

A handful of light

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Daily Bible readings for Advent and Christmas

Contents

Introduction	7
Week 1 Lament	14
1 Dec No hiding place	16
2 Dec Floods of tears	21
3 Dec The last straw	25
4 Dec Lament for lost life	30
5 Dec Facing calamity	34
6 Dec The Real Absence of God	38
7 Dec To laugh at gilded butterflies	43
Week 2 Longing	47
8 Dec The all-night wrestling match	50
9 Dec Desperate for God	55
10 Dec This is your land	59
11 Dec Age-old questions	64
12 Dec Longing in lost places	68
13 Dec The Messiah	72
14 Dec The return of the king	76
Week 3 Annunciation	81
15 Dec The painful question	83
16 Dec A surprising response	88
17 Dec Lost for words	92
18 Dec Highly favoured lady	96
19 Dec The overshadowing	100
20 Dec Kindred spirits	105
21 Dec Magnificent hope	109

Week 4 Nativity	113
22 Dec Breaking with tradition	115
23 Dec A light for those in darkness	119
24 Dec Census and sensibility	123
25 Dec Hillside revelations	127
26 Dec Dazzled at evensong	132
27 Dec When I'm 84	137
28 Dec Losing Jesus	142
Week 5 Illumination	147
29 Dec A star is born	149
30 Dec There's always a Herod	153
31 Dec Thesaurus	158
1 Jan The intensity of darkness	163
2 Jan Light, part 1	168
3 Jan Light, part 2	172
4 Jan Life	176
Week 6 Hope:	180
5 Jan Glory	182
6 Jan Grace	187
Notes	192



Introduction

On a beautiful and radiant Saturday morning in early June I went to our local shop and was given my usual welcome by Emily and Terry who run it. As I was paying my dues for my daily paper, Terry said, ‘This is the kind of day that we think about in those dark days in January, that gives us a reason for carrying on.’ I could not have agreed with him more, and returned home walking more slowly, savouring the bright light, warm air, green trees and bright flowers, trying to suck the atmosphere and experience deep into my soul to charge my memory sufficiently so that it will sustain me when those winter months eventually return.

I have to admit to being a person who prefers summer to any other season. I have many friends who love the spring best, and there’s no doubt spring comes a close second for me. My wife is one of those who love the autumn, and I do find her enthusiasm for the rich colours of autumn infectious. I don’t have many friends who say that their favourite season is the winter. Some of them do speak enthusiastically about winter; I am prepared to believe their enthusiasm is genuine, but I will never quite understand them. Admittedly, there is something very beautiful about a bright, frosty morning, especially when the boughs of the trees have been airbrushed by the cold night air and sparkle in the sharp sunlight. But most days of the winter are not like that. I find I get cross with the grey skies, I don’t like the lack of green on the trees, I miss the colours of the flowers, I hate the cold, but most of all I hate the lack of light. In the winter I am someone who needs messages of hope to keep me going.

The Bible readings in this book are written for the season of Advent and Christmas, which, in the northern hemisphere, comes in some of our darkest months. The main message of Advent is hope,

and Christmas comes as a festival of light and hope at the time of the year when the nights are longest. Although this book can be read at any time of year, because the Bible stories themselves are not connected with the seasons, most people will probably be following it during the winter month of December and into the New Year until the festival of Epiphany on 6 January. In these winter days, I, for one, will be remembering Terry's wise words and use the memory of that bright June day to sustain me and remind myself that there will be days again when the air is warm and the sun high and, despite all the current evidence to the contrary, better days will come. This is a classic expression of hope: though things are tough now, there is an instinct, a belief, an awareness that there is a better world which we will experience sooner or later. Hope is the fuel that has kept many people going when they have had to face the many and various types of darkness that this world can bring.

