



# ADVENT 1: ISAIAH 2:1-5 AND ANGOLA

The coast of south-west Ireland once stood on the edge of the medieval world. Or almost. A few miles out to sea was Skellig Michael, a rocky island monastery named after the archangel whose trumpet call would signal the second advent of Christ in glory. Successive generations survived the harsh conditions with faithful expectation, but by the 13th century the last of them had gone. Nobody knows for certain why the monks departed, but some believe they just got tired of waiting. It's always tempting to give up in the face of unrelenting monotony, but it is against such apathy that Advent comes as a gift.

This is a season of waiting, but not of inactivity. It's a time to prepare for Christmas, but a plethora of 25-day calendars mean that Christ's birthday will hardly take us by surprise. Surely the season has more to say to Christians than 'keep your head down until angelic trumpets summon the apocalypse'. In his prophecy, Isaiah gives us the directions to much deeper meanings today. He pictures people streaming back to God's holy mountain. The verb employed can mean to flow like a river or to shine with joy; but either way, the implication is that as they draw closer to God, pilgrims will be thoroughly transformed. It's as though they wake to see the world sleepwalking into violence and injustice but, having seen the danger, their spirits are now restless for something more than swords and spears: they long for the fullness of shalom that God has purposed for the Earth.

Advent is given to actively encourage that longing in us. We sing 'O come, o come Emmanuel', come God and be with us. But if God responds to such a plea, then our deepest desires reflect the divine thirst for peace and reconciliation. We will ache for the human ingenuity that once fashioned weapons of destruction to bring forth new tools and technologies that will nurture life in all its fullness. We will yearn for tanks to become tractors and missiles to turn into water-pumps. And we might glimpse a prophetic imagination of how costly stockpiles of chemical annihilation might be beaten into the pharmaceuticals needed to transform the lives of the 34 million people worldwide living with HIV. For as well as the beginning of Advent, today marks World AIDS Day.

The prophetic imagining of Isaiah is a necessary secret for resisting the monotony of the world today. It's also a source of hope to see the Earth transformed. And perhaps nowhere deserves to see such transformation more than Angola. Forty years of conflict decimated national infrastructures and social cohesion, generations were left uneducated and millions were displaced. But while 11 years of peace have seen Angola emerge as Africa's third-largest economy, few of its people, least of all its young women, have seen the benefits of this wealth. High adolescent fertility rates along with a low use of contraceptives means the threats of pregnancy and HIV are ever present.

Faced with a daily absence of change, it would be easy for Angolans to give up. But Christian Aid partner Women's Christian Union (UCF) is bringing tangible transformation to many lives. Its Girls Building Bridges programme raises the self-esteem of young women, teaching them important life skills, including sex education designed to prevent HIV and underage pregnancies. Recent graduates of the programme mentor the next year's intake.

Girls like 13-year-old Dilza testify to the changes they have experienced: 'Before Girls Building Bridges I didn't know what was meant by self-esteem, but I have learnt to value myself and trust my judgement.' Louisa, an early graduate of the course and the first of her neighbourhood to go to university, adds: 'The course helped me value myself as a woman in society.'

These young Angolans are people walking in the light of God. These are lives actively transformed by the prophetic imagination. These are communities who have discovered that the mountain of the Lord is in their midst. They have grasped the gift of Advent and they share it with us as we actively await the fulfilment of God's shalom.





# ADVENT 2 : MATTHEW 3:1-12 AND COLOMBIA

Sometimes the peace should be disturbed: the kind of peace that allows injustice and inequality to prevail in the world. John is one such disturber of the peace. His words in Matthew call people to attention, to reflection, to acknowledge that things need to change. In these tinselled days in the run-up to Christmas, John's words might stop us in our tracks and disturb us to examine our decorated traditions and long-held assumptions. But more than just disturbing individuals' peace, John disturbed societal peace, the kind of peace that accepted the power imbalances that assumed position, status and prestige. John's words cut through hierarchies built by humans and speak of the equality of the coming kingdom. His words come not just as warning, but also as encouragement to prepare for this new world order.

Advent is a time full of preparation for feasting, for exchanging gifts, for making arrangements to see family and friends. Or even preparing for heightened expectations to be unmet, desires unfulfilled. John however calls us to a deeper kind of preparation: to prepare for Immanuel, God with us. Examining the fruitfulness of our lives, confessing and repenting from our sin may be part of our preparation. But so too may be an examination of our world, identifying and exposing the power imbalances that have left many oppressed and without essential services this Christmas. What world are we welcoming this child and every child into? Advent is not a time of passive waiting but of active preparation for the coming of the kingdom.

