

Adventuring

4 Advent Reflections for groups or individuals

The words *Advent* and *Adventure* come from the same root. Both look towards what will be with a sense of expectation. Adventure carries with it a sense of risk; the future cannot be known in its entirety. If we consent to step into it then our life will be stirred in some way. An adventure is not safe, and we are likely to feel fear or discomfort as we move into it, but it is life-giving.

The Advent season is also a time to allow ourselves to be disturbed and thereby renewed. God is moving into our world; how can we ever be the same? God is in our world and now is the time to wake to this presence. God is bringing all that is to its completion; our consent is needed if the Kingdom is to come in and through us.

These 4 reflections look back at biblical figures who took up the adventure of responding to the work of God in their lives. All were well on in years. Perhaps they thought that the time for new beginnings had passed them by. The reality was that their greatest adventures lay ahead of them. These Advent reflections are intended to help us see afresh the challenge of our later years as we are led deeper into God through the ways of faith, hope and love.

Week one:

Abraham and Sarah: Time for new adventure

Week two:

Moses: Time for letting go

Week three:

Job: Time to meet mystery

Week four:

Simeon and Anna: Time to wait with hope



SAGE

Southwark Spirituality and Age Group

Exploring and developing the spiritual, pastoral, ethical and missional aspects of life of older people in the Diocese of Southwark

Abraham and Sarah:

In their older age life for Abraham and Sarah took an unexpected new turn. Guests arrived with what seemed an unlikely message: Sarah would bear a child. Sarah's reaction was to laugh: the time for such new beginnings was past.

But then Abraham and Sarah's life had been like that for some time. From a settled life God called them to journey to a land they did not know, promising them descendants as many as the stars of heaven or the grains of sand on the seashore.

Older age is a time for new adventure.

It is time to stop playing safe with life. We know our years are shorter. Now is the season to give ourselves to what really matters and to live all that is in us to the full

We are being drawn into a new intimacy with God, and trust alone will open up the way. And so, with Abraham and Sarah, we set out on an untrodden path, leaving behind what is comfortable and familiar as we move in response to the Spirit. We make the journey not only for ourselves but for generations to come. But It is not surprising that we sometimes laugh with Sarah, unable to believe that our life's passage could have such consequence.



Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

Genesis 12: 1-5

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.' **Genesis 18: 1-15**

Some questions for reflection and sharing

1. How do you respond to the story of Abraham and Sarah? What challenges you / troubles you / inspires you?
2. Do you have any sense of a 'journey' that God desires to lead you on. It probably won't involve physical travel but it might be about some way in which you are being nudged to 'move on'.
3. Sarah and Abraham are promised a new child and a new beginning. What new thing is being brought to birth in your own life at this moment?
4. Do you identify with Sarah's laughter? Do you have particular points of unbelief – areas of your life where it seems difficult to trust God?

What is it time for you to do?

- This might be taking seriously how God calls you by name and invites you to live in awareness of his presence through a deeper commitment to prayer
- Perhaps it's time to dare to do that something that has long been in your heart
- Or is it time to do something generously for those who will follow you?

Some Advent challenges:

1. Advent comes as autumn fades into winter. The days are short and the light is low. The sun, even when it does pierce the clouds, lacks any real warmth. Yet now bulbs are planted for seasons yet to come. Buy some bulbs [for example tulips, daffodils or crocuses]. Plant them in your garden or a window box. What hopes or desires go into the ground of God's love as you plant?
2. Go on an Abraham and Sarah journey to a place that has some meaning for you. It might be somewhere you know well, or somewhere that is entirely new. As you go, and when you arrive, reflect on what the journey expresses for you.

Sarah's prayer

You made me laugh
Such impossible things!
How could it be?
I'm old. Too old
Past it – whatever 'it' may be

You made me laugh
Such crazy words!
What me?
I've had my day.
My day – now gone from me.

You made me laugh
Such pie in the sky!
Or is it just my
doubting but longing
for what, you say, will be.

You made me laugh
Such mad dreams!
O let it be!
Your mad dreaming
come to birth in me!

Prayer:

Lord of adventurers
give us the daring to go with you,
though we do not know the way.
Give us the courage of Abraham and
Sarah, risking all in response to your
invitation
Let us be as generous and free as your
great giving, when you pitched your
tent among us and made our flesh
your own.

Moses

Moses spends his life working for something that will ultimately lie beyond him – a land of plenty and peace for a people who have known hardship and slavery. He has made his mistakes, yet kept faith in God who has kept faith in him. He uses his experience generously, to help those who are younger have an easier passage than he himself has known. He lays hands on his successor, Joshua, knowing he has done what belongs to him and the rest must be left to another.

Older age is a time for letting go

Each of us has important work to do; and yet it is also part of a larger whole that lies beyond us. As children we depended on adults to nurture and guide us. We came to stand – more or less – on our own feet, and in our turn we helped others to begin their journey. In our work and our relationships we laid foundations that others now build on. What we do, the roles we have, the new initiatives we set up, are never our possession. The time comes to let go and allow another to carry on what we have begun.

