

ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK ONE: LIVING IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

As it was in Noah's day, so will it be when the Son of Man comes. For in those days before the Flood people were eating, drinking, taking wives, taking husbands, right up until the day Noah went into the ark, and they suspected nothing until the Flood came and swept all away. **Matthew 24: 37-39**

God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth, for not one of them is forgotten in your sight. Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live.

The poor and the earth are crying out. O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to you! Amen.

Pope Francis *Laudato Si'*

CHERISHING THE LAND

Randy Woodley, theologian, scholar, and Cherokee descendant contrasts the attitude of early North American settlers to the Indigenous people already present on the land:

"The very land itself meant something quite different to the newcomer than it did to the host people. Something was missing. The difficulty, as the Natives saw it, was with the settlers themselves and their failure to tread lightly, with humility and respect, on the land. The settlers wanted to live *on* the land, but the host people lived *with* the land. Living on the land means objectifying the land and natural resources and being short-sighted concerning the future. Living with the land means respecting the natural balance.

To Indigenous peoples, the problems of a Western worldview are obvious. The way of life demonstrated by Western peoples leads to alienation from the Earth, from others, and from all of creation. This lifestyle creates a false bubble called "Western civilization," which people in the West think will protect them from future calamity. This false hope is detached from all experience and reality.

The problem is that the Western system *itself* is what brings the calamity. There is little doubt that experiencing today as so-called natural disasters have their origin in human carelessness.

How do we avoid the impending disaster brought on by a settler lifestyle of living *on* the land and against nature? The answer is simple: we learn to live *with* nature."

Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another.

Pope Francis *Laudato Si'*

CLIMATE CHANGE

Communities, especially the poorest and those on the margins, are already suffering the bitter consequences of an eroding biodiversity: millions of people are losing their livelihoods, food and water are becoming increasingly scarce, climate change is accelerating, and weather patterns are far less predictable. And it will not be long before the impact is felt by everyone. Destroying the earth destroys a gift that has been entrusted to humanity.

The rich diversity of life reflects God's goodness and creative exuberance. Deep incarnation implies Christ's solidarity with the suffering earth and its potential restoration. If humanity is called to become co-creators in the image of God, indifference to creation is simply not an option.

Pope Francis points out in *Laudato Si'* that the earth and its peoples are deeply interconnected; if we destroy the earth, it is the poorest people who will suffer. We don't have a choice between paying attention to either conservation or poverty – the two are intricately bound up together.

Celia Deane-Drummond Director, *Laudato Si'* Research Institute

TALKING WITH THE SUN - Joy Harjo, Native American poet

I believe in the sun.

In the tangle of human failures of fear, greed, and forgetfulness, the sun gives me clarity.

When explorers first encountered my people, they called us heathens, sun worshippers.

They didn't understand that the sun is a relative, and illuminates our path on this earth.

After dancing all night in a circle we realize that we are a part of a larger sense of stars and planets dancing with us overhead.

When the sun rises at the apex of the ceremony, we are renewed.

There is no mistaking this connection, though Walmart might be just down the road.

Humans are vulnerable and rely on the kindnesses of the earth and the sun; we exist together in a sacred field of meaning.

Our earth is shifting. We can all see it.

I hear from my Inuit and Yupik relatives up north that everything has changed. It's so hot; there is not enough winter.

Animals are confused. Ice is melting.

The quantum physicists have it right; they are beginning to think like Indians: everything is connected dynamically at an intimate level.

When you remember this, then the current wobble of the earth makes sense. How much more oil can be drained, without replacement; without reciprocity?

I walked out of a hotel room just off Times Square at dawn to find the sun.

It was the fourth morning since the birth of my fourth granddaughter.

This was the morning I was to present her to the sun, as a relative, as one of us. It was still dark, overcast as I walked through Times Square.

I stood beneath a twenty-first century totem pole of symbols of multinational corporations, made of flash and neon.

The sun rose up over the city but I couldn't see it amidst the rain.

Though I was not at home, bundling up the baby to carry her outside,

I carried this newborn girl within the cradleboard of my heart.

