

Step into a deeper Christmas

An Advent Reflection

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Step into a deeper Christmas

The traditional themes of Advent are hope, love, joy and peace. These familiar words capture so much of the spirit of the season. But there are other words too that can be suggested that help us to explore the meaning of Advent, and to prepare us to receive our Lord. This year's reflection booklet from Anglican Overseas Aid suggests four alternative clues to a happy and meaningful Christmas. They are welcome, insight, dedication, and sensitivity.

At the end of a busy and challenging year, especially after the further disruptions caused by COVID-19, it may be tempting to see Advent as the festive prelude to a relaxing and well-deserved summer break. While Advent is certainly a time for warm celebration, it

is primarily one laden with deeper spiritual meanings. We should not short-change Advent by focusing only on the pleasant social interactions that accompany the season, or on the