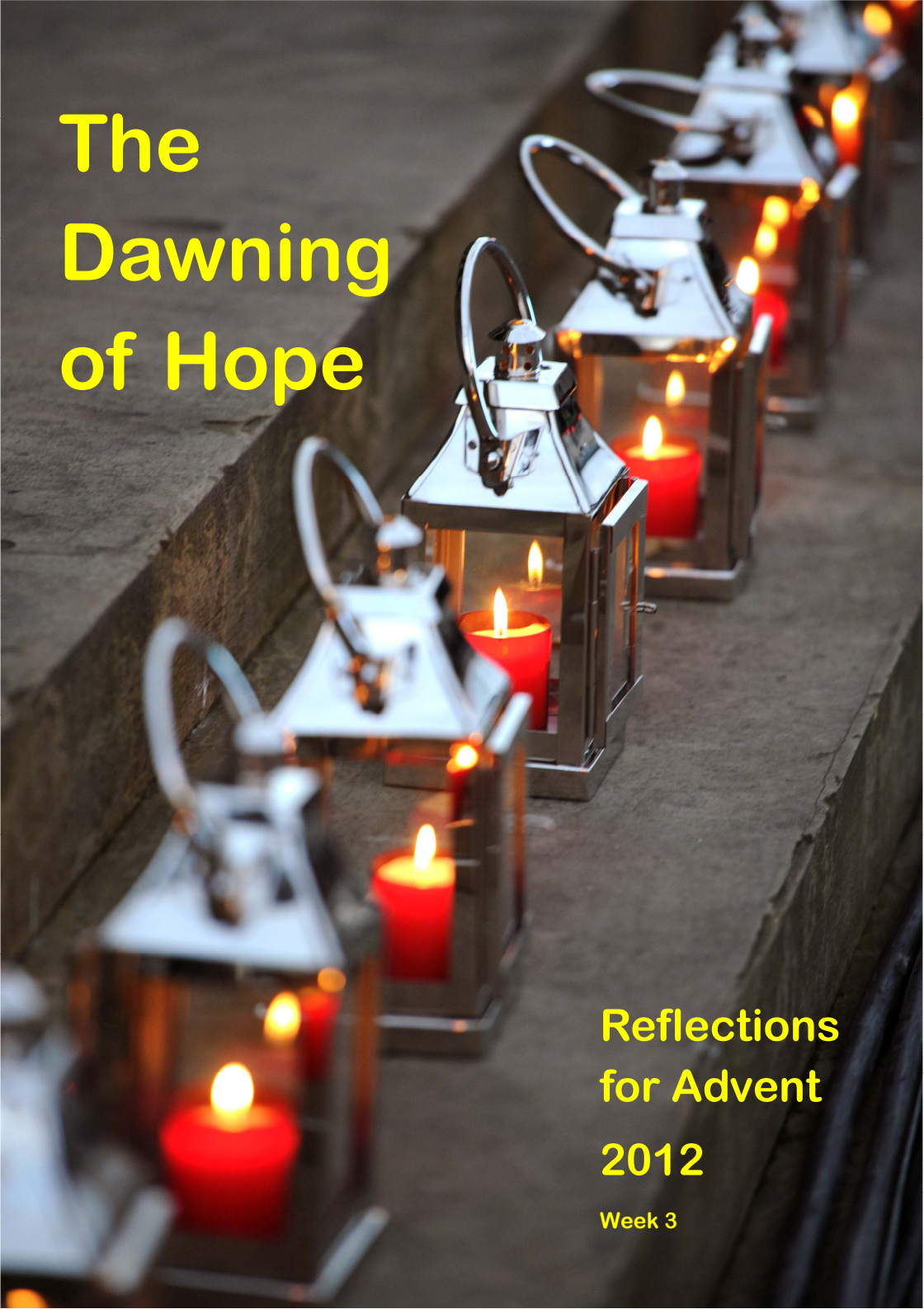


The Dawning of Hope

A row of lit lanterns with red candles inside, set against a dark, textured background. The lanterns are arranged in a line, receding into the distance. The light from the candles is warm and glowing, creating a sense of hope and reflection. The background is dark and textured, possibly a stone wall or a similar material.

Reflections
for Advent
2012

Week 3

Week 3 - John the Baptist

The third week of Advent introduces us to the figure of John the Baptist. He enters history to give voice to the longstanding message of the past, but also to be a living sign that it is becoming a reality in the present. He is often known by the designation of *“a voice crying in the wilderness,”* reminding us that the crucial messages in our society, do not always come from the place that we might expect. His message was not an easy one to hear, because he had to speak out when he saw power and position being abused.