Another disturber of the peace, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, said the following words in his 1967 Christmas sermon on peace:

*'It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny... We aren't going to have peace on Earth until we recognise this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.'*

In his sermon, Dr King gave a list of examples of how through the basic routines of the morning we depend on half the world. For some of us, half our morning routine depends on Colombia. The palm oil required for gel and shampoo used in the shower, the strong black coffee required to kick-start a busy day, and the banana chopped over cereal or toast could well be from Colombia. Our lives are intertwined not just with Colombian produce but also with the fact that Colombia has more internally displaced people than anywhere else on Earth. An estimated 4.9 to 5.5 million people are displaced from their homes and living within the country, while more than 70,000 civilians have been killed or have disappeared in Colombia in the past 20 years.

For six decades it has been accepted practice for armed groups – those with power – to take land from the peasant farmers. The land is wanted for growing palm oil, mining for gold, coal or oil, farming cattle or controlling the routes for the cocaine trade. Two Christian Aid partners, Peace Brigades International (PBI) and Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace (CIJP), are disturbing these practices of displacement and disappearance.

CIJP accompanies conflict-affected communities in their struggle for justice and reparations and for the return of their lands. It informs communities about their rights and provides legal representation to these communities taking their cases to the national and international courts. PBI in turn provides an accompaniment programme for CIJP. As international volunteers, the accompaniers' presence acts as a deterrent against those seeking to stop the crucial work that Christian Aid supports. Their protection allows human rights defenders to fight impunity and carry out their work safely.

Like John, PBI and CIJP are challenging the long-accepted way of things; they challenge the power imbalances that perpetuate inequality. Sometimes, in order to realise peace, we need to disturb the peace.





# ADVENT 3 :

## MATTHEW 11:2-11 (NIV)

# ISRAEL & THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

**'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'**

This reading strikes a warning. Already the storm clouds are gathering. Even before Jesus is born, we are reminded of the mounting opposition that will follow him through his life and will ultimately put him to death. His teaching has been so counter-cultural, the kingdom of God he proclaims so strange, that even John the Baptist misunderstands who he is.

At this time of year, we may ask ourselves what we are looking for. As we turn aside from exhausting pre-Christmas business, from the high street expectations of what will fulfil us, from all the millions of things we have to do, what do we find? Perhaps a quiet church? Perhaps a moment of stillness? Perhaps a lit candle? But is this really it?

Asking ourselves what we hope to find in the context of the world may not be so different. Situations like the one in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory may simply feel too complex, too political, too tangled to even start to understand, let alone to engage with.

The human cost to the conflict in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory is almost as unthinkable as the politics. Living under occupation, many ordinary Palestinians are prevented from accessing the medical treatment they need.

Christian Aid partner Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI) is an Israeli organisation working to protect the right to health for people of all faiths, races and backgrounds. It does this through advocacy and campaigning, supporting permit application procedures, and petitioning to the Israeli High Court of Justice. It also provides primary medical services. Every Saturday, volunteer Israeli and Palestinian doctors and nurses travel to the West Bank with mobile clinics.

Not only do these mobile clinics provide supplementary medical care, but it is a rare opportunity for Israelis and Palestinians to meet in a non-conflict situation.

A mobile clinic may seem little defence against a hard and concrete separation barrier. But we read remarkable details of people's lives that have been immeasurably improved by PHRI. Waleed, aged 13, was born deaf and has been given a hearing aid by PHRI. Now, his mother tells us, 'He's far less shy... it's surprising [because] suddenly his whole personality changed.' Amani Abbadi, who brought her baby son into the clinic, sick with fever and diarrhoea, was able to access a well-stocked and free pharmacy. Salsabeel Al Arabsi, whose family have been helped by PHRI to apply for permits, is able to travel to East Jerusalem for dialysis three times a week. Dr Eran Kozer, a volunteer paediatrician, tells us that 'for some of these children, this is their only opportunity to see an Israeli without a uniform. To see an Israeli who is kind to them. It is an opportunity for us to show something different.'