I held her up and presented her to the sun, so she would be recognized

as a relative, so that she won't forget this connection, this promise, so that we all remember the sacredness of life.

ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK TWO: INVITING CHRIST INTO OUR LIVES

In due course John the Baptist appeared: he preached in the wilderness of Judaea and this was his message: 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.' **Matthew 3:1**

Advent is about two comings. It's about waiting and watching for the coming of the Christ child – new life, new birth, new hope coming into our world and into our lives. It is the fulfilment of God's promises. But it's also about waiting and watching for the end times when the fullness of God's kingdom will be revealed. Both these advents signify the coming together of humanity and divinity.

Advent is a time when the Church stands up in the face of the busyness of life and asks us to slow down, be still, and be quiet. We are to keep awake, looking and listening for the God who is always coming to us. We are called to prepare the way of the Lord. We watch and reflect on who we are. We look for the Christ in unexpected places – in the stuff of everyday life, in the poor, the hungry, and the needy. We live with expectancy and anticipation of God's presence in our lives. We wait for the angelic messenger that promises us that the womb of our humanity will bear a child named Jesus.

Advent reminds us that waiting and watching are holy work. So how do we do this? Silence is the key. Silence is a way of waiting, a way of watching, and a way of listening to what is going on within and around us. We come to self-knowledge through stillness and silence, through attentiveness and watchfulness.

Michael K Marsh *Interrupting the Silence*

FINDING STILLNESS AND PRESENCE

I walked some of the Camino to Santiago de Compostela a few years ago. I found it to be such a powerfully moving and spiritually beneficial experience that I have undertaken a long pilgrimage walk every year since then.

One of the things I love about walking long distances is that it forces me to slow down. It helps me to be still and to practice being fully present to each particular moment.

When I walked to Santiago, I covered up to 18 miles (30 km) each day. That's about six hours of walking each day, with additional time spent stopping, looking and being – in local villages, in churches, in nature, in conversation, in sharing meals and in sitting and being still.

In our busy, stressful world, we have to seek out silence and stillness consciously. God speaks in all sorts of ways – through scripture, through nature, through other people. However, unless we slow down and listen, we miss his promptings and his voice. Only then can we truly appreciate the value of the journey, as well as the destination; the value of slowing down, looking and listening; learning from the rhythms of nature; learning from the movement of one's own body, from the formation of community along the way, and from times of stillness and rest.

So often we rush through life at breakneck speed, never pausing to reflect and be still. It is only when we slow down and look that we really see. By slowing down, and being more present to each moment, all sorts of lessons are learned.

For some people, this might involve the healing of painful memories. For others, it could be time to discern the next stage in life. For many, it is a chance to really get away and listen to God. For me, it is an invitation to a whole way of being – one that recognises that God is not 'out there' to be sought, but already 'in here' to be found.

Annie O'Connor *The Camino: Finding Stillness and Presence*, 2019

CHRIST IS PRESENT

Into this world, this demented inn,
in which there is absolutely no room for him at all,
Christ has come uninvited.

But because he cannot be at home in it,
because he is out of place in it,
and yet he must be in it,
his place is with those others who do not belong,
who are rejected by power
because they are regarded as weak,
those who are discredited,
who are denied the status of persons,
tortured, exterminated.

With those for whom there is no room,
Christ is present in this world.
He is mysteriously present in those for whom
there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.

Thomas Merton

He shall save the poor when they cry and the needy
who are helpless. He will have pity on the weak and
save the lives of the poor. **Psalms 71: 12-13**

ROOM FOR CHRIST

It is no use to say that we are born two thousand years
too late to give room to Christ. Nor will those who live
at the end of the world have been born too late. Christ
is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts.

But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that
he speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory
workers and children that he gazes; with the hands of
office workers, slum dwellers and suburban
housewives that he gives. It is with the feet of soldiers
and tramps that he walks, and with the heart of
anyone in need that he longs for shelter. And giving
shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it,
is giving it to Christ.