The truth of Hillsborough would never have emerged had those who cried in the wilderness not refused to be silent. It took time for those awkward “unofficial” voices to be recognised as speaking reality; but through their speaking, they brought about change that will have impact far beyond their own experience.



13. The word of the Lord – Luke 2:1-5

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene - during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'

There is a measure of comedy to these few verses from the early part of the Gospel story. Every ruler, power-broker and influencer of the day is listed, but as this catalogue of *"the great and the good"* reaches its end, the devastatingly simple truth is that they are all side-lined. The *"word of the Lord"* is invested instead in an otherwise insignificant desert preacher named John. He cannot claim the wealth, status or influence of those who occupied the seats of power, but his message is unstoppable, because it is a message from God.

There are many similarities between John the Baptist, and those who have fought campaigns for truth and Justice. They too are often a lonely voice, struggling to be heard; they can often be confronted by those who believe that their place in society affords them a greater say. In the worst extremes the power brokers can even believe that they can re-write the narratives of history to suit their own ends.

But truth and justice have a power that is greater than mere human narratives; they are more than just a message, they are an unavoidable reality. We have already been reminded that those who speak for truth and justice, are advocating the characteristics of God. Even if those in power seek to consign them to the wilderness, theirs is a message that simply cannot be silenced.

When truth and justice prevail in one place, it sends out a message of hope far beyond; it reminds every struggler and wilderness dweller that when they speak the message of God, their words will overcome.

God, whose word is made flesh in Christ, give me the wisdom to recognise your truth, wherever it might be found.

14. The stones will cry out - Luke 19:37-40

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

Truth is unstoppable. We live in a world where vast amounts are expended on hiding it, suppressing it or distorting it. Whether through an advertising campaign designed to convince us that something is of far greater necessity than it truly is, or a high court injunction seeking to prevent some misdemeanour coming to light, there are those who try very hard to keep reality controlled and contained. But truth has a power all of its own, no matter what image or spin some might seek to generate, reality remains – the memory, the consequences, the evidence, the facts prevail and outlast every attempt to destroy them.

Jesus arrived at Jerusalem in the final days of his life. Just like a football crowd making its way to a big match, pilgrims had flocked there to celebrate the Passover, lining the streets and chanting their songs of celebration. And in the middle of it all, one group of followers declared their hero and leader to be no other than the *"king who comes in the name of The Lord God"*. Theirs was a message that the powers-that-be did not want to hear; they called for the chants to be silenced, but the truth would not be contained.

Jesus used a figure of speech to convey this powerful reality; if they were forced to be silent then the very stones of the ground would declare their message. Advent is a season of truth, a truth that is not always borne out in our immediate experience; for a while at least, many of us may have to pursue our life's journey amongst struggle and contradiction. But when truth breaks through, shattering the masks of falsehood and rising from the deception that some have worked hard to maintain, there is hope and inspiration for everyone.

God's Kingdom is coming; a Kingdom of hope and healing, justice and reconciliation. This is a truth that cannot be suppressed; its message will always prevail. Let this eternal reality bring you hope, peace and comfort, whatever the circumstances of today might be.

Lord God, may your unstoppable message of hope and promise inspire and sustain me this day.

15. The heavens declare God's glory - Psalm 19:1-6

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth; their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth.

When Jesus announced on the highway to Jerusalem that "the stones will cry out" he drew on an image that was already well used in the Psalms. As this ancient Hebrew poet looked beyond the immediate horizon to the skies and the heavens beyond, so it seemed that every aspect of them said something about the nature and the presence of God. This was not a message of words, but an indisputable reality carved into the very essence of the natural world.

Advent is a season for drawing back the lens and viewing a wider landscape, recognising that whatever our immediate circumstances might be, there is a bigger story of which we are a part. For all the struggles and tragedies that we endure, we live on a planet that sustains life, expounds beauty and touches all of our senses. We live in a world that proclaims God.

We need not belittle our immediate struggles, nor can we simply ignore them, but at times they can so dominate our horizon, that we lose sight of the greater good that surrounds us. The power of a tragedy can so overwhelm us that we struggle to see anything else. At the moment that we need it most, we risk losing sight of the very source of hope and strength that can sustain us through it.

