

Looking toward Advent during the Second Lockdown A Time of Hope and Refreshment

In a letter to the clergy of the Church of England, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, with the Bishop of London, have invited us to make this month a month of special prayer:

‘During this second lockdown we invite you to fast in a way appropriate to you as well as pray for our nation every Thursday, for its leaders, its health and essential services and all those who suffer.’¹

This message falls in the week leading up to Advent. The document which follows includes advice about what this fasting and prayer might look like in the weeks leading up to Advent.

“Behold, thy King cometh unto thee”, proclaims the Prophet in the Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent. This announces Advent’s principal theme: the coming of the Lord, which stirs in us a sense of expectation. We await the coming of the Lord, who is our salvation. Thomas Aquinas, in the Prologue of his commentary on Isaiah, speaks of the three dimensions of Advent: the coming of the Son of God *in carne*: in the flesh, historically; his coming *in mente*: in our souls, now by grace; and *ad iudicium*: at the judgement, at the end and as the end of history. Paramount in our keeping of Advent is that second dimension: Christ’s Advent *in mente*, the present coming of the Word of God in our souls by grace. Daily Prayer, seeking Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion, and Bible-Reading are helpful parts of our Advent preparations.

Prayer

For practical guidance, see the card available on the website, together with the lectionary. You are able to join us online for daily prayer and mass, or you could join us in prayer with a shortened office and personal prayer using the material online.

St Paul exhorts us to “pray without ceasing”. This does not mean that we spend all our time reading prayers, but that our life becomes a kind of prayer: “we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies to reasonable holy, and living sacrifice unto thee”. Prayer includes much more than asking for things, or even giving thanks. Prayer is a movement toward God, and a way by which the life of Spirit is shaped in us. The Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent describes Christ cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem. The true business of the temple, the true business of the city, the true business of the soul, is prayer: willing God’s will; willing the eternal good which is God’s will. Or, in the words of the Epistle for Advent 1, “Owe no man anything, but to love one another.”

The Daily Offices: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer

If you are able to come to one of the Offices on a regular basis, even once per week, you will help to support the life of prayer in the parish and feed your daily prayer also.

Prayer at Home

The life of prayer includes not only prayer in Church, but also how we pray at home, in a group or by ourselves. There are many guides to prayer and ways to pray. Some people find the the PACTS formula helpful (**P**ause, **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, **S**upplication or *Asking*).

Some people follow the daily offices of Morning Prayer and Evening prayer at home. This is a way to join in the daily services of the Church even when you cannot be there. You can use these services as they are, or add spaces for silence or for your own prayers. Compline, or even parts of Compline, can also offer a kind of personal or family prayer at night time.

Whatever form you use, it is important to find some time for daily prayer. Prayer shapes who we are and how we live. That which we can do at anytime, we may find that we do at no time. This is why people often

¹ <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/letter-clergy-archbishops-justin-welby-and-stephen-cottrell-and-bishop-london>

"Bearing in mind our primary vocation as the Church of Jesus Christ to pray and to serve, we call upon the Church of England to make this month of lockdown a month of prayer.

"More than anything else we know that we are in the faithful hands of the risen Christ who knows our weaknesses, tiredness and struggles and whose steadfast love endures for ever...

"During the first lockdown we cheered for the NHS every Thursday. During this second lockdown we invite you to fast in a way appropriate to you as well as pray for our nation every Thursday, for its leaders, its health and essential services and all those who suffer."

find it helpful to find a regular time of day for prayer. For practical guidance, see the card available on the table near the chapel.

Reading and Meditation on God's Holy Word

Daily reading of the Bible is a source of guidance, inspiration, and instruction. Reading the Bible is not just a way to get information. It is a kind of food. When we read the Bible this way, we take the time to think about it and reflect on what it means for us, and just to enjoy what is being shown to us.

The Anglican tradition is sometimes described as a way of reading the Bible. Some people simply like to dip into their Bible and to explore. The daily readings for Morning and Evening Prayer are printed on the weekly bulletin. If this is too much reading, you can pick one of the books being read. For example, you could choose to read the Old Testament lesson (either as 2 readings or combined in one long reading), or the daily Gospel reading. Or, you could read the selection from the Epistle. If you do this, you can go at your own pace and still follow along with the public reading of Scripture at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.

Fasting

Fasting has an outward and in inward part. The outward part involves giving up food and drink for a period of time. In the early Church, fasting often consisted of a complete giving up of food and drink until after evening prayer (in liturgical time, evening prayer marks the beginning of a new day). Abstinence may involve giving up certain kinds of food (like meat or cheese), giving up one meal, eating less at meals, or giving up delicacies. Fasting is not dieting! How we fast is left to our judgment, only that it should involve real self-denial.

Fasting also has an inward part. The great purpose of fasting is prayer. This explains why fasting usually involves not only a denial of certain food, but a withdrawal even from innocent and normal past-times or social occasions. Fasting is an expression of sorrow over sin and a kind of spiritual training. Fasting or abstinence can make our bodies more human, more responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit, and more aware of our dependence on God. In the Gospel according to St Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples how to fast. It is hard to imagine why he would do this unless he intended his disciples then and his disciples now to fast. In the words of the poet and theologian George Herbert, 'the Scripture bids us fast, the Church says now'.

Dr Pusey emphasizes the importance of considering the union of body and spirit in how we approach fasting or self-denial: 'It must be feared that it is one of the subtlest devices of the Enemy, to persuade us that we may become spiritual, through means merely spiritual; that we can cherish better the things of the Spirit, by neglecting those of the flesh; that we can have the victory over the flesh without fighting against it; that, being in the body, we can transfer the conflict, wholly to the soul; that we can cultivate spiritual feelings, desires, longings, love, without the discipline of the body, which can obstruct them and weigh them down.'

The greatest hindrance to fasting and abstinence may be low expectations. Perhaps we don't fast because we don't hope for much, don't expect much. In the words of one theologian: "we kill the flesh in order to acquire a body." We fast so that the whole of who we are may be more alive with the life of the Holy Spirit.

In a preface to one of the early translations of the Bible into English, known as the *Great Bible* (1540), Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote a preface about reading the Bible which included a long quotation from John Chrysostom, the fourth century Archbishop of Constantinople. It is very down to earth: "What sayest thou man? . . . Is it not for thee to study and to read the scripture, because thou art encumbered and distracted with cares and business? So much the more it is behoveful [needful] for thee to have defense of scriptures. . . . Thou art in the midst of the sea of worldly wickedness, and therefore thou needest the more of ghostly succour and comfort! . . . Thy wife provoketh thee to anger; thy child giveth thee occasion to take sorrow and pensiveness; thine enemies lie in wait for thee; thy friend (as thou takest him) sometime envieth thee; thy neighbour misreporteth thee or picketh quarrels against thee; thy mate or partner undermineth thee; thy lord, judge, or justice, threateneth thee; poverty is painful unto thee; the loss of thy dear and well-beloved causeth thee to mourn; prosperity exalteth thee, adversity bringeth thee low. Briefly, so divers and so manifold occasions of cares, tribulations, and temptations, beset thee and besiege thee round about. Where canst thou have armour or fortress against thine assaults? Where canst thou have salves for thy sores but of holy scripture?"