

Long Expected



Four Bible Studies for Advent

John Birch

Contents

Introduction	3
Study 1 - Come, thou long-expected Jesus	4
Study 2 - Hope of all the earth thou art	8
Study 3 - Born to reign in us forever	12
Study 4 - Raise us to thy glorious throne	16
Using images prayerfully	20
References	21

©2021 John Birch. Permission is given to reproduce copies of this Bible Study for individual church usage. If used over several churches, it would be lovely if you could purchase one per church! It should not be republished in any other way or offered for sale without the express permission of the author. More information about the author and other Bible Study Guides on www.faihandworship.com

Cover picture: Axum Cathedral, Ethiopia, fresco, Black Madonna

Introduction

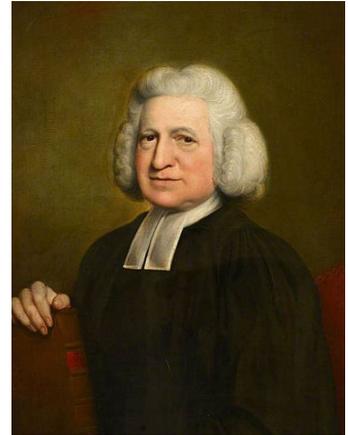
1. Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

2. Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

3. Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

4. By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

(words by Charles Wesley, 1707-1788)



'Come, thou long expected Jesus,' is one of many hymns written by Charles Wesley, and influenced by the class divide in 18th Century Britain and the orphans he saw in the streets, along with a particular Bible verse which states, "I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD Almighty' (Haggai 2:7).

Charles Wesley wrote this in 1744 and published it in his 'Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord', hoping those singing it would remember the Nativity but think also about the Second Coming, both familiar themes today in our annual journey through the season of Advent.

The preacher Charles Spurgeon thought highly enough of this hymn to use it as an illustration in a sermon for Christmas in 1855, and through Spurgeon and others the hymn became well known and published in several hymnbooks, paired with popular tunes such as 'Stuttgart' and 'Hyfrydol'.

Charles Wesley was born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, the son of Anglican cleric and poet Samuel Wesley and his wife Susanna. He was a younger brother of Methodist founder John Wesley and Anglican cleric Samuel Wesley the Younger, and he became the father of musician Samuel Wesley and grandfather of musician Samuel Sebastian Wesley.

Study 1 - Come, thou long-expected Jesus



Jeremiah, Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, 1511

Starting Point...

1. Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

Key verse...

'Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.'
(Psalm 25:5)

Come, thou long expected Jesus

(Read Jeremiah 33:14-16)

The Book of Jeremiah is not the most cheerful in the Bible, and not written in chronological or topical order, so difficult to follow if read from beginning to end. There is plenty of bad news for Judah but also, within Jeremiah's prophesies, some good news as well. The Babylonians had overrun several Judean cities, and Jerusalem was in the closing period of an eighteen-month siege, its people helpless and in despair. But all is not lost because chapters 30-33, known as 'The Book of Consolation', foretell a glorious future and

a time when even Gentiles will be drawn to the truth, with a new and perfect King 'from the line of David' sitting upon the throne. And all this written while Jeremiah was in prison and with the city's population suffering both famine and disease.

So, in these verses, Jeremiah brings us a Messianic prophesy, God's promise of the restoration between monarchy and priesthood after the disruption of exile. Not immediately, but 'in those days and 'at that time', which is interpreted to mean 'in Christ'.

Discussion...

Q) This reading is full of hope for the future, but the context is battle, blood and death. How important is context when we hear the set readings for Sunday read out from the lectern?

Q) What does this reading say to you?

Born to set thy people free...

(Read Psalm 25:1-10)

Written as an acrostic poem, each verse beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet (in order) can make for difficulty in developing a flow of thought, but we can pick up themes of forgiveness, freedom, guidance, and protection. The source of the psalmist's current anxiety is not clear, and it has become a psalm that many people can relate to when daily life becomes difficult and a source of anxiety.

The psalmist is encouraging his readers to put their trust in God, who willingly forgives

and forgets the sins of the writer's own youth and the rebellious young man he was and becomes his guide and daily source of wisdom.