Sister Stan is an Irish nun who has written a book of daily readings called *Gardening the Soul*. In her reading for 21 March she writes, 'Hope is daring, courageous; it has the audacity to reach a hand into the darkness and come out with a handful of light.'¹ It reminds me of the following saying that I have come across, which I believe goes right back to the first century AD: 'When you light the lamps in the evening, you say to the darkness, "I beg to differ!"' That custom reveals that wonderful human determination not to let the darkness have the last word. I have come across that determination time and time again throughout my life, and I have never ceased to be moved by it. I often see it in people who are facing what I think must be unbearable strains in their work or homes and press on regardless, some of them even cheerfully; I have seen it in friends who have been bereaved, who have remarkably found energy to haul themselves along the rocky path of grief, not only surviving but discovering treasures on their journey which they have shared with me and others; I have seen it in some internationally known people, those who have carried amazing beacons of light like the courageous Martin Luther King and the compassionate Mother Theresa; I have

seen it in countless fictional characters in novels and films in which writers and film-makers have used their skills to depict a message of hope that spills out of that story into ours. I have also seen it in the pages of the Bible, and in these coming weeks we shall be looking at some of these ancient stories and discovering the same infectious energy and determination. As I explore the stories of hope in the Bible, in history and in everyday life, I am discovering that hope is a quality that is not just about a better future. It is a quality that has the power to transform the present moment. For me, true hope means that I can somehow find a handful of light even on a January afternoon and allow it to change me from grumpy resignation to joyful acceptance. Now that is good news!

Starting points

The starting point of this book is our common humanity. You do not have to be at a certain level of Christian understanding or maturity to read this book—you just have to be human! I think it is likely that most people reading a book of daily Bible readings will be Christians. But I very much hope that others will also be joining in the journey—those just starting to find faith, those who have lost their faith, and those whose faith seems on the point of extinction.

For the last few years here in Derby, I have been the minister responsible for St Paul's Church, which is situated near the centre of the city. It had not had an easy life in recent times but was kept going by a wonderful and faithful small group of people. In 2003, a few of us from another church joined these folk to help and encourage them, and, little by little, we have seen signs of growth. I have learned so much at this church, not least through our 'Soul Café', an evening event that was held on the first Sunday of the month over three years. It took place in the church but was very different from normal church services. The church was laid out as a café, with a stage where live music, storytelling and poetry took place. There were snippets of films and other multi-media

presentations. It included exploration of Christian themes in such a way that they were accessible to all. As a result, we found lots of people coming who would not come to 'normal' church, and one of the exciting results is that they have begun to show us how to 'do church' in a language that non-churchgoers understand. The project is currently continuing as 'Soul Studio'.² During these events, I find myself deeply aware of our common humanity—those with faith, those without, and those not sure where they are, all travelling together with a strong sense of mutual respect, and daring to explore together.

I hope something of this exploration will happen in these daily readings, that together we will set out with open hearts and minds to see what we might discover. If you are a regular Bible reader, then many of the passages will be familiar to you, but it's amazing how new treasures can be found in familiar places. Perhaps, however, you are someone who is not a Christian, and you haven't read much of the Bible in your life. Maybe you are reading this because a Christian friend has given it to you as an early Christmas present and you don't want to offend them by not reading it! But you may well be one of those who, somewhere inside, is aware of an instinct telling them that within this book there is a personal message for them. I feel sure that if you read these passages with openness, you won't be disappointed. Whoever you are and wherever you are in your life, we all have one thing in common: we all need hope, and our quest in these weeks ahead is to reach our hand into these ancient scriptures and draw out handfuls of light.

The way the book works is like this: there is a Bible passage for every day, followed by some comments. There are questions to help you reflect on the passage and a prayer that you are welcome to use.

The Bible readings are all related in some way to the two major themes that are celebrated in the Christian Church at this time of year: Advent and Christmas. For those not familiar with these festivals, they mean the following:

Advent: This season looks forward to the coming of Jesus, including his first coming here on earth and also his promised return at the end of this age.

Christmas: This season celebrates the birth of Jesus.

For those reading the book in the Advent and Christmas season, I suggest you start on 1 December, which means that you will complete the readings on the twelfth day of Christmas, the feast of Epiphany, when we remember the fact that God made himself known to us through his Son, Jesus. However, the readings are not especially geared to particular days, so you can be flexible.