A custom existed among the first generations of
Christians, when faith was a bright fire that warmed
more than those who kept it burning. In every house a
room was kept ready for any stranger who might ask
for shelter; it was even called "the strangers' room",
not because the man or woman to whom they gave
shelter reminded them of Christ, but because these
people are Christ, asking us to find room for Him
exactly as He did at the first Christmas.

Dorothy Day

May you trust God that you are exactly where you
are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite
possibilities that are born of faith. May you use
those gifts that you have received, and pass on the
love that has been given to you.

St Teresa of Avila

ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK THREE: WAITING WITH JOYFUL EXPECTATION

Be patient; do not lose heart, because the Lord's coming will be soon. **James 5:8**

God comes, and his ways are near to us.
God saves in history.
Each person's life, each one's history,
is the meeting place God comes to.

How satisfying to know
one need not go to the desert to meet him,
need not go to some particular spot in the world.
God is in your own heart.

St Oscar Romero December 1978

YOUR KINGDOM COME

Lord, we wait with eager expectation
for the coming of your Kingdom
when the humble will be exalted
and the hungry fed.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we prepare for your advent
with searching minds and contrite hearts,
trusting in your healing spirit
and redemptive love.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we watch with those who wait and weep,
longing to see the rule of justice
and the reign of peace.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we seek you amongst the despised and
rejected, knowing that there we will find your light
shining in the dark.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we proclaim sight to the blind
and liberty to the oppressed,
trusting in your tender mercy
and passion for justice.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we work to proclaim your truth,
challenging the mighty and raising the meek.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done.

Lord, we wrestle with our hopes and fears,
our struggles and our joys
labouring with creation to come to new birth.

**Your Kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

Annabel Shilson-Thomas *Just One Year, an anthology*

It is the Lord who keeps faith forever,
who is just to those who are oppressed.
It is he who gives bread to the hungry,
the Lord, who sets prisoners free.

It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind,
who raises up those who are bowed down,
the Lord, who protects the stranger
and upholds the widow and orphan.

It is the Lord who loves the just
but thwarts the path of the wicked. **Psalm 145: 6-9**

Our task as God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians... is to proclaim love to the world... with joy, humour, gentleness, good judgement and true wisdom.

N T Wright *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*

WHO IS AN EVANGELIST?

John the Baptist was an evangelist. Many thought that he was the promised Messiah but his mission was only to announce the Good News, preparing the way for Jesus' coming.

I wonder how we might answer the question 'who is an evangelist?' – in a way that word tells us a little more... Let's start with some Greek! We get the English word *evangelist* from the Greek noun *euangelistes*, which means 'bringer of good tidings,' or 'announcer of good news.'

You might spot the word *angel* lurking in the middle of both the English and the Greek words, and (in terms of the etymology of the word) you'd be right to make this connection. An angel is a messenger, or an envoy, and when the message they bring is from God, it is good; (*eu* is the Greek word for 'good').

So, the evangelist is one who, like the angels, brings a message of good news from God. And I think we can understand something of the evangelist's message by looking at the message of the angels in the New Testament.

What is their message? Nothing less than the infinite God of love come down, God-with-us, peace on earth, joy to all, reconciliation, new life...

There is a broad sense, then, in which all Christians are called to be evangelists. We are all called to speak, live and act in ways that bring this good news of God-with-us to those we meet. We are all messengers of glad tidings.

Annie O'Connor Church Army, October 2019

A FRANCISCAN BLESSING

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done, to bring justice and to kindness all our children and the poor.

Let us imagine peace and nonviolence for ourselves in a world of peace and justice where no mouth is left hungry and the forgotten are embraced.

Let us imagine a world of enough for all.

Let us imagine touching sadness with a smile.

Let us imagine touching discouragement with hope.

Embracing this incredible abundance, we trust that it is never too late for God to invigorate and revitalize a person, a church, the world.

Sister Edith Prendergast RSC

ADVENT REFLECTION – WEEK FOUR: BRINGING HOPE

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the power of the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' **Matthew 1:18-21**

CHRISTMAS PRESENT

In recent weeks I've been reflecting on how Jesus' coming into the world teaches us about presence, and how Jesus is the presence of the Father, God-with-us.