The message centres upon the relationship between God and his people, here represented by one individual. It is an apt message for Advent, as we consider the wonder of a Messiah born not just for a nation but for all people.

Discussion...

Q) Trust in God is at the heart of the psalmist's thoughts as he writes these words, but what do those three words mean in your daily life?

Q) Do you find it useful to have in mind various Bible passages that can help in tough times and, if so, which have you found helpful?

Quotes

'I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.' (Charles Dickens)

'Once again, we come to the Holiday Season, a deeply religious time that each of us observes, in his own way, by going to the mall of his choice.' (Dave Barry)

'God never gives someone a gift they are not capable of receiving. If he gives us the gift of Christmas, it is because we all have the ability to understand and receive it.'
(Pope Francis)

From our fears and sins release us...

(Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

Psalms 25 underlines the importance of understanding the spiritual relationship that exists between God and ourselves as believers. Here, we find Paul praying that God and 'our Lord Jesus' might facilitate his meeting up with the Christian fellowship in Thessalonica, so that he can help build up their faith.

This passage has Paul acknowledging the unity of the Godhead, Father and Son, and in the description of overflowing love in verses 12 and 13 we glimpse how the power of God's Spirit might work in and

through the lives of the believers, moulding them into the people that God wants them to be, that is blameless, holy, and ready when Jesus returns.

Whilst in Advent we celebrate the coming of Christ as a baby, Paul reminds us of the Bible's teaching about the Second Coming, so vividly portrayed both in the Gospels (as we shall see in the next section) and the imagery of Revelation.

Discussion...

Q) How easy do you find it to think of both the Nativity and the Second Coming of Christ through Advent?

Q) This is a really encouraging word from Paul. Do we give enough thought to encouraging people in our own fellowship and the other churches across the towns where we live?

Q) How does verse 13 speak to you?

Let us find our rest in thee...

(Read Luke 21:25-36)

Most of chapter 21 concerns itself with Jesus' description of the temple and signs of the end times. Luke immediately follows it with Judas talking to the chief priests and the temple guard, with secret plans being made for Jesus to be handed over at a quiet moment in his life when no crowd was present. Whilst we are thinking of Advent, it is difficult to avoid the inevitability of Easter.

The commentaries call verses 5-38 'The Apocalyptic Discourse'. It talks of a time when enemies would surround Jerusalem, and a lengthy siege reduce the people to starvation and despair before the city fell and



Destruction of Jerusalem, Book of Hours, Google Art Project, c1414

slaughter began. Earlier, Jesus warns his hearers to flee to the mountains before this happens, and when the signs are there to be seen. Luke then talks of 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory' (v. 27). Matthew, Mark, and Luke all contain references to the fall of Jerusalem.

Commentators have argued whether Jesus did in fact talk of future events, or if the writers added all this detail after the actual fall of Jerusalem. All three writers place the events concerning Jerusalem within the 'present generation.'

Luke tells us that 'when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.'

Without getting too deep into the theology surrounding the Second Coming, perhaps it is enough to be certain that where Jesus is physically, and where Jesus's Word and Spirit lives on in the lives of believers (as we see post-Pentecost), then the kingdom of God is indeed near.

Discussion...

Q) There's a lot of imagery here. How easy do you find it to connect with Jesus's words?

Q) How would you summarise Jesus's words to someone unfamiliar with this kind of language?

Q) Jesus talks of the kingdom of God being near. How do those words connect with your faith?

Q) Look again at the first verse of Charles Wesley's hymn and consider its place in the Advent story.

Let's pray...

For ourselves, that through this season of Advent our faith and fellowship together might be strengthened.

Study 2 - Hope of all the earth thou art



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Zacharias Writes Down the Name of his Son, c.1488

Starting Point...

2. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Key verse...

'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty.' (Malachi 3:1)

Israel's strength and consolation...

(Read Malachi 3:1-4)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all quote this verse as a reference to John the Baptist, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, and considered very much to be the messenger in these striking words and his call for repentance.

It is a simple message to a people hoping desperately that the long-promised Messiah would be with them soon - 'then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come'.

