# Advent Reflection Part 1

**December 1st – 7th**

### Written by Rev Mark James, inspired by Henri J M Nouwen

**A group of people in different colors

Description automatically generated**

This material can be used alone or as part of a group.

Groups may elect to meet somewhere or online.

You can join the Facebook group which has additional daily reflections and invites thoughts and comments. The group can be found here xxx

It is suggested that when you come together you spend a short time in prayer and then discuss any aspect of the weeks readings that have particularly challenged or encouraged you.

Part 2 (Days 8-14) will be shared on x

Part 3 (Days 15-25) will be shared on x

Any questions can be raised with Mark James 01409 251015 – rector@bradworthybenefice.org

**Day 1: December 1st: Amidst the Darkness of Our World**

We often find ourselves looking for grand and dramatic moments to strengthen our faith and belief in God's saving power. It's tempting to be drawn toward these larger-than-life experiences. But when we fail to notice the subtle signs of God's presence – like the smile of a baby, the carefree play of children, or the kind words and acts of love from friends – we stand on the edge of despair. The child from Bethlehem, the unrecognized man from Nazareth, the rejected preacher, the crucified man – all call for our full attention. God's plan for our salvation unfolds in the quiet beauty of our world, even here in North Devon, amidst the fields, coastline, and communities, as the world around us constantly clamours, shouts, and bombards us with its promises and claims.

**Isaiah 11:1-3**

New International Version

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears.

**Prayer**

Lord, in the noise and chaos of the world, help me to recognize your quiet signs. Let me find hope in a child's laughter, peace in the innocence of children at play, and comfort in the kindness of friends. Amidst life’s grandeur, keep me focused on the humble man from Nazareth and the crucified man on the cross. May these reminders of your saving power remain ever present. As I journey through life, don’t let me miss the whispers of your presence in a world full of shouting. And as I reflect on Isaiah 11:1-3, may it be a beacon of hope in the darkness around me. Amen.

**Action**

Today, look for one small sign that God is present in your daily life. Give thanks for Gods presence. If absent, resolve to find out why.

**Day 2: The Essence of Patience**

The eminent French philosopher, Simone Weil, inscribed in her journal: "Enduring patiently in anticipation is the essence of spiritual existence." In the absence of patience, our hopes devolve into mere daydreams. The term "patience" originates from "patior," translating to "to endure."... What we perceive as a setback morph into a path; what we see as an obstacle transforms into a gateway; what we consider a misfit evolves into a keystone.

Reflecting on Hebrews 6:9-12, the essence of patience becomes even more profound. The passage encourages us to be diligent, to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, not being sluggish but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. It's a call to transform our trials into opportunities and our obstacles into doorways of new possibilities.

Patience then, is not just enduring in the face of adversity, but the ability to see beyond the immediate discomfort and recognize the potential for growth and spiritual enrichment. It is about holding onto hope and faith, even when circumstances seem bleak. It's about trusting in the promises that lie ahead, however distant they may seem.

In our spiritual journey, patience plays a pivotal role. It not only helps us bear our crosses but also opens doors to divine wisdom and understanding. So, as we wait patiently, let's remember that our waiting is not in vain but is a crucial stepping stone in our spiritual growth. Let's remember to see every hindrance as a way, every obstacle as a door and every misfit as a cornerstone. For in patience, we find our path to spiritual maturity and our doorway to God's promises.

**Hebrews 6:9-12**

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we offer our gratitude for the wisdom You've bestowed upon us. We thank You for the virtue of patience, a divine gift that shapes our character and strengthens our faith. In times of adversity, help us to remember the words of Simone Weil and Hebrews 6:9-12, and to see every obstacle as an opportunity for growth. Grant us the courage to face the trials of life, the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference. As we journey through life, keep our hearts rooted in Your love, our minds filled with Your peace, and our spirits fuelled by Your joy.

**Action**

Take a few moments to breathe deeply when you feel rushed or stressed, or patiently waiting for an answer to a prayer. Additionally, spend some time meditating on Hebrews 6:9-12, pondering the virtues of faith and patience. Reflect on how these virtues can transform your own life and the lives of others. Remember, the journey towards growth and maturity requires consistent faith and patience, and God rewards those who are diligent.

**Day 3: Within Solitude, Amidst Activity**

In the stillness of our hearts, we comprehend that devoid of solitude, our existence is under threat. We understand that in the absence of silence, words become hollow, that without lending an ear, our speech ceases to mend, and without the gap, intimacy fails to heal. We realise that bereft of solitude, our deeds swiftly turn into meaningless motions. The intricate harmony between silence and speech, retreat and engagement, detachment and intimacy, solitude and community shapes the foundation of the Christian faith, and thus, should be the focus of our utmost personal consideration. Let's scrutinise more closely, first at our life in action, and then at our life in solitude.

