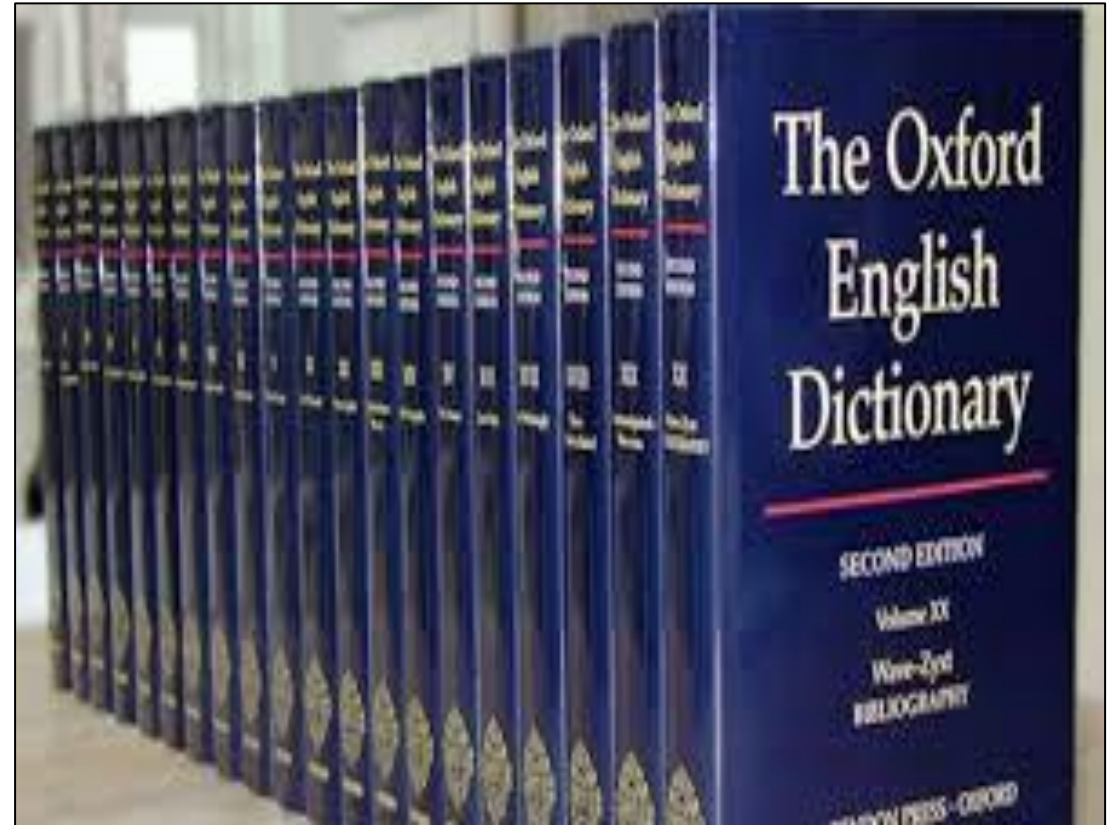
Advent was therefore originally conceived as a penitential season characterized by serious fasting.



Advent

Advent Etymology:

- Some apocryphal accounts suggest that the word Advent derived from Pope Perpetuus's " St Martin's Lent" which translated to "Advent."
- A more convincing etymology from the Oxford Dictionary suggests it is derived from the Latin noun *Adventus* (arrival) with its verbal root: *ad venire* "to come."





“Mechanics” of Advent

Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day (Advent Sunday).

There are therefore four Sundays in Advent, though the season is also observed in mid-week services, meditations, prayer services and study groups.

The liturgical colour for Advent is violet in Anglican Churches in honour of its penitential origin (though fasting is no longer recommended); Lutheran Churches often use blue vestments and candles for Advent.

Anglican Advent wreaths have three purple candles, one rose candle for the third Sunday (Gaudete Sunday which means “rejoice!”), and a white Christ candle for Christmas Day. These are lit successively (and accumulatively) throughout the season.