And it is not only Palestinians who see a different view. One of PHRI's volunteers, an Israeli doctor, told PHRI that going through the West Bank with the mobile clinic, he saw all the small villages and the grapevines that reminded him of his military service, but that now they gave him a different feeling. Then he wore a uniform and was armed with a gun, but now he wears a white coat and is armed with his doctor's bag, and he feels happier and safer.

'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' The birth of Jesus utterly dispels any fantasies of God as some kind of superhero. Instead, it tells us of God born in our midst, coming from the inside, as small and fragile as a smile of kindness to or from a Palestinian teenager, as a moment's peace in a stressful world, as a little child born in a manger. This is the kingdom of God and this, Jesus tells us, will bring a world of health and healing and integration for all God's people.





# ADVENT 4 :

## PSALM 80:1-7; 17-19

## MATTHEW 1:18-26

## AND IRAQ

The fourth Sunday of Advent is traditionally the time when we think about Mary. The story is so familiar that we don't always stop to reflect on just how incredible it is. Mary, probably in her early teens, is engaged to Joseph, and rather than talking about plans for the big day, she drops the bombshell that she is pregnant. Even in our post-Christian, western culture, such an announcement would spell the end of many a relationship – but in 1st century Palestine the consequences could be death.

Yet, we are told Joseph is a righteous man: not one who necessarily follows the letter of the law, but righteous in the sense of open to God, compassionate and merciful. His first response to Mary is to dismiss her quietly rather than to submit her to public disgrace and possible stoning. But then he has a dream and a conversation with an angel that leads to a courageous and grace-filled turn of heart. And he does the almost unthinkable: he takes the pregnant Mary as his wife, offering her protection and a place of safety.

But it could have been a very different story with a very different ending.

Ngen is just 23 and already has a nine-year-old son and four-year-old twins, a boy and a girl. Hers is a story that those of us who are old enough will have heard on the news. From northern Iraq, she was one of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people displaced from their communities by the Al-Anfal attacks\* committed against Iraqi Kurds by Saddam Hussein. One tragic story lost in the midst of thousands. But Ngen was also separated from her family when she was just a few years old, taken in by another family until she was 13 and then sold to an Iranian man as his wife. But this man was no Joseph; he imprisoned and abused her, mistreating her after the birth of her first child, and later locking her away to give birth to twins alone.

We can hear the words of the psalm of lament reflected in Ngen's story.

*'How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure....'*

But there is hope in Ngen's story, hope in her own courage and determination for a better life for her children. Hope in escaping and returning to her homeland. Hope, even, in surviving until help was found, living among the graves of a cemetery. Hope in trying to trace her original family. Ngen, who like all Muslims believes that Jesus was a prophet from God, says:

*'I saw a vision of Jesus touching me and the babies, and he told me "God and I will help you find a way out of here."'*

And there is hope too in an organisation with Joseph-like qualities – Christian Aid partner ASUDA, which courageously offers safe shelters for women, legal services, help with tracing lost families, vocational training and other support. And hope, too, that we can respond to just some of the stories of mass tragedy we hear on the news by supporting ASUDA, through giving to Christian Aid and through praying, as it works with the Ngens and the Marys of this world, in the name of Immanuel, God is with us.

Advent God,  
you break into our lives in the surprising and unexpected  
through an unplanned pregnancy  
through a teenage girl  
through a courageous and grace-filled man.

Advent God,  
you break into the lives of the nameless people we see  
on our TVs  
through an escape and the finding of a place of refuge  
through a young woman and her children  
through the courageous work of Christian Aid partner  
ASUDA.

Advent God,  
where there are tears, bring joy  
where there is despair, bring hope  
where there is violence, bring peace  
in the name of Immanuel  
God is with us.

**Footnote**

\*Since Iraq was established in 1920 following the end of the First World War, successive regimes have systematically denied Kurds and other minority groups in Iraq basic cultural and political rights. Oppression faced by the Kurds intensified when Saddam Hussein took control of Iraq in a coup in 1979 and subsequently launched a heavy campaign to subdue the Iraqi Kurds. The Al-Anfal campaign lasted from 1986-1989 and claimed the lives of between 50,000 and 100,000 non-combatants, most of whom were women and children. Around 80 per cent of villages in the region were destroyed, along with hundreds of schools, hospitals, mosques and churches. The atrocities, which included chemical attacks and mass killings, were recognised by the UK in 2012 as genocide.

