

WEEK ONE

The Kingdom of God is Justice and Peace



1 DEC

A light has dawned ...

Switching on the Christmas lights has become a special feature in many villages, towns and cities. It seems we not only like our high streets to twinkle goodwill but houses and gardens now compete to spread festive joy. Lights attract – light is a vital element for life. God's first 'word' was 'Let there be light' and, thereafter, biblical imagery equated light with goodness and darkness with evil. Have you ever paused to think how tiny a light bulb is in comparison with the area it lights up? Our Advent challenge is to light up the areas where we live and work with Christ's joy and love; a lasting joy and love that is not put away with the Christmas decorations!

Bible reading

Isaiah 9:1–2, 6–7

Context

The book of Isaiah stands out in the Old Testament as the greatest book of prophecy. The God-inspired vision we are looking at today, is one of the best-known and best-loved of all prophecies and there will hardly be a service of nine readings and carols where this passage is not used. Uttered some seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, against the background of Assyrian invasion and oppression, verses 2 to 7 most probably became associated with the coronation of King Hezekiah. It was a 'hymn' heralding a new beginning – the people could draw a line under the past – no more the gloom of

domination but a glorious Messianic hope. Notice how this hope is rooted in the dynasty of David, the iconic shepherd king of their nation's golden era. Imagine Jesus learning this prophecy in the Nazareth synagogue!

Reflection

Perhaps some of our earliest words have been encouraged by nursery rhymes and it's amazing how far into old age and even dementia, hymns and poetry still touch the soul. These long-ago prophecies were methodically learned and recited and became a living hope for God's people. The son born of King David's lineage would embody God Himself and bring to the world a completely new way of life.

God gave Isaiah the vision of a newborn baby, the perfect symbol for hope and joy. Have you noticed how the presence of a baby changes the atmosphere? Everyone smiles! And we all have the tendency to place great expectations on the child.

So, now in our Advent preparations, let's thank God again for the mystery of birth and the miracle of new life in Jesus Christ.

Power point

Christ is the world's Light, He and none other.

Things to consider or discuss

- What hopes and expectations did your parents have for you?
- Who do you consider brings light and joy into your family or community and how?
- If you have had a child, how did that birth affect your attitudes and lifestyle?
- Which of the given names to the son in Isaiah's prophecy means the most to you and why?
- Which of these names do you think would best be understood by non-Christians?

Prayer

Advent God,
We meet to be inspired by your promised coming,
To learn your will through people who speak out for justice,
To see your power in people who bring light to others,
To find your truth from people who point to your light.
Be with us, Immanuel; the God who comes close.

Simon Walkling!

Pray for others

Pray for those who feel unable to break out of their gloom
for those who are guilty of oppression
for those you know who are dreading the approach of Christmas
for babies being born around the world as you have been
reading this
for new parents
for agencies striving for justice and peace.

Meditation

Come, thou long expected Jesus
Born to set thy people free,
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation
Hope of all the earth thou art,
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.

Charles Wesley, 1707–88

2 DEC

New world vision

Television documentaries have brought the fascinations of wildlife into our homes. In comfort and safety we watch as lions attack and devour their prey, bears prowl through rubbish bins, and elegantly marked snakes shoot out their tongues into the camera.

We know more about mammals, reptiles and insects than any previous generation; we know how dangerous some can be. But how far do we equate knowledge with wisdom and understanding? In our passage for today, Isaiah prophesies the Messiah will be a judge and will turn our world order upside down. God's kingdom will be safe, His people will live in peace and be able to enjoy life.

Bible reading

Isaiah 11:1–9

Context

One of the criticisms levelled against the Old Testament is that it has far too many gory battles; too much disaster, vengeance and heartache. Well, that was how it was – and still is for millions today. Isaiah surveyed the destruction and agony of his time and recognised the cause and effect.

All that befell 'the House of David' was the consequence of Israel's kings relying on their own power and might and ignoring the power of God. One of the great themes of the Old Testament is the warning 'Do not forget your God'. Isaiah delivers his second Messianic vision to the people. We can almost hear the passion of the man as he declares the joy of a new world. The Spirit of the Lord will be on this ruler and values of the world will be superseded with God's kingdom values.

Jesus quoted similar words from Isaiah 61, when, at the beginning of His ministry, He spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:2–4).

Reflection

A few months ago, I needed to attack an over-sized rubber plant before it pushed its way through the ceiling. I pruned it in half,