Advent





In the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church (consistent with the Anglican Lectionary) the readings on the Sundays of Advent have distinct themes:

1. On the First Sunday of Advent, they look forward to the Second Coming of Christ. This is done through readings from the Psalms and from two major prophets: Isaiah and (to a lesser extent) Jeremiah; and a number of minor prophets: Baruch, Malachi, Micah and Zephaniah.
2. These are mainly eschatological prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, with a description of all the signs that will be had in the natural world pointing to that fulfilment. Excavations of valleys and hills; the making of straight highways; the watering and blooming of the desert; lambs and lions lying down peacefully together; safety of innocent children even around snakes; rejoicing and fulfilment of a people forgiven by God and eternally reconciled with God.
3. In a general sense, although judgement is sometimes implied, it is not emphasised in these prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures so much as God's forgiveness and mercy leading to peace, fulfilment and reconciliation.



Advent

The Advent Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures can only be incorporated into the Christian Advent consciousness, because the Church has always assumed that the anticipated Messiah of Judaism, is one and the same with Jesus Christ.

This is called using a typological interpretation of the Old Testament scriptures: This is where “certain persons, objects or events in the OT are seen to set forth at a deeper level persons, objects and events in the New Testament.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

Many biblical scholars are uncomfortable about this approach, and of course Judaism is not always acceptant of what Christianity does to sacred texts that are considered to belong to it's faith.



Advent

My own feeling is that it's acceptable for Christian to do this, if we do it sensitively, and with humility, acknowledging that there are different usages and interpretations of these shared texts.

We are justified in doing this:

- Throughout the New Testament particularly in St Mathew's gospel, Old Testament prophecies are used to reinforce and validate elements of Jesus' character, life and identity, as well as experiences of the early church. (Immanuel, Isaiah 7:14; Pentecost: Joel 2: 28; Acts 2)
- Jesus himself used OT texts to demonstrate New Testament realities and challenges: "The Spirit of God is upon me (Isaiah 61; Luke 4:18); "You have heard it said that".. but I say (Matthew 5:27-28)



Advent

1. On the Second Sunday, the Gospel reading recalls the preaching of John the Baptist, the only NT prophet, who came to "prepare the way of the Lord"; the other readings have associated themes.
2. On the Third Sunday (Gaudete Sunday), the Gospel reading is again about John the Baptist, the other readings about the joy associated with the coming of the Saviour.
3. On the Fourth Sunday, the Gospel reading is about the events involving Mary and Joseph that led directly to the birth of Jesus, while the other readings are related to these nativity readings



Advent

The rest of this presentation will be in three parts:

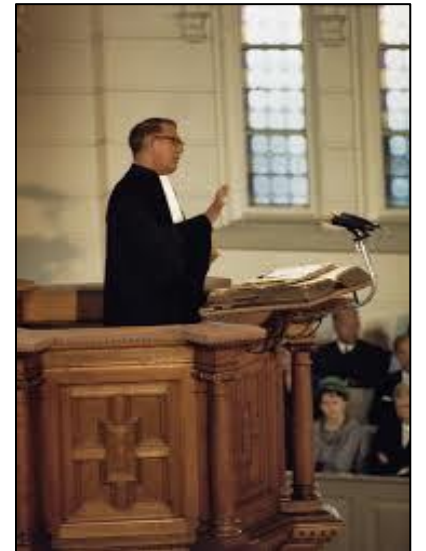
1. I will explore with you firstly some of the general biblical themes associated with Advent;
2. Then I will concentrate specifically on Year B readings that are pertinent to this year, its Advent preaching and other Church ministries.





Advent

3. I will illustrate how it has always been my practice to share the preaching in Advent, and cross-pollinate what was to be expressed in the preaching with other ministries of the parishes where I have served.





Advent

- Preaching for both the preacher and their hearers is about participating in the w/Word of God.
- I hold to a Barthian view of the w/Word of God:
 - Written word (Bible, small “w”)
 - Spoken word (Preaching and Bible reading in church; small “w”).)
 - Incarnate Word, Christ himself, to which both of the above point. (Capital “W”)



Karl Barth 1886-1968



Advent

I hope this is not too controversial:

- The written word and the spoken word are Word only in so far as they point to the Incarnate Word, Jesus himself, and that is where the capital “W” needs to be located.
- This understanding of the Word, prevents bibliolatry characterised by biblical literalism and claims to inerrancy; this understanding discourages any abuse of power of the preacher who might have an inordinate respect for the “word” which they “produce.”



Advent

- I can say with confidence and sincerity, though, at the end of a Bible reading in Church: both “Hear the Word of the Lord,” or “This is the Word of the Lord.”
- This is because I believe that in the reading and in engaging with the written word, in hearing the delivery of the spoken word, something of the Word that is most important, Christ the Incarnate Word, will by God’s grace be realised in our presence.
- The w/Word is a dynamic space and not a static entity.