The promise of a Messiah occurs frequently in the Bible. Orthodox Jews and many others would question the use of ancient Scriptures as part of the bigger story of Jesus, but Christians would argue that although these words speak into historical situations, their ultimate fulfilment is in the birth and life of Jesus, who corresponds to the hope of a Davidic King, an anointed one bringing in a long-awaited kingdom.

The shock is to come with the crown of thorns, and his throne a cross.

'Who can stand when he appears?' says Malachi. It is going to be the ones who have clean hands and a pure heart (Psalm 24:3-4). Repentance is an inferred necessity, purification pictured by a fire that refines metals, and soap used with clothing to remove impurities and leave a garment clean.

Discussion...

Q) What was the advantage of having someone introducing Jesus to the world?

Q) How important are the Old Testament passages scholars quote to link Jesus to the bigger picture of God's relationship with humankind?

Hope of all the earth thou art...

(Read Luke 1:68-79)

Zechariah's song, known as The Benedictus, gives praise to God for deliverance through the promised Messiah and celebrates the role that his own son will have.

Luke connects the Gospel message with its Old Testament roots, as Zechariah looks back to the goodness and mercy shown by God to the nation of which he is a part, and looks forward to the future role of both John and Jesus in the fulfilment of God's promises to all people.

Historically, there was a link between deliverance from captivity in the Exodus to arriving in the Promised Land, where those who had experienced the saving grace of

God might serve Him and live out their side of a covenant relationship.

Zachariah also appreciates the importance of the role of his son, who will represent 'the Most High', and even if not the prophesied Elijah, then 'he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' (Luke 1:17)

Discussion...

Q) How important is remembrance of the Exodus story to Advent?

Q) We perhaps don't think of Zechariah as a prophet, but verse 67 tells us he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. So, what might that tell us about the role of prophecy in the church?

Dear desire of every nation...

(Read Philippians 1:3-11)

In Paul's letter to the Philippian Church, we see again the thread of Jesus' Second Coming, an important part of our Advent narrative. Paul gives thanks for a group of believers he began sharing the Gospel story with around a decade previously, who have been faithful followers on their spiritual journey to this point in time, and he is confident they will continue to do so 'until the day of Jesus Christ'.

His prayer is full of encouragement for the fellowship at Philippi, that their love, knowledge, and wisdom might grow, so

their lives might become a living witness to the faith they profess.

Paul is looking for fruitful believers, and the fruitfulness he seeks is a life lived in the power of God's Spirit, which he talks about in his letter to the Galatian Church, 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'.

Lives that are fruitful are lives that shine with Christ's love and bring glory to God. (Galatians 5:22)

Discussion...

Q) Paul speaks of his joy at the partnership in the gospel between himself and the Philippians (NIV verse 4). How does the word 'partnership' fit in with your understanding of Church?

Q) How can we best encourage the Christian community within our local areas?

Q) Does Paul's list of fruits seem complete, or can you think of maybe others that would be helpful to both individuals and fellowship?

Joy of every longing heart...

(Read Luke 3:1-6)

And so, the time is right and although this reading moves us forward several years beyond the birth of Jesus, it connects with the bigger picture that these readings bring to us. God will send his messenger to announce the coming of the Messiah, and Zechariah discovers it will be his son, John, who will fulfil this role and 'go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins' (Luke 1:77).



Raphael, John the Baptist Preaching, 1505

It has been some time since the people last heard a prophet bringing them God's message.

Now, we read of John receiving God's affirmation, as had so many prophets of the past, that this is the moment he has been waiting for, and his brief but vital mission begins, a voice in the wilderness (so much a part of the nation's history with the Exodus) calling the people to a baptism of repentance to prepare for the coming Messiah.

Before a king made an important journey, there was a period of preparation including repairing roads, and so it must be for the Messiah, although here it would be the spiritual quality of lives that needed addressing rather than the evenness of roads, valleys or even mountains.

Discussion...

Q) Preparation was key, we read. Does this echo our season of Advent, and if so, what preparations could churches be making to bring the good news to their communities?

Q) What do verses 5-6 say to you about the mission of the Church?

Q) Look again at the second verse of Charles Wesley's hymn and consider its place in the Advent story.