But if letting go sounds negative remember Jesus' words: *'unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies it yields a rich harvest'* [John 12.]

Sometimes we have to let go to let God. By this trust our life in God grows deeper. And, like Moses, we are given new work to do. For him, it was helping his people understand the significance of the road they had travelled, and preparing Joshua as his successor. What will it be for you?



Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
May my teaching drop like the rain,
my speech condense like the dew;
like gentle rain on grass,
like showers on new growth.
For I will proclaim the name of the Lord;
ascribe greatness to our God!
Remember the days of old,
consider the years long past;
ask your father, and he will inform you;
your elders, and they will tell you.
When the Most High apportioned the nations,
when he divided humankind,
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples
according to the number of the gods;
the Lord's own portion was his people,
Jacob his allotted share.
He sustained him in a desert land,
in a howling wilderness waste;
he shielded him, cared for him,
guarded him as the apple of his eye.
As an eagle stirs up its nest,
and hovers over its young;
as it spreads its wings, takes them up,
and bears them aloft on its pinions,
the Lord alone guided him;
no foreign god was with him....

Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua son of Nun. When Moses had finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them: 'Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today...This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.' **Deuteronomy 3**

Questions for reflection and sharing:

1. For all his adventures, Moses never entered the Promised Land. He had to trust it would be there for the next generation. How do you think Moses might have felt about this?
2. Looking back at your life thus far, think of a time when like Moses you knew it was time to let go. How did this work out for you, and what did you experience?
3. Looking back, think of a time when, like Joshua, you were entrusted with a responsibility that others had worked for. What did you feel in taking this over?

What is it time for you to do?

As winter draws on, the last leaves fall from the tree, making way for new buds for another season.

- In Advent we are invited to let go of anything that prevents us making room for God. What will you let fall in this season so that God's new life may form in you through prayer?
- Is there anything in your life that you are grasping tightly where you sense God inviting you to let go?

Some Advent challenges:



1. Spend some time gazing at the landscape: trees stripped bare of their leaves, fields ploughed and ready for sowing, the openness of land and sky. Ask the Lord for the gift of an open and ready heart.
2. Clear out a cupboard that has long been cluttered. Be daring in throwing or giving away what you no longer need. Ask the Lord to simplify your life in the same way.

A reflection by Oscar Romero

Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated in 1980 after speaking up for the rights of the poor and dispossessed in his country. Before his death he spoke about the importance of being generous in working for the Kingdom, trusting that our small acts of kindness and courage do make a difference, though we may never know in what ways.

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the Kingdom is always beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives achieves everything.

This is what we are about: We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.

This enables us to do something, and do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that's the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders – ministers not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Prayer:

Lord, you choose to empty yourself to come close to us.

You come among us not as God almighty, but as God, all-humble, taking the servant's place.

Open our hands to let fall what we grasp too tightly, and to receive all those good gifts you so long to share.

Give us, with Moses, a thirst for the Promised Land of your Kingdom, and the generosity to allow it to come through many hands, and not just our own.

Job Job's life collapsed around him. His health deteriorated, he lost his loved ones and those who had looked up at him now looked down on him in the misery of his condition. Job in his earlier life, amidst prosperity, never doubted God's goodness or God's purposes. But now he saw no sense in what was happening in his life. At times he railed against God and in other moments he felt his further existence to be useless.

Indeed, in the light of his current state, his whole life felt an empty sham, devoid of meaning. And where was God? And why didn't prayer work the same way that it once had? And how had all his former certainties crumbled away? Job's friends insisted he must have done something to deserve his fate. But Job resisted this easy equation. What had happened had happened; and no reason could be found. Amidst his puzzlement and confusion Job never let go of his faith in God. Doubt was large in his life, and he could not understand what was going on, but he held on to God and knew at some deep level that God did not let go of him.

Faith and doubt are sometimes seen as opposites. But faith is not certainty; faith is the choice to trust amidst uncertainty, and sometimes despite what we feel.

Older age as meeting with mystery

Life is never anything we can wholly manage or control, though the illusion that we might be able to lingers long. We do what we can, but there will be always be unexpected experiences: events that are neither planned nor wanted. There will be unexpected gift too: the wonder of the beauty we encounter and the kindness shown us though unearned and unsought. Older age can sharpen our sensitivity to the pain of loss and our gratitude for gift. More and more we recognise the limits of our understanding. Former certainties crumble. Life is greyer than the black and white world of clear answers we were brought up to believe in. Jesus meets us in the muddle of reality. He too struggled to make sense of things. His faith, in the midst of doubt, was to hold on to the goodness of God in the face of dark and difficult experiences.



'Do not human beings have a hard service on earth, and are not their days like the days of a labourer?

Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like labourers who look for their wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down I say, "When shall I rise?" But the night is long, and I am full of tossing until dawn.

My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out again. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope.

'Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good. The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone. As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;

they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.

'Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

[7: 1-11]

O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock for ever!
For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!