Reflecting on Mark 1:35-39, we see Jesus modelling this balance perfectly. He sought out solitude and silence in the early morning hours to pray and commune with God (Mark 1:35). Yet, when people sought him out, he did not hesitate to engage with them and carry out his ministry (Mark 1:36-39). This passage highlights the deep interplay between solitude and activity in our spiritual journey, showing us that both are crucial for a fruitful Christian life. Just as Jesus did, we too should strive for this balance, carving out time for solitude and reflection, while also actively serving our community.

**Mark 1:35-39**

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

**Prayer**

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of solitude and activity in our lives. We humbly ask for Your guidance to strike a balance between the two, just as Jesus did as depicted in Mark 1:35-39. Grant us the wisdom to discern when to retreat into solitude for reflection and prayer, and when to engage actively in the world around us. As we journey through this Advent season, may we grow closer to You and embody Your love in all our actions. In Your Holy name, we pray, Amen.

**Action**

Begin your day with a quiet time of prayer and reflection, just as Jesus did in Mark 1:35. Make it a priority to find a serene and private place where you can connect with God without distractions. This could be in your home, at a local park, or any place where you feel at peace. Dedicate this time to seeking God's guidance for the day, expressing your gratitude, and presenting your concerns to Him. Over time, this practice will not only deepen your relationship with God but also equip you to face the challenges of the day with grace and confidence.

**Day 4: Unveiling the Power of Prayer**

Make the day's gospel your guide for the next ten minutes. Immerse yourself in its words, revisiting them again and again. Venture into your daily life, carrying the gospel within your heart. Let the gospel's message be as a mural adorning the walls of your soul's sanctuary, the sanctuary that is your heart... Opportunities to live out this Word present themselves every moment, but you must first internalise it. It has to transition from a cerebral concept to a heartfelt truth. This is what prayer is all about - allowing God's Word to resonate deep within you, whispering, "You are my cherished one."

Reflecting on Matthew 6:25, 32-33, we are reminded not to worry about our lives, what we will eat, drink, or wear. It's not these material possessions that define our lives, but rather our heavenly Father who knows all our needs. Instead of worrying, we are encouraged to seek first his kingdom and righteousness. In doing so, all these things will be added unto us. This gospel message resonates within us, guiding us to trust in God's provision and focus on spiritual matters above material ones. It's a call to let go of anxieties and let the Word of God sink deep into our hearts.

**Matthew 6:25, 32-33**

“Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

**Prayer**

"Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of this day. As we delve into your Word, we ask for your wisdom to open our hearts and minds. Guide us to embrace the lessons we encounter, and to apply them in our daily lives. May we find comfort in your love, strength in your promises, and joy in your grace. Lead us on the path of righteousness and help us to always seek first your kingdom. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen."

**Action**

In our everyday hustle and bustle, it's easy to become consumed with worry and anxiety. To counter this, focus on cultivating a sense of gratitude. Begin each day by acknowledging the blessings in your life. This could be as simple as noting the warmth of the sun, the taste of your morning coffee, or the smile of a loved one. Additionally, consider setting aside a specific time each day for prayer and reflection. This time could be used to thank God for His provision, express your concerns, and seek His guidance. This simple but powerful action can significantly enhance your spiritual connection and bring about a profound sense of peace.

**Day 5 : "Maintaining Proximity with the Divine"**

In your pursuit of walking in the footsteps of Jesus, one must be mindful of the content they absorb on a daily basis. Picture yourself commuting to Exeter surrounded by a barrage of advertisements. Why clutter your thoughts with such trivialities? Why surrender your mind to the ceaseless chatter of TV and radio? It's crucial to exercise discretion over what influences your heart and mind. This doesn't imply that you must refrain from visiting Rebel to enjoy a movie or engaging in television, but rather be discerning about what you allow to impact your thoughts and emotions. It's not merely about eliminating the negative, but more so about embracing the positive.

Keeping a prayer close to your heart can be truly beneficial. Life presents us with countless opportunities to engage in prayer. Imagine waiting in line at the supermarket, frustration building as the cashier takes their time. Instead of succumbing to impatience, offer a silent prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, show me your compassion." Carry this prayer with you throughout your journey.

Reflecting on 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18, it's clear that we are called to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for us. By controlling what we intake, maintaining a positive outlook, and keeping a prayerful attitude, we can stay close to God just as the scripture instructs.

