

More useful resources from <https://arthurrankcentre.org.uk/>

A beginning

For the first time in years there's an Advent calendar gracing my mantelpiece today; for the first time ever, it's a chocolate one!

Throughout my childhood and into early-ish adulthood, my very traditional grandparents bought me and my sisters simple card calendars which opened each day to reveal a picture from the Christmas story and, usually, a Bible reference.

I come from a non-conformist background and grew up in a church in which Advent was more of a countdown to Christmas than a season in and of itself. We ticked off the days via our calendars and the daily Advent candle that we lit during dinner each evening. So it's really been as an adult that I've begun to truly appreciate Advent as an opportunity to immerse myself in the richness of this period of reflection and preparation.

I suspect that for many Christians, Advent will, this year, hold a greater significance as we wait together: for COVID-19 restrictions to lift, to travel to the places we call home, to hug those we love, to return to our church buildings, to sing hymns and carols which speak of the love, joy, comfort and hope that are revealed to us at Christmas. For many of us, that wait will continue into next year, and yet as Advent unfolds we hear again the promise that God comes to us in our waiting and waits with us.

A blessing for Advent

May you hear the gentle voice of the One who speaks to you saying, 'well done, [your name!], good and faithful servant'.

May you feel the loving arms of the One who assures you that 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

May you see the light that shines in the darkness, that the darkness cannot overcome.

In this time of uncertainty, confusion, pain and waiting, may you experience the hope that comes from knowing that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.
Amen.

With love and prayers at Advent,

Louise, on behalf of the wider Arthur Rank Centre team

Place and vocation

First reading: Isaiah 25:6-10 (Jerusalem Bible)

The Lord will prepare a banquet for every nation. On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines, of food rich and juicy, of fine strained wines. On this mountain he will remove the mourning veil covering all peoples, and the shroud enwrapping all nations, he will destroy Death for ever. The Lord will wipe away the tears from every cheek; he will take away his people's shame everywhere on earth, for the Lord has said so. That day, it will be said: See, this is our God in whom we hoped for salvation; the Lord is the one in whom we hoped. We exult and we rejoice that he has saved us; for the hand of the Lord rests on this mountain.

Responsorial psalm: Psalm 22 (23) (Grail Psalms)

Response: *In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for ever and ever.*

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose.

Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirit.

In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for ever and ever.

He guides me along the right path; he is true to his name.

If I should walk in the valley of darkness no evil would I fear.

You are there with your crook and your staff;

with these you give me comfort.

(Gospel: Matthew 15:29-37)

Reflection

As a priest, the readings from Isaiah 25 and Psalm 23 are two 'staples' of ministry. Both are among the collection of suggested readings for funerals: Isaiah, with the picture of the banquet of fine food and rich strained wines, which God prepares for us in eternity, together with the removal of shame; the best known of David's Psalms in which he, the earthly shepherd-king, points with his words and his life towards God from whom the images of both shepherd and king take their resemblance and in whom they find their ultimate meaning.

Of course, both readings put lament in context. And there has been much lament in our lives this year; through sickness, through death, through isolation, through jobs and businesses crumbling, through

lack of hugs. Funerals without the solace of hugs are incomplete and lacking human warmth. When the solace of these is absent, more has to be asked of the solace of the scriptures. That is why the riches of the 'funeral scriptures' seem to offer more in the present times.

But there is another solace I want to mention: we who are privileged to live in the rural world have also the blessings of 'place', and those who farm the blessing of 'vocation'. Viewed through the lens of place and vocation these pictures and allegories of heavenly banquet, food and wine, and of the shepherd and sheep, are something more. They are the very world in which we dwell; not part of the imaginings of those in concrete towers, but the fabric of life.

Rural work often seems unexciting, and yet through it the world is fed, and heaven is viewed. When I was born 2.8 billion people inhabited the planet, a quarter of them malnourished. Now 7.8 billion, with only a seventh malnourished, are sustained by the rural life and vocation of the world. What a wonderful quiet revolution is the rural industry we share.

Response

When you next walk out, look, in this damp and frosty season, at the crops which are weak and the animals who head indoors as plants cease to grow and autumn rains turn soils to mud. See amidst the decline the journey towards the yield that will come, and give thanks. Trust, too, that the yield will come from the Word of God which we live and share, and which leads us to the eternal banquet.

Prayer

May the seed you sow in me, Lord, be nurtured by my life, my thoughts, my habits and words. May it lead me and others to the banquet of your kingdom. Amen.

Fr Rob Taylerson, priest in the Catholic Diocese of Birmingham and trustee of the Arthur Rank Centre