Quotes

'Christmas is a tonic for our souls. It moves us to think of others rather than of ourselves. It directs our thoughts to giving.' (B. C. Forbes)

'Faith is salted and peppered through everything at Christmas. And I love at least one night by the Christmas tree to sing and feel the quiet holiness of that time that's set apart to celebrate love, friendship, and God's gift of the Christ child (Amy Grant)

'Every year we celebrate the holy season of Advent, O God. Every year we pray those beautiful prayers of longing and waiting, and sing those lovely songs of hope and promise.' (Karl Rahner)

Let's pray...

For the lonely, the housebound and homeless, in the area within which you live.

Study 3 - Born to reign in us forever



Meister von Hohenfurth, *The Nativity*, 1350

Starting Point...

3. Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

Key verse...

‘And with many other words, John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.’
(Luke 3:18)

Born thy people to deliver...

(Read Zephaniah 3:14-20)

We don't know a lot about Zephaniah other than he came from royal blood, with Hezekiah as his great-grandfather. It was not a good time for the nation as they had drifted away from God and now was an ideal moment for a prophetic voice to be heard.

There are harsh words for the surrounding nations, but God's judgment is also for Judah and Jerusalem, with a message that 'The great day of the Lord is near – near and coming quickly' (Zephaniah 1:14).

But, says the prophet, for those who trust in the name of the Lord, the meek and humble, a remnant of Israel whose lives are untainted

by the arrogance of so many, there is hope of restoration. 'Daughter of Zion' refers to the gathered remnant of Israel.

And in these poetic words, generations have seen a picture of the messianic age with a time of great joy, as the Lord is with his people. With punishment taken away, singing and rejoicing will replace fear and sorrow, and God will restore the nation's fortunes.

Discussion...

Q) 'On that day' and 'At that time' are repeating phrases here. Is it right for us to see this as a messianic passage, rather than of a time closer to when the prophet was writing?

Q) When you read this passage from the Old Testament, and from what you know of the New Testament, are there discernible differences in the relationship between God and humanity, represented by the nation of Israel?

Born a child and yet a King...

(Read Isaiah 12:1-6)

Isaiah, along with so many other prophets, has previously said much about the behaviour of God's people and how their sin will incur God's wrath and judgement.

What they must do is turn their backs on the lives that they currently live and, in penitence, turn again to God, where they will find the forgiveness that they desire.

This is a call to the faithful remnant of God's people. Isaiah's poetic words in previous chapters focus on the Messiah (11:11), the 'Branch from Jesse' (11:1) and the child who will reign on David's throne (9:7).

Now this passage looks forward in expectation of the rejoicing when that great day comes. Isaiah's words echo those of the Song of Moses in Exodus 15 as the people passed through the divided waters to safety, 'The Lord is my strength and my song...'

God has become everything to his people, and now with joy they will draw water from the well of salvation, and God will bring them life, spiritually and physically.

Discussion...

Q) Taken in its context, there is good reason for Isaiah to insert a song of praise at this point. Is this one that is relevant to all generations and not just the one for its time, and what does it say to you?

Q) Is there a verse here that really speaks to your heart?

Quote

'My brothers and sisters, may the spirit of love which comes at Christmastime fill our homes and our lives and linger there long after the tree is down and the lights are put away for another year.' (Thomas S. Monson)

Born to reign in us forever...

(Read Philippians 4:4-7)

This passage, from the closing chapter of Paul's letter to Philippian Church might not seem at first glance to have much to add to our journey through Advent, and yet it sits comfortably when previous readings have talked of a messianic age when the Lord is with his people, fear and sorrow replaced by rejoicing, repentance met with mercy and grace, when God is our strength and song and his love becomes the focus of our lives.

No matter how dark the circumstances of life might seem, Paul encourages believers to maintain a spirit of joy in the Lord, show humility and gentleness toward others, and not be anxious about anything. They should bring their concerns, needs, and worries to God in a spirit of thankfulness for past mercies, knowing that the peace of God will guard hearts and minds from despair.

Discussion...

Q) How easy do you find it to bring every difficult situation to God in prayer?

Q) Paul tells us that by handing over our anxieties to God, we will find an inner peace 'which transcends all understanding'. Is this an experience you have known and can share?

Now thy gracious kingdom bring...