Whether we gaze into the heavens, are mesmerised by the intricate beauty of nature's tiniest element, or are simply inspired by the joy of human love, made known by the touch of another's hand; in all these things God declares his presence. The world in which we live, speaks to those who walk through the storm, and reminds them that they do not walk alone.

**God of all creation, even when storm clouds gather, help me to
look to the heavens and see your glory.**

16. Let them grow together - Matt 13:24-30

Jesus told them “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from? An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.

The natural world teaches us much about our humanity, the rhythms and cycles of the universe and the God who made them. Centuries after the Psalm writer spoke of the heavens declaring God’s glory, Jesus borrowed an everyday image from the world of agriculture, to outline a key Advent theme.

In every generation of history, we have struggled to explain why wrongdoing continues to thrive, and often it is the good and honest who, as a consequence, suffer. But the lack of intervention on the part of the farmer whose crop has been contaminated is neither an expression of disinterest or helplessness. He is in control; he has confidence that his crop can still grow and bear fruit; when the time is right, he will divide his own from what has been sown by his enemy.

In this simple story, we are invited to have faith that, in the midst of a troubling world, God’s purposes will prevail. Those who sow the seeds of doubt, deceit and malicious intent may feel that their efforts are bearing fruit, but the harvester of righteousness is waiting; a reality that in time will be clearly known. Even when wrong seems to thrive, God’s people have cause for hope.

All over our world, injustice, wrongdoing and deception continue to germinate. They take root in institutions and organisations, become ingrained in our culture and behaviour. But this is not God’s final word – the harvest of righteousness will come, justice will prevail.

God of justice, when evil takes root and thrives, keep my heart pure, my hope alive, and renew my determination to pursue all that is good.

17. Longing to be set free - Romans 8:18-21

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”

Events can often turn out quite differently from what was intended or anticipated. A journey of hope and expectation can end in bitter tragedy; in situations where we would imagine ourselves to be safe and secure, we can suddenly find that we are vulnerable and in peril. One consolation we might draw when a tragedy is caused by human error, is that at least we can find refuge in the God who made the world around us.

But what about those situations when our tragedies are caused by the world itself; the earthquake, famine or natural disaster? What, we might ask, does this say about the God that we are invited to recognise as the Creator of all these things? How can this world reflect the goodness of his nature, when at times it can be a terrifying and destructive place?

The Early Christians were reminded that human failings and the turmoil we witness within the natural world are not unrelated. Just as we have fallen short of God's ideal, so his world around us has become less that it should be.

But even as we confront the physical realities of a damaged world, there is cause for hope. God invites us to become part of his new humanity, and offers the promise that one day the groans of creation will be heard and a new world will come; a world in which all things will be as they should. Creation will be restored to the harmony, peace and security that existed at its dawn; God's children will be at peace with one another and the environment they inhabit.

We live with the hopes of new creation in the world of the here and now; a world which at times will be painful and harmful; a world whose groaning we will share and at times find difficult to bear. Yet this is also where we can glimpse the promise of eternity when all things will be as they should. The golden sky at the end of the storm is no mere sentiment; it is the promise of our Creator.

**Maker of all things, when the world seems in turmoil around me,
fix my eyes afresh on the promises of your New Creation.**

18. When you walk through a storm - Mark 4:35-41

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

Any fan of Liverpool will be familiar with a song that speaks of walking through a storm. The disciples of Jesus may have found themselves on board a boat, but they were nonetheless at the very heart of a raging tempest. Their instinct was natural and understandable, they rushed to wake the sleeping Jesus, convinced that they would perish if he did not intervene. The episode left them in no doubt of his power and identity, for at his bidding, the very forces of nature could be called into compliance.

But Jesus then turns his attention to his followers and asks them a searching and somewhat perplexing question. “Why did you need me to intervene? Was my presence not enough? Few of us are likely to have acted differently to how the men in the boat did; they interpreted Jesus’ sleeping as a sign that he was disengaged and oblivious to their shared peril. But he invited them to look deeper into that reality, to recognise that he was very much aware of what was going on around them, and to see his slumber as source of confidence; a sign that they too could be at peace.

We might often find ourselves in situations where it would be easy to liken our experience of God to feeling as though he is asleep. He fails to respond as we might hope and expect; he allows to rage unabated those symbolic storms that threaten and disturb us. The God who has power over the waves and wind, does not promise that he will always still them, but he does promise to walk with us through them. He offers us the peace of knowing his presence.

God of all power, help me to trust you and find strength in your presence, even when the storms rage unabated.