Each of these festivals carries a profound and encouraging message of hope, and it is this theme that I will be focusing on in particular. We live in an age when there is much that can tempt us to despair. It may be our ordinary everyday lives, with the pressures of life possibly compounded by financial worries or job insecurity. We may be facing the pain of an ongoing illness in ourselves or in someone we love. We may feel burdened by problems in our local community, and feel close to despair when we see constant acts of vandalism and violence in our neighbourhoods and wonder at what will become of some of our young people. We may feel burdened by the many disturbances in our world brought about by natural disaster or political upheavals. There is much in our often fragile lives that can get us down. But as we shall see, these issues are nothing new; the human family whose stories are described in the pages of the Bible also had their fair share of fear, grief and depression, and in these next few weeks we shall see that the messages of hope that renewed and sustained them also hold good for us today.

Meeting in a group

You may like to use this book for group study (although I appreciate that, if you are studying this at Advent and Christmas, it is not the best time for weekly meetings!) You could meet once a week, after

you have completed each week's readings, and share what you have been learning. It would help to make notes of your thoughts, and you might find it helpful to keep a brief journal. The questions for reflection at the end of each day's reading will help you form your response.

At the group meeting, you could structure the meeting around the following questions:

1. Which of the days' readings has meant the most to you? Share what God has been saying to you. Give each person in the group space and opportunity to share their experience.
2. Has there been anything difficult to understand? Others can share their insights to help clarify.
3. Is there something you would like to do in response to what you are learning: personally, in your church, at work, or in your community?

Dedication

I have dedicated this book to Subhro Tudu. I met Subhro when a group of us from St Paul's, Derby, travelled to North India in March 2007 as part of a diocesan partnership visit. We spent two weeks in the Diocese of Eastern Himalaya at the kind invitation of Bishop Naresh Ambala. Our guide for much of this trip was Subhro, who works as the Programme Co-ordinator for the Diocesan Board of Social Services, and he and his colleagues showed us a wonderful range of caring activities in which the church was engaged. We saw agricultural projects, HIV/AIDS care projects, projects to support schools and families, projects in villages to empower local people, tea plantation co-operatives and women's co-operatives. We were taken to many villages where we were welcomed with warmth and generosity, and we sheltered from the sun in simple and beautiful church buildings. Everywhere we went we saw signs of the church making a difference to people who faced serious hardships in their

lives. And there, quietly and thoughtfully, was Subhro, full of kindness and wisdom and a deep call from God to bring the good news to the poor in any number of practical ways, always on the lookout for new projects to ease the lives of the people he loves so much. Subhro has become a good friend to us, and he represents that army of people in places of the world that has seen too much despair. They are those who know the stuff that hope is made of. They don't just speak about hope, they do it, and their example is a constant inspiration.



Week 1

Lament

Much of this book will focus on the opening sections of the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John. Matthew and Luke give us those well known infancy stories—the angel Gabriel appearing to the young Mary; the birth of Jesus in the musty stable; the curious shepherds and those wise men following their star. These are stories well known to us through Christmas carols, greetings cards and children’s nativity plays. We shall also look at the opening lines of the Gospel of John—words we hear if we go to a midnight service. John doesn’t give us any of the stories of stables and wise men. Instead, he goes for a much more mystical approach, playing with the concepts of word and light.

Before we get to those stories, we shall have a couple of weeks mostly in the Old Testament, that large body of writing that records stories, teaching and poetry from the days before the coming of Christ. These stories will set the scene for the birth of Jesus and begin to explore the theme of hope. In our first week, however, we are going to think about the theme of *Lament*. Now, I must admit, I thought long and hard about the wisdom of starting a book with lots of readings on the theme of lament. It’s not exactly the most cheerful way to begin, and I keep wondering whether readers would prefer a more upbeat start. But no one likes endless stories of a pain-free world with problem-free people living idealized lives. If you have seen the film *Pleasantville*, you’ll remember how you felt when the two young people find themselves dramatically transported into a 1950s black-and-white American soap, where everyone lives in a state of relentless cheerfulness. I found it completely sickening! The film beautifully develops the theme of people moving from a

superficial, artificial life into reality with its genuine joys as well as painful sorrows, and all the complexities of normal life.