(Read Luke 3:7-18)

Advent is a season of anticipation, reflected in this reading from Luke, as word spreads about John the Baptist calling people to repentance, and rumours start circulating that this man might be the long-promised Messiah.

Luke tells us that the people were waiting 'expectantly', aware of God's promise of 'one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord..." (Isaiah 40:3) and in their hearts hoping this was the moment.

Luke certainly saw in John's ministry the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophesy, quoting more of it than Matthew and Mark. His conviction was that all people would now see God's salvation (Luke 3:6).



Bernardo Strozzi, Sermon of John the Baptist, Google Art Project, c1644

John's words to the gathering crowd seem harsh, but he is not really questioning their actions in coming out to be baptised by him, simply their motives. It is not enough to cling to their descent from Abraham as a sort of 'get-out' clause, as what needs to be seen is evidence of a living faith.

John makes it plain that it's not who or what you are that matters, but whether your daily life shows the love and grace of God through action and word. He also emphasises that the time for action is

now, 'I have laid the axe to the root of the trees...' and God is looking for fruitfulness.

Then John reveals he is merely the messenger. There is another who will baptise not with water, but with Spirit and fire (an ancient symbol of judgement, refinement, and purification). This is the coming Messiah. This is the coming King.

And with many other words, we are told, John proclaimed the good news to the people gathered there.

Discussion...

Q) What do you think of John's approach to mission work in verse 7?

Q) How easy is it to feel that because we live in a broadly Christian country, at least in its approach to governance, to think this increases our chances of acceptance with God (as with the Jews of John's generation)?

Q) Repentance was vital, but what did John want to see as the product of repentance?

Q) Look again at the third verse of Charles Wesley's hymn and consider its place in the Advent story.

Let's pray...

For all who are searching for faith, that through this season they might, within the Advent narrative, find answers to some of their questions.

Study 4 - Raise us to thy glorious throne



Pieter Brueghel, The Good Shepherd, 1616

Starting Point...

4. By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Key verse...

'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.' (Micah 5:2)

By thine own eternal spirit...

(Read Micah 5:2-5a)

This chapter begins with a call to arms for a Jerusalem under siege, but what swiftly follows is a statement of hope. Ephrathah is the ancient name of Bethlehem and identifies it as the town in which David was born (1 Samuel 17:12), as well as being a connection between the messianic King and David.

This new ruler, says the prophet, will be one whose activities lie in the distant past (the word can mean eternity), but who is coming at some future time. Micah's words

appear to speak of a supernatural figure. Until that time, when 'she who is in labour bears a son' and there is a restoration of the family of Israel from exile, the nation will remain estranged from God.

Micah describes the kingly reign of the Messiah in familiar shepherding terms, but his reign will reach to the ends of the earth, a source of peace, echoing Isaiah's description of the child who would become 'Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6).

Discussion...

Q) Israel had been without a Davidic king since the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC, which Micah prophesies about in the late 8th century BC. How easy must it have been for a people hearing these words read over many centuries, to maintain hope in a messianic King?

Q) Where do you see the coming of Jesus within these words?

Rule in all our hearts alone...

(Read Psalm 80:1-7)

Here is God the Shepherd again and a plea that the people, probably the northern tribes, might, with divine help, find safety as in the past. These are God's people and only he can 'restore' them as they come to him humbly in prayer, seeking salvation.

Historically, there is some evidence of an increase in population around Jerusalem, which may have been an influx of refugees fleeing the Assyrian army.

The language of the psalmist is both poetic and revealing, as he accuses God of feeding

the people with the 'bread of tears' and making them drink tears by the bowlful.

There is desperation in these words, knowing that these people are a cause of God's anger, and worthy of judgement, and the author now asks how much longer this anger will last. The people seek restoration and forgiveness, and for God to once more rule in their lives and hearts.

Discussion...

Q) The picture of a divine Shepherd was one that the people of Israel could relate to. Is that still an image that works today, or is there an alternative occupation that might work today as an illustration of how God leads and feeds his people?

Q) This is the song of a people who are at their wits' end, desperate for their situation to turn around. Can it have relevance for today, and how does it fit into the Advent story?