[19: 21-27]

Questions for reflection and sharing;

1. Do you think it fitting that Job's doubting and questioning is included in the Bible? Is it helpful for you? In what ways?
2. Where in your life do you 'meet mystery'? What different types of experience fill you with wonder?
3. Can you remember a time when you felt a little like Job in these passages? What was the fruit of those times? What happened within your relationship with God during these times of uncertainty?

What is it time for you to do?

The days of Advent are short; we live much of our lives in the dark of night. On some days spring seems impossibly far away. Yet this season too is part of a cycle of growth.

- In Advent we turn to God with the honesty of what is in our hearts: our longings, our pains, our questions and our hopes. Be honest in this way in your prayer; allow God to meet you as you are, not as you ought to be.

Some Advent challenges:

1. The psalms are prayers of the heart. Write your own psalm to God, expressing what you feel and what you long for.
2. At the end of Job's questioning, God shows him the wonders of the created world and Job falls silent, overcome with such mystery. Spend 5 minutes each day this week being present to something in the created world around you: the stars on a clear night, or the intricate shapes of trees, the sounds of birdsong or the changing patterns of the sky. Be alive with all your senses to what is before you. Let this 'silence' of your attentiveness lead you into prayer.

Discipline

Throw away thy rod
Throw away thy wrath:
O my God,
Take the gentle path.

For my hearts desire
Unto thine is bent:
I aspire
To a full consent.

Not a word or look
I affect to own
But by book,
And thy book alone.

Though I fail, I weep;
Though I halt in pace,
Yet I creep
To the throne of grace

Then let wrath remove
Love will do the deed:
For with love
Stony hearts will bleed.

Love is swift of foot;
Love's a man of warre,
And can shoot,
And can hit from farre.

Who can scape his bow?
That which wrought on thee
Brought thee low,
Needs must work on me.

Throw away thy rod
Though man frailties hath,
Thou are God:
Throw away thy wrath.

[George Herbert]

Prayer:

Lord when the waves of our doubt
overwhelm us, hold us safe in your care.
When we do not wholly understand your
way, keep us on the path that leads to
life.
When we turn from you in our confusion
seek us out and draw us home.
Grant us the silence of heart to meet you
in mystery, and to place our hope in
your love.

Simeon and Anna

Simeon and Anna had learnt how to wait: how to work with, rather than against, the seasons. The hope planted in them was real. The day was coming. Their waiting was not the impatient, grumbling, restlessness of the one who waits for the delayed train, or the one who frets whilst waiting to finally get through to the right person on an automated phone line. Their waiting was attentive, and hope-filled. The day would not be hurried, but the day would come. Simeon waited on the Spirit, until the morning he was led to the Temple. Anna continued to praise God, grounding herself in the remembrance of God's goodness and faithfulness. They are open-hearted people, ready to receive the new whilst awake to what is gift in the present. With those open and hospitable hearts they welcome a young family and a small child.

Older age as a time for waiting in hope and expectation

Prayer is an active waiting on God. Our attentiveness, our 'gazing', is turned towards the Lord who has come, who is now present with us and who will come again in glory. Every moment is rich with encounter. As we look back on our lives we trace the path of his working. And now we look forward with hope and expectation. Nicodemus wondered how a grown person could be born again. Simeon and Anna lead us in being open afresh to being born anew in the birth of the Saviour



When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem
Luke 2

Some questions for reflection and sharing:

1. Simeon and Anna appear for a brief moment in Luke's Gospel. Why do you think Luke draws them to our notice? What part do they play in the story of our salvation?
2. Share an experience of waiting that felt difficult? Why was this so? Now share an experience of waiting that felt energising? What made the difference?
3. There is a contrast between all the movement and bustle of life on the streets of Jerusalem, the noise and activity of the Temple and the still quality of Simeon and Anna's waiting. Where does the balance in your own life fall between busyness and stillness?

What is it time for you to do?

Advent is a time of waiting with joyful hope. On the bare branches of trees buds have formed. The days are at their shortest, but soon they will begin their lengthening

- As you prepare for Christmas consider whether there is one person in particular you want to open a space for in your heart. How will you do this?
- Consider what it is you are waiting and longing for from the Lord this Christmas. Each day this week bring this desire to God in prayer.

Some Advent Challenges:

1. Create a prayer space in your home. It might be a corner of a room that becomes a set aside place of prayer. You might leave a candle there, ready to be lit, or have words from the bible that are special to you, or pictures that speak to you of God. Make the space feel homely and inviting so that when you visit it you know you have come here to be attentive to the Lord.
2. Look through a hymn book and choose an Advent or Christmas Carol that expresses what you seek or feel this season. Reflect on the words and their significance for you – and sing it too!

For Reflection::

What is stirring, waking, not of our making,
but simple giving, shaped for our longing?

The Virgin, weighed
with the Word of God,
comes down the road:
if only you'll shelter her.
John of the Cross

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.
[Luke 1

A prayer for the last days of Advent

Lord, I offer my day to you
It is your gift to me.
Draw me to yourself.
Help me to be awake to your presence
And let your Spirit grow in me.
For this is my desire.

A prayer for the Christmas season



Jesus, I am in wonder
that you choose me.
You make your home in me.
You are my peace,
You are my home.
In you I have life.
Through you I will grow