**1 Thessalonians 5:12-18**

Now we ask you, brothers, and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

**Prayer**

We approach Your throne of grace with gratitude for Your constant presence in our lives. We recognise our need to stay close to You, to filter what we take in, and to be ever mindful of Your teachings. We pray for Your wisdom and discernment to guide us in our daily interactions. As we strive to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, may our actions reflect our commitment to You. As we conclude our reflection today, we ask for Your grace to remain in us and give us the courage to live out our faith boldly. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**Action**

Make a conscious effort to incorporate prayer into your everyday moments. Whether it's during your morning coffee, on your commute to work, or during your lunch break, find moments to connect with God. Be mindful of the content you absorb—be it music, television, or social media—and ask yourself if it brings you closer to God. If not, consider replacing it with more spiritually nourishing content. And always remember to express gratitude, for it is in giving thanks that we acknowledge God's goodness and provision in all circumstances.

**Day 6 : The Practice of Fellowship**

Jesus wasn't solitary. His closest companions were Peter, John, and James. He also had the Twelve and additional disciples. These individuals created concentric circles of closeness encompassing Jesus. We, too, need such circles of connection, but it is an art that requires discipline. I consciously choose North Devon, and in return, North Devon chooses me. The need for being cherished and cared for is essential in my life.

Where do you find your source of love? Who is reaching out to you? Who is there to support you? Who instils a feeling of vitality in you? Who reminds you, "You are a person of worth, you are God's beloved, don't ever forget that"?

Reflecting on Ephesians 4:1-6, it is clear that unity and peace are paramount in our community as believers. This scripture encourages us to live a life worthy of our calling, with all humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another in love. It is a call to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, recognizing that there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. This mirrors the sense of community and fellowship that Jesus cultivated with his disciples.

# Ephesians 4:1-6

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of community. We are grateful for the connections You have graced us with, and we pray for the strength to be worthy of the call You've given to us. Teach us, Lord, to maintain unity and peace within our communities, just as Ephesians 4:1-6 encourages. Help us to show love and offer care to those around us, reflecting the fellowship that Jesus had with His disciples. We pray for Your guidance as we strive to live a life that honours You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

**Action**

Make a conscious effort to reach out to someone in your community who may need love and care. This could be a neighbour, a friend, or even a stranger. Offer them support, a listening ear, or a helping hand. By doing so, you are living out the discipline of community, reflecting Jesus' love for us, and maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Remember, every act of kindness, no matter how small, reflects God’s love and can make a significant impact in someone's life.

**Day 7: Unmasking the Illusory Self**

In our spiritual journey, two significant foes we encounter are wrath and avarice. They epitomise the internal aspect of a worldly existence, symbolising the bitter fruits of our earthly dependencies. Isn't wrath merely an instinctive reaction to the sensation of being robbed? When our identity is tied to others' opinions of us, a critical comment can ignite a quick flame of anger. Similarly, when our self-worth is measured by our acquisitions, the thwarting of our desires gives birth to greed. Hence, wrath and avarice are the offspring of an artificial self, shaped by the societal pressures of a world yet to find redemption.

The perspective of Anthony (d. 356 A.D., the pioneer of Western monasticism) and his monastic brethren is thus understandably drastic. They viewed the passive acceptance of societal beliefs and values as a spiritual catastrophe. They recognized the immense challenge faced not only by individual Christians but also by the Church in eluding the captivating allure of worldly influences.

As we reflect on Romans 12:1-2, we're reminded not to conform to the patterns of the world, but to be transformed by renewing our minds. We're called to break free from the chains of wrath and avarice, to shed our false selves, and to embrace our true identity in Christ. By doing so, we not only resist worldly pressures but also align ourselves with God's will, proving His perfect and pleasing plans for us.

# Romans 12:1-2

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

**Prayer**

Dear Lord, may our lives be a testament to your divine grace, as we seek to shed the false layers of our selfhood, rooted in anger and greed. Help us to embrace the transformation you call for in Romans 12:1-2. Guide us in our journey of self-discovery and spiritual growth, that we may present ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to you. May our efforts, however imperfect, be acceptable in your sight through the righteousness of Jesus. Amen.

**Action**

Today, let's take time to evaluate our motivations and choices. Are they driven by self-serving desires or by a genuine need to serve others and God? Let's consciously seek ways to break free from worldly dependencies and strive to live in alignment with our spiritual values. Remember, even small steps towards resisting conformity to the world and renewing our minds are valuable in our spiritual journey.