Quotes

'The real evidence for Jesus and Christianity is in how Jesus and the Christianity based on him manifest themselves in the lives of practicing Christians.' (Lionel Blue)

'To perceive Christmas through its wrappings becomes more difficult with every year.' (E. B. White)

By thine all-sufficient merit...

(Read Hebrews 10:5-10)

This passage is part of a longer treatise on worship and sacrifice. The writer tells us that because the Levitical sacrifices under the old covenant were powerless to deal with sin, with offerings having to be made year after year, something new had to be established, and he quotes from Psalm 40 words that he sees as coming from Christ and explaining the incarnation.

It was not the sacrifices that displeased God, but that they were not being offered in the right spirit. What God wanted was obedience to His will, and the nation's

history showed how difficult that was to achieve.

Therefore, says the author, Christ came into the world, and through his obedience to God's will and his sacrifice on the Cross, a new covenant was established whereby all might become holy, set apart, through that one sacrificial offering. Nothing needed adding to that act, no repetition was necessary and as Jesus said himself, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30) The old had gone, the new begun.

Discussion...

Q) How difficult is it to sum up, in a few words, the problems of an old Covenant that Israel struggled to keep, and tie it in with all that Jesus did? Do you think the author achieved his aim?

Q) Is sacrifice, in part, still necessary for believers, and what should our offering be?

Raise us to thy glorious throne...

(Read Luke 1: 46-55)

The words of Mary's song mirror those sung centuries earlier by Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and its major theme is a reversal of the powerful and the humble in society, and amongst the nations who have oppressed Israel.

The song is full of Old Testament phrases and shows Mary's deep knowledge of Scripture, which, though not unusual, does perhaps show the pious nature of the one chosen to be the mother of the Lord.

Mary is humble enough not to think herself as worthy of this honour, but being chosen by God in this way is reason enough for a song of praise.



Meister Francke, Birth of Jesus, 1424

Mary begins with an expression of joy and an acknowledgement of God's enduring interest in her life, despite her low social status. She remembers all that God has done in the past, not just for her but for generations past.

From the time of Abraham, God has been with his people, fed the hungry, sent the rich away empty-handed, exalted the

humble, and brought down rulers from their thrones. The inference in Mary's words is that having done all this in the past, God will continue that same work through the life of her son.

Discussion...

Q) The traditional Nativity play is one that has Mary (and Joseph) at its heart. How important is our use of this song within the liturgy of worship, in remembering her obedience and joy in accepting God's call and challenge?

Q) Is there a verse that speaks into your own call to follow?

Q) How revolutionary are her words, and how much a part of their fulfilment are we?

Q) What for you is the message of Advent that this world needs to hear?

Q) Look again at the last verse of Charles Wesley's hymn and consider its place in the Advent story.

Let's pray...

For our neighbourhood, town or city, and a world that needs to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ!

Using images prayerfully

here are quite a few images within these studies, and you may like to try this way to use them prayerfully.

It is called Visio Divina, or 'Divine seeing' and all it requires is a few minutes of quiet, while we look at the images, what the artist might say to us, even putting ourselves into the artwork, and allowing God to speak to us.

The four stages of Visio Divina, assuming we are relaxed, quiet and with a copy of the picture in front of us, are:

Here is an image you might like to begin with. The stages are the same.



Meister von Hohenfurt, The Nativity, 1350

1. Look at the picture slowly, noting the colours, people, places, and things. Start in one corner and work your way around it. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about what you see, particularly anything you missed at first glance.
2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where might you be within the picture? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?
3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.
4. Be still. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms, and legs. Rest in this quietness and let God speak.

References

Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicized, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): New Testament, Zondervan; Abridged edition (April 18, 2004).

MacArthur Study Bible (NKJV), Thomas Nelson; REV UPD edition (November 5, 2013)

NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, Zondervan; Special edition (August 23, 2016)

NIV Study Bible, Copyright © 1985, 1995, 2002, 2008, 2011 by Zondervan.

Zondervan Bible Commentary (One Volume), Zondervan; Illustrated edition (June 4, 2008)

Topical quotes courtesy of brainyquote.com

All images used are, to the best of my knowledge, free of copyright restrictions.

There are more Bible Studies, collections of prayers and free prayer resources available on www.faithandworship.com