

Advent 2017

The world of work has come under immense scrutiny in recent weeks. With leading politicians and celebrities being increasingly challenged in relation to their sexual conduct, we have been reminded that despite the high-profile environments in which they operate, these are also someone's workplace. As such, people have the right to expect to be free to perform their duties without being exposed to harassment, unwanted advances or inappropriate conduct or engagement.



Within any work context there are dynamics of power and cultural conformity that seem to cause some to assume that they can act in ways that would simply not be tolerated in any other circumstance, and indeed cause others, at least until recently, to feel they have little choice but to accept these abuses.

Many of the recent revelations seem to have been initiated by the #MeToo campaign, through which women and men have felt emboldened to speak out against harassment and abuse. Those who have chosen to shine a light on what they recognise to be wrong have challenged the powerful, and empowered the vulnerable in a quite remarkable way. And we would have to accept that while sexual conduct has been particularly in the spotlight recently, the power dynamics of the workplace unleash other forms of harassment and abuse too.

This is the backdrop against which working Christians will enter the season of Advent this year and it is interesting how each of these realities offer a commentary on the other. Advent is that season when we recognise that we remain bound to a world where evil can still thrive and wrongdoers can prosper. But we engage in that world confident of God's promise that one day the darkness will be dispelled and his Kingdom of light will come in all its fulness. In Christ, we have seen the first-fruits of the promise, and we continue to seek and see signs of hope in the midst of our struggles. We are those who like the #MeToo campaigners can speak narratives of light and hope amidst the darkness, and whether or not we see its fruits in the here and now, we do so with a confidence that ours is a cause that will one day prevail.

The workplace could be seen as a microcosm of that universal narrative. Good can and does prevail, but those who seek harm can also prosper; their deeds can remain hidden while those who seek justice and right can feel constrained and manipulated by the systems and structures that prevail. It is all too easy for our aspirations and behaviour to become determined by this environment – Advent acknowledges this reality, but invites us to re-calibrate our course by the promises and signs of God's Salvation.

For many of us, our journey through Advent will largely take place within our place of work. We will be all too aware of situations that seem to challenge and contradict God's message of hope, and yet this is a season when we are constantly confronted by individuals who become part of God's purposes within such realities. Their potential is unlocked when they place themselves into God's hand. ICF's daily readings are offered as an encouragement to those who similarly seek to be light amidst the darkness. We also offer some reflections that could be used in public worship or private devotion as you light an Advent candle each Sunday.





Week 1 – Unlocking the potential of our history

Looking back can often be portrayed as a negative thing, and will be if all it does is locks us into tradition or causes us to hanker after times now past. But as we look back to the early stories of God's people, we are reminded that this world is no mere accident and that God is not indifferent to its plight.

If we are to realise our potential for God, it begins by believing that God has a purpose for us, and the world he has made. We are not simply called to stand by, nor are we limited by what can be achieved in our strength alone.

Our world has the potential to be different, and the narratives on which our faith is founded remind us of this again and again. Advent reminds us that while God's Kingdom has yet to fully come, there is much that can be done in the here and now.

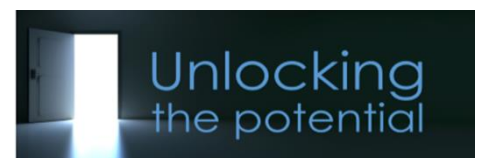
We look to a present that is beset by struggle, but we still believe. We believe because the God who had led and sustained his people continues to be present in their midst. In the stories from our past, there are many moments when things did not make sense, when the road that was hard and painful to tread, was the one that led to the place of redemption and hope. We choose to believe, not because we can make sense of our present circumstances or even see a clear way ahead, but because we stand as part of a bigger story – we inherit the hope and the testimony of those who have walked this way before.

**This flame of hope is ignited
To cast its light on the road we have travelled
For the very light that we have kindled
Exists only because our God once declared that it should be.**

**And though we struggle to make sense of the world that surrounds us
And pathways ahead are shrouded in uncertainty and foreboding
We will not surrender to despair or indifference
For God's purpose prevails, even when obscured by our expectations.**

**Its light draws our eyes away from the darkness;
The confusion and struggles of this earthly journey
Not to escape or ignore their reality
But to remember that in every circumstance God is present**

**And spurred by the stories of God's hand in our history
Inspired by the example of those who have been caught up in his purpose
We open ourselves to be servants of the most high
To embrace the present assured of God's faithfulness**





Week 2 – Unlocking the potential of our message

Words can be powerful things. Much of our perception of reality is not so much shaped by actual events and circumstances, but the things that we are told about them. “It doesn’t have to be this way” sheds a very different light on things to “It’s just how it is”.

