

First Sunday in Advent

This is one of a series of Advent reflections that has been commissioned by the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) of the Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed Church and Church of Scotland. Working with other partners JPIT is seeking to encourage Christians to recognise Advent as a season in which to embrace the call of the prophet Micah to act justly and love mercy. These reflections and prayers could be used in a variety of contexts, both for personal meditation or in services and other gatherings. They seek to follow the traditional themes associated with the four Advent candles, lit on the four Sundays before Christmas; this makes them suitable as a reflection in this context too. Their message is rooted in the #enough campaign through which we have sought to challenge narratives and policies that shift the emphasis of welfare benefit from one of care and provision to conditionality and coercion. Congregations are encouraged to learn more about the #enough campaign, and through these reflections root its concerns in our Gospel identity.

ISAIAH 60:1-3

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and monarchs to the brightness of your dawn.*

In different ways, the lighting of the first Advent candle
Turns our eyes momentarily away from this present world.
We look back and remember the stories of those who are the founders of our faith;
Those through whose lives, our God began this salvation story.

Some will call this the candle of hope;
Inspired by great narratives of faithfulness from ages now passed,
We look beyond our present realities
To watch and wait in anticipation of Christ's eternal coming.

It is a moment of contentment
As we glimpse the infinity of God's generosity and grace
The eternity of God's provision
The endlessness of the hope that has always been ours.

And there is enough
Even in that most fleeting of glances at the riches lavished upon us;
Enough to continue our journey of hope
Enough to re-centre our attention on God's coming Kingdom

And yet it must also be a moment of discontent
For God turns our eyes briefly away
Only that we might look at this world afresh
With renewed restlessness to see his Kingdom come.

It is not the discontent that impatiently counts down shopping days
With Christmas adverts, flash-sale offers and on-line wish-lists;
The discontent that some would foster
So that we might want more, consume more – spend more.

The discontent to which God calls us
Is not the discontent that measures love by what we spend
Defines our worth by the material value of what we receive
And seeks to turn gratitude for love into debt to strangers.

Ours is a holy discontent
The discontent of those who recognise that God has given more than enough;
Yet believe that it is not enough to simply receive
Without concern for those who remain in need

It is not enough to leave unchallenged
The narratives of harm and attitudes of inhumanity
That give the least to those whose need is most
And hides from them the light of hope that we are called to bear

Eternal God

**May the light of hope
That you have kindled throughout history
Shine upon us and shine through us
Into the world you have created
And to which you will one day return.**

**Your provision of salvation
Is woven into every age of history;
Defining our humanity;
Restoring our dignity;
And from generation to generation,
Calling us to walk in your ways.**

**We give you thanks for those whose example, whose endeavour and whose faithfulness
Have turned our eyes towards your light,
Who have helped us understand what it means to be your people,
And whose footsteps mark the paths that we now follow**

**Where the causes of the powerful
The interests of the wealthy
And the indifference of the selfish
Crush the worth and dignity
Of any who are made in your image,
Make us no less tireless in our endeavours
To bear your light in the midst of that darkness.**

**And so may your presence be revealed
Your image restored
And hope be rekindled
AMEN**