One of the Hebrew words translated as 'presence' in the Old Testament is 'paniyim', which can also be translated as 'face'. I love this, because it reveals something of the nearness of God's presence and the close, personal encounter we can have with God face-to-face. As Psalm 67:1 tells us, to experience God's presence is to experience the light in God's shining face.

'Present' is one of those wonderfully rich words that can have all sorts of meanings.

When we think of Christmas presents, we think of gifts; Jesus certainly is the self-gift of the Father to the world. But to be present also means to be here, to be near, to turn up, to exist in this moment, now, to be accessible. Isn't it wonderful that Jesus' coming means all these things as well?

When I look at Jesus' life and ministry, I'm struck by how totally present he was to everyone and in everything.

Whether in prayer to the Father, in conversation with the people he encountered, in proclaiming the kingdom, in ministering to people's needs, in listening to their concerns, in suffering, in dying and in rising, Jesus was fully present in each particular moment.

I wonder if this Christmas we can practise being fully present in this particular moment, to these particular people in this particular place, without thinking of what comes next? Can we accept this moment as a gift from God, to be lived to the full?

Annie O'Connor Church Army, 2018

GOD OF HOPE

God of reconciliation and grace,
you promise us a world where all is new,
where love is born when hope is gone,
where broken relationships are restored to
wholeness.

May we live as people who know your story of
love, and have the vision to imagine what could
be possible if we dared to live this story.

God of abundant life,
may we be witnesses of love, hope and peace,
and co-creators of your life in the world. Amen.

Christian Aid

AN ADVENT PEOPLE

God of light, shine forth, show us
how to bring hope to others.

God of mercy, help us to
comfort your people and share
in their joy.

God of hope, make us an Advent
people, preparing the way.
for life in all its fullness. Amen.

Catherine Gorman CAFOD

THE ECLIPSE

I stood out in the open cold
to see the essence of the eclipse
which was its perfect darkness.

I stood in the cold on the porch
and could not think of anything
so perfect as man's hope of light
in the face of darkness.

Richard Eberhart

HOPE – A PLACE OF PROMISE

"Hope is something you make every day". This is Basma, and the first thing she tells me about hope. When a militia came to burn down her home in Libya, she and her daughters ran for their lives under a barrage of bullets. Now Basma lives in Liverpool as a refugee, caring alone for her children, working odd jobs, studying human rights.

I ask her the difference between real hope and false, and she says, "You have to face the tragedy of the world." This is hope's test – can it face up to the world as a tragic place?

In my conversations with people well-grounded in their hope, I've been finding that they share a fervent feeling for the vitality in the world around them. They can still look out into the world as a place of promise, even after all the harm we've done.

Celia's been an activist since her schooldays in Italy. She says she's always felt hopeful, despite the baked-in injustices that she's been railing against for years, because "life is beautiful". About ten years ago a massive earthquake levelled her house, burying her in bricks; she was presumed dead. In the darkness under the rubble hope was all she had left, she tells me. I ask why hope stayed with her. Because above her in the light of day, she answers, she knew that "life is beautiful".

As a nurse in palliative care, Joe has cared for many people who are dying. Accompanying his patients towards their death has drawn him closer to "what makes life worth living and death worth dying and the present worth being in". Every moment of our aliveness carries worth, Joe says, even when – especially when – death waits around the corner.

Joe and Celia know that the world is a tragic place, but also that it's not merely tragic. Hannah, a community worker, puts it perfectly: even "in a broken world, things aren't fully broken". If hope had a slogan, this might well be it.

David Gee October 2019

Right now, we are in desperate need of hope. But hope is not about pretending that everything will be fine. To me, hope is not something that is given to you, it is something you have to earn, to create. It cannot be gained passively, through standing by and waiting for someone else to do something. Hope is taking action.

Greta Thunberg *The Climate Book*, October 2022

Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible. **Helen Keller**