Hope is an important theme to us, precisely because we live in a world where much happens that depresses, puzzles, pains and exhausts us. It is immensely reassuring to discover that the Bible is not a set from *Pleasantville*: a land full of beautiful people leading perfect, smiling lives, solving every problem with breathtaking wisdom, winning every battle and bearing pain with dazzling courage. In this first week of readings we shall discover that there is much suffering recorded in the Bible that does not have quick-fix solutions, and there are many mysteries that are not solved. Time and again I go to my Bible and find myself amongst people who, though living in very different times to ours, nonetheless struggle with similar issues to the ones I face, and ask similar questions to mine.

The word 'lament' feels like quite a powerful word to me. It carries a sense of deep grief, regret, yearning. It's probably not a word we use very often, and I suspect it's used more in religious circles. But the experience of grieving, regret and yearning is experienced by all humans. We'll look at some Bible passages this week that show us how some people have responded to life situations that have caused them to lament, and how, those painful experiences have often been the point at which they have begun to sense the first rays of hope rising in their souls. The theologian Walter Brueggemann asserts that 'only grief permits newness'.³ If that is the case, then lament is an essential part of hope.



1 December

No hiding place

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'

GENESIS 3:8-13

The opening two chapters of Genesis are a beautiful description of the creation of the universe. The writer or writers of these verses were not trying to provide a scientific account of the origin of the universe; their intention was to convey through their writing skills some key messages. They were describing their profoundly held belief that the universe was created by God, that he created it in an orderly way and that he created humans to live and work closely with him and to have a distinctive caring role for the planet they were to inhabit. They are also keen to communicate that God created humans with the intention that they should lead perfect lives, living in a perfect world in perfect harmony held together by the perfect love of God. But, just as you are thinking that this state of bliss is unassailable, we discover two problems in these stories. Firstly, there is the existence of evil that threatens the state of perfection. Secondly, humans have been given the freedom to choose either

good or evil, and there is within these humans the possibility that they may prefer to choose evil. Without this ability to choose, they would have no personality—they would simply be robots programmed to think and do only good. It is the fact that they have choices that makes them real.

If you read the first two chapters of Genesis, you can't help but feel moved. You have this idyllic scene of God working with the blessed soil of our planet, forming life, developing plants, creating many different forms of life to occupy land, air and water. And he creates a man and a woman. These are not simply other life forms; these, we are told by the writers, are made in 'the image of God' (1:27), and into the nostrils of these creatures God breathes 'the breath of life' (2:7).

These breathed-in images of God settle into their new home, which is a place of great peace and safety until something catastrophic happens. Evil appears in Genesis 3:1, in the form of a serpent, and begins a discussion with the woman, making her aware that she has choice—she can choose good or evil. If that's the case, why not just try a little of the evil, just to see? It can't do you any harm. In fact, try eating from that tree, says the serpent, and you will know everything you ever need to know. As we look at this story, we realize we are reading here not so much a literal story of two people at the beginning of human history; we are reading about ourselves, and that is exactly what the first writers wanted us to see. To start working out if there was a literal Adam and Eve completely misses the point. The point of the story is to declare that God's original design for this world was perfection, but it has been desperately damaged—and not by two people in the Garden of Eden in the long-distant past. It is being desperately damaged by me and you, every time we choose darkness over light, evil over good, selfishness over kindness, deceit over truth.

The writers of this story knew all too well what it felt like to choose dark rather than light. They knew what it was like to do something they knew to be wrong and feel their conscience pricked.

That's why they write the story so well and why it has resonated with millions of people over many centuries. We *know* this story so well in our own experience.