Prophets were agitators who were not prepared to simply accept the status quo. When people were in despair, they spoke words of hope; when the nation was complacent and unjust, they spoke in condemnation; when falsehood and lies prevailed, they refused to stay silent. But their words were not simply a response to circumstances; they spoke as the mouthpiece of God, defining reality in the light of God’s word.

God has spoken a message of hope. God’s word has been made flesh in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When we truly speak God’s message, we are not simply offering an opinion or communicating some vague optimism, we are echoing truths and realities that prevail beyond any immediate circumstance. God’s word has power beyond measure – it is within our grasp to declare it and unleash its potential.

**We light this flame as those to whom God has spoken
With lives touched by Word made Flesh in Jesus
Believing that God’s word still sheds its light
On the chaos and concerns of human circumstances**

**Its light is kindled in our world where many voices
Each clamour to be heard above the noise of worldly aspiration
Seeking to silence any who might dare to contradict
Their narratives of division, falsehood and misrepresentation**

**We hear the voices of the prophets
Echo their message of truth in every generation
Declaring God’s comfort to those who despair
And challenge to those who believe this world to be their own**

**We who believe God's word still speaks
Light this flame to declare our readiness to listen
Seeking peace through knowing that in the deepest despair
Echoes of grace and hope can be at their most profound.**





Week 3 - Unlocking the potential of our response

The Advent narratives are filled with stories of ordinary people. Yet through their lives and actions, God's extraordinary purposes were fulfilled. For many who were part of that story, their response required at best that they simply accepted the circumstances around them, and more often that they faced greater adversity in the here and now.

But they responded in faith, and because of their obedient willingness, God's salvation was accomplished. God will seldom call us to acts that would be seen as great in the eyes of this world; he will never require of us more than we can offer, though our commitment to his higher purposes may require acts of selfless sacrifice.

We are not called to achieve success as measured by the standards of the world in which we live; we do not even need to be able to explain or understand the circumstances in which we are immersed. But the lives that we celebrate bear profound testimony of the immeasurable potential of simple and humble obedience. What opportunities could be ours by simply responding to God's call, whatever that might be?

**We light this candle and remember
How once in the midst of the ordinary,
A messenger of light
Declared that God's salvation was dawning**

**Still stunned by the faithful example
Of one young woman's "let it be to me"
We offer ourselves in awestruck anticipation
Of what our living sacrifice might yet become.**

**Let this simple flame be our reminder
Of the profound potential of ordinary lives
Offered in service to the Most High;
God's purpose accomplished in the midst of human frailty**

**Not because we suppose that this world's salvation
Can be wrought through our endeavour alone
But as those who have seen God's miracle of grace
And believe that in these broken vessels, God's rich treasure can reside**





Week 4 - Unlocking the Potential of our confidence in God

Many of the Psalms and songs of Advent speak of God's salvation being accomplished. In reality what was being witnessed were simply the first signs of this reality and it would yet be some years before the work of the cross was complete. But these early signs were enough for those who saw them to know and declare that God, in his absolute faithfulness, would bring things to completion.

We can now look back on those events that comprise the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus as a part of our realised history. Yet we live in a world where God's Kingdom has not yet fully come, and are faced with realities that though temporary, remain at odds with the values of that Kingdom.

But Christ's first coming, in fulfilment of the promises and prophecies from centuries before, give us the confidence to believe that the promise of his coming again will one day be realised. We can speak of God's Kingdom and walk in the ways of God's Kingdom in the here and now, and though we may be at odds with the world that surrounds, we are confident of the day when that Kingdom will fully come. This is a promise that no-one can take from us, and we do not need to seek success or status as the world defines it, we can simply walk in God's ways with a confidence that defies any present circumstance.

**We light this candle as one of celebration
Not because every evil has been conquered or every trial overcome
But because the mark of God's coming
Is indelibly stamped in the history and destiny of this world**

**There is a Kingdom that will prevail
Long after this world's struggles have subsided
A Kingdom whose doorway has been flung open
And the light of Christ points us to its threshold**

**We kindle a flame to show our desire,
That this Kingdom's dawn should be made known
To draw the eyes of those who long for a better world
To the place where every such hope can be fulfilled**

**We join with those who declare the certainty of God's promise
Revealed in new-born child and Servant King
And so we seek to pursue the ways of this Kingdom
Confident that its sovereign will one day come again.**