Advent

Preaching is about inviting people into that dynamic space that I am calling the Word. It is about facilitating their engagement with God, rather than telling them how they should or ought to engage with God. That is why most of my preaching is not expository:

- presenting and interpreting a passage,
- outlining what it meant when it was written (exegesis),
- stating how it is to be interpreted today (hermeneutics);
- and demonstrating how it can be applied in my and my congregation's life (application/ exposition).
- This represents a didactic form of preaching





Advent

- Rather, I would approach the task of preaching with a kind of *lectio divina* prayerful approach, and let the texts suggest to me themes, conundrums, enigmas; points of interest that I then work with, with God's help, to form an invitational space for my hearers to engage with God's Word.
- There are many contemporary proponents of non-didactic approaches to preaching

Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a De-centering Word*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2007.

Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon: Personal, Pastoral Preaching*, Missouri, Chalice Press, 2001.

A.C. Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.



Advent

Esoteric to Vernacular:

Mountains, valleys and straight paths:

- Level playing fields (ethical dimension);
- highways and motorways; access direction; journey.

Calling in the wilderness:

- Kind? Personal/collective wilderness;
- Character? Flatness; aridity; interminable; dangerous?

The sorts of revelations that often emerge from the Advent readings are:

- Stories (cameos): Stories of the nativity; Mary's visitation to Elizabeth; the story of the Annunciation; Zechariah and the angel.
- Themes: Coming of the Messiah; Judgement; righteousness; waiting; healing and peace of a reconciled world; restoration; Grace and glory; God birthing something new in the world/ in us?
- Symbols: Sign of Ahaz (The young woman who will bear a child); mountains lowered, valleys; straight paths formed; John crying in the wilderness; garment of sorrow; diadem of glory (Baruch); wolf lying down with the lamb; child putting its hand on the adder's den.



Advent

Esoteric to Vernacular:

- Waiting places: bus stops; election/ Covid queues
- Time-travel
- Ever seen a programme called “Sliders”/ “Outlander”?

- In the sense that Advent is always a season of looking back to stories and prophecies which help us to look forward to the coming of Christ, there is a fair bit of imaginative “time-travel” involved. And we have hardly arrived at the story of the nativity than we are directed to look forward to Jesus’s adult life as it is heralded by John the Baptist. We look back at John looking forward to the adult emergence of Jesus and couched in language that looks forward even further to the fulfilment at the end of the age, which our looking back tells us did not happen in John’s time frame.
- Shifting/changing/collapsing of time frames/perspective.
- “With the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. (2 Peter 3; Year B, Advent II)



Ethical Considerations:

Advent can be rather escapist, because the nativity narratives have become sentimentalised in our contemporary culture; also because the eschatological emphasis of the readings lead us sometimes to emphasise future wonder and beauty and reconciliation and fulfilment. We must beware that tendency to be too heavenly minded to be any earthly good! We must allow openness to the more challenging readings like the Magnificat to remind us that God loves those who are lowly, disadvantaged and marginalised in the here and now; and that a Christian ethic points us to the mandate to love them as well, and to translate that love into practical action.

Have a stretch!





Advent

Year A & C

All the above themes are ways into sermon writing that can uncover something unusual or intriguing or topical to explore.

They seems random, but I can honestly say they have never failed to lead me somewhere creative.

They are drawn from the Advent readings set for Year A and Year C.

Year B

I now want to turn to Year B, quite specifically, as these are the Advent readings we will be offered this year in the lectionary.



Advent

Method:

- My approach to these readings is to use the form of reflective practice that I have mentioned a few times now to suggest a way into the readings, and to “dwell” creatively within the readings, before starting to write anything down.
- Takes the preacher out of the purely cognitive so they can eventually re-enter that cognitive frame for the “write-up” but, hopefully, with a “right brain” gift that just might also be the special giftedness of the Spirit.



Advent

Method for individual preacher:

- Start 4-5 days' ahead
- Spend time in prayer;
- Read all the readings
- Read each again individually and reflectively, taking notes: What do I identify with here?; what words/phrases stand out? What is surprising? intriguing? perplexing?
- Read study Bible commentary and take notes.
- Consult other commentaries and take notes.
- Let ideas/ themes/ images “percolate” for a few days
- Ask God to allow you when to sense it is time to begin writing.
- Write, edit and “shape.”