Adam and Eve, the writers, you and me, have chosen to eat forbidden fruit. We thought we knew better. 'Why should God tell us what to do?' we thought. 'We are adults.' In the Genesis story, we read that after they have eaten the forbidden fruit, the man and the woman do feel different. They decide they should cover themselves and they make fig-leaf clothes. Maybe as they are sewing the leaves together they are discussing that the fruit of that tree was really rather tasty, and no harm was done by eating it, and in many ways it was probably very nutritious... until they hear 'the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze' (v. 8). What a wonderful image this is! It shows us world where God sounds so tenderly human as he wanders around the garden at the end of a hot, sunny day. Amazingly, he appears not to know that the two have eaten the forbidden fruit (v. 11). It seems as if he has deliberately humbled himself so that he can be as near as possible to his human companions.

You get the impression that before the fateful encounter with the serpent, the man and woman and God were often to be found wandering around the garden together, and there's nothing unusual about God turning up to see them in the time of the evening breeze. Only this time, when Adam and Eve hear the sound of his approach, they feel a strange desire to hide. They don't want God to see them; they want to protect themselves—they have already tried to cover up their bodies with fig leaves (v. 7). The beautiful, free, trusting relationship with God has been broken, and they are now in a world where they have something to hide, where they feel ashamed. Then, as they hide in the trees, hoping that God won't see them, they hear that loving, searching voice: 'Where are you?' (v. 9).

Eventually, God finds his companions and Adam says, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself' (v. 10). Well, at least he is honest. This sad

comment reveals that fear has entered his heart, displacing the love and trust that once happily resided there. Strictly speaking, he is not naked. He is wearing a designer Eden Garden fig-leaf suit! But he still feels naked—and this means more than a lack of clothes. He feels a deep vulnerability. The rest of the story doesn't make for happy reading. Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the serpent; God curses the serpent and explains to the humans the terrible consequences of their actions, which include pain, toil, exhaustion and banishment from the beautiful garden, and the loss of that close companionship with God. In the midst of all this bad news, there is one touching verse (v. 21), in which we are told that God made garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothed them. Although he is desperately disappointed by their actions, he nonetheless does not lose his love and compassion for them. He looks at the fig-leaf suits and knows they won't adequately protect them, so he makes them garments that are far stronger than fig leaves, so that his friends do not feel quite so naked.

Each time I read this story, I get the sense that there is more sorrow in God's heart than there is in the humans'. When I reach the end of the chapter (v. 24) and see God posting an angel at the entrance of Eden, I see a rather lonely God walking back into his beautiful garden with sad memories of the days when he laughed and played with the man and the woman and they strolled together in the evening breeze, chuckling over the absurd waddle of a duck or delighting in the beautiful colours of a dragonfly wing.

Guilt is a difficult subject. We know the feeling: it's disturbing and unsettling. We know the processes we instinctively go through—trying to make excuses, blaming others, hoping to be better next time, feeling bad about ourselves and so on. If we do get as far as wanting God to forgive us, then we may envisage a rather stern God who is fed up with another human getting it wrong again, who technically forgives us, yet is still cross with us. Maybe a more accurate picture when we experience guilt is that of God's walking back into the garden, grieving over the broken friendship. It is not

that we have done wrong that matters most; it is the broken relationship. If we understand that, we will begin to walk a path of hope, because the Gospel stories describe God coming once again to walk with us, not this time in the perfection of Eden, but in the world beyond the garden—the world of hurts, pains, struggles and laments of many kinds. This time it is in our world that he calls out, ‘Where are you?’ If we take the time to stop and listen, and come out from hiding and dare to say, ‘Lord, I am here,’ we may well find that a divine hand reaches out and a voice says, ‘I’d like to walk with you in the evening breeze. There’s much to chat about.’

Reflection

What makes you feel guilty? What goes on in your heart when you feel guilt? Like Adam and Eve, do you try to hide and to shift the blame? Does this story change how you feel about guilt?

Prayer

Lord, let me so delight in walking with you in the evening breeze that I will not want to taste forbidden fruits.