Advent

Year B Advent 1

Isaiah 64: 1-9

Psalm 80: 1-7,
17-19

I Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13: 24-37

Isaiah and Psalm: Note these are laments; they are exhortative. What does it mean to exhort God or to invoke God? What do we think we're invoking? Is invocation relevant today? When do we do this in the Eucharist?(Epiclesis)

Intriguing: You have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Relevant today? What is the restoration we want/ need as individuals as a society? Themes: Hands: potter and clay; hand of iniquity; let your hand be upon the one at your right hand; significance of hands?

I Corinthians: Grace. Respect; affirmation; sophisticated people in learning and in spiritual gifts, but...

Mark: Apocalyptic signs in the natural world: sun darkened; no moonlight; stars falling; heavens shaken etc Archaic terminology: elect gathered from 4 winds; from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. Translatable to contemporary life?

Motif: No one knows the day or the hour...



Advent

Isaiah: Intriguing: 4 different images of God: the vengeful God who has meted out double penalty to a sinful Israel; comforter who speaks tenderly to a forgiven Israel; gentle saviour caring for and leading the nation as a shepherd does with the flock; Mighty and glorious God creating cataclysmic devastation to the landscape. What does all this say about the people's understanding of God? How does it affect our understanding of God? Ambiguity of the last days.

Psalms: God who restored the people in the past is asked to do so again. The final reconciliation is depicted in symbolic language: love and righteousness of God meet and kiss the faithfulness and peacefulness of the people

2 Peter: God's time-frame incomprehensible to human beings; one day like 1000 years; day of the lord unpredictable; not only collapsing time-frames but of reality, spaces and structures: heavens to pass away; elements to be destroyed in fire: cataclysmic. Yet there is the hope of a new heaven and a new earth. Ambiguity of the last days.

Mark: Announces that John the Baptist's crying out in the wilderness is the beginning of the Good news of Jesus Christ; idea of messenger well attested in OT: Isaiah and Malachi; Story of John is found in all 4 gospels.

Year B Advent II

Isaiah 40:1-11;

Psalms 8: 1-2;

8-13;

2 Peter 3: 8-15a

Mark 1:1-8



Year B Advent III
Gaudete Sunday

Isaiah 61: 1-4; 8-11

Psalm 126 or

Luke 1: 46b-55

I Thess 5: 16-24

John 1: 6-8; 19-28

Isaiah: 5th servant song? Evocative: Spirit of the Lord is upon me; vocation related to God's justice and mercy; Intriguing Images: garland instead of ashes; oil of gladness (x mourning); oaks of righteousness; garments of salvation; robes of righteousness; Differing interpretations of the suffering servant: Isaiah himself? A Jewish Messiah? The nation of Israel; Jesus...?

Luke: Evocative: Spirit inspired praise Uplifting: my soul magnifies the Lord; rejoice; Justice emphasis.

I Thessalonians: Rejoice; Do not quench the Spirit

John: Witness sent to testify to the light; John knows clearly his vocation: not Elijah; not the Messiah, but a witness sent to testify to the light.) Jesus later ascribes the role of Elijah to John the Baptist.

Themes: Isaiah, Mary and John the Baptist: enlivened and enlivening followers of God; inspired by the Spirit, who know their vocations



Advent

Because Advent is a discrete 4-week season, and because of its popularity as a time of hope and anticipation of the coming of Christ, I have always determined ministry themes (including preaching themes) as a community collaboration:

- Sometimes the retired clergy in the parish and I would take a Sunday each and preach from a theological or spirituality text that one of us suggests.
- At other times I would have an Advent “think tank” with leaders in ministry in areas such as preaching, intercessions, meditation group, children’s ministry etc meeting together to identify the themes we would all base our Advent ministry leadership on and involve our ministry teams in...



Advent

Method:

- Leave aside 2½ hours for this event
- Have the Bible readings for the Season read aloud. This can be done with the whole gathering, or twosomes or threesomes can take a week of readings each.
- After each reading leave enough time for participants to read it again silently and jot down notes around the following questions:
 - What speaks to me in this reading”/ What do I identify with? What stands out? What surprises? What intrigues/perplexes me? What is the main theme here?
- Go through the same process for every reading.

The top of the slide features a photograph of four lit purple candles. The candles are arranged in a slightly curved line, and their flames are bright yellow-orange, casting a warm glow. The background is dark, with some bokeh light effects. The word "Advent" is written in a dark, sans-serif font in the upper right corner of this image area.

Advent

Method:

- Draw the whole group together and identify the themes/subjects. Images that stood out.
- Look for common themes to begin emerging; comment on those and encourage others to notice these and note them as they “pop up.”
- Do these themes speak to current realities/ challenges?
- Ask the group to identify the most prominent themes, and decide which to choose to work with.



Advent

Method:

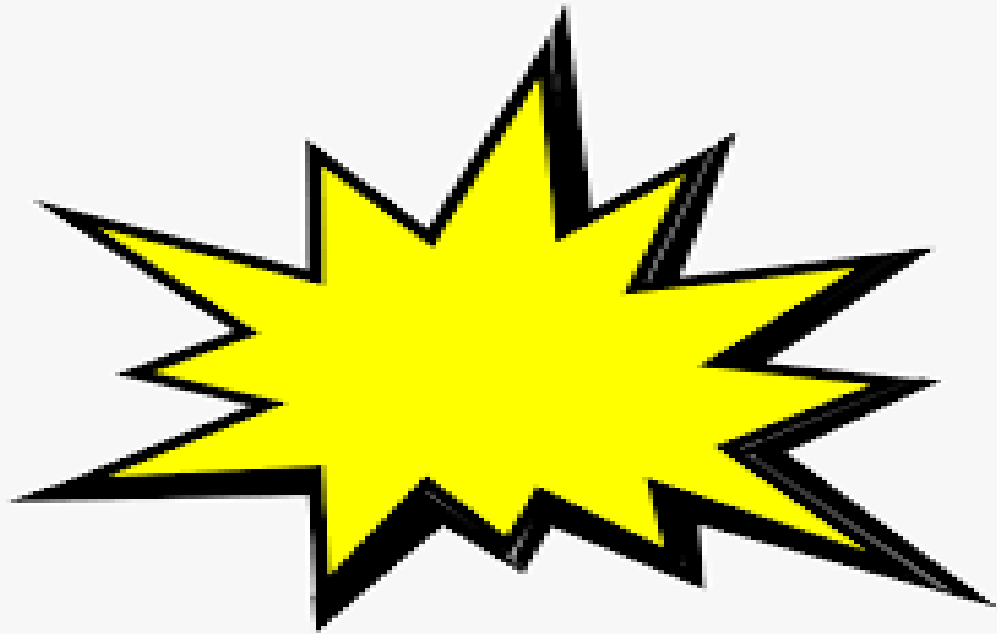
Examples emerging from this process in the past:

- Overarching theme: The Revelation of Righteousness.
 - Sermons: Signs of Righteousness; Holy and Righteous all the days of our lives; Rejoice in Righteousness; Bodies of Righteousness.
 - Meditations: The promise of righteousness; the harvest of the righteous branch; life of righteousness.
- Overarching theme: Waiting in the midst of oppositions:
 - Sermons: Power and Gentleness; Destruction and Restoration; Water and Light; The Powerful and the Lowly.
 - Children's Ministry: What are we waiting for? Bus stop erected in the sanctuary-place for the children's talk. Children's talk for the 4 weeks: who is joining us at the bus stop to play the waiting game and what is each of them waiting for?: Prophet Isaiah; John the Baptist; Mary Mother of God; King David...



Advent

If Time Allows



Year B Advent IV

2 Samuel 7: 1-11; 16

Psalms 89:1-4; 9-26

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1: 26-38



Advent

Other options 1:

Situate reading and interpretation of texts in the context of what is known about the season: waiting and anticipation of Christ's coming.

This can work well, but the danger is that the texts from Scripture are read through the hermeneutical lens of the season, restricting their potential to yield anything new or fresh.

Other options 2:

Allow a wide reading of the Advent scriptures to suggest a theme to you: changed landscapes: mountains, valleys and highways; branch of righteousness; root of Jesse; faithfulness and righteousness springing up from God's sowing; watering of the desert; flowers blooming in the wilderness; oaks of righteousness. Natural world is a worthy vista onto which God's presence and activity is inscribed. Ecotheology? Natural revelation?



Advent

*Thank you for being here
(in person
or by live streaming)
Happy Advent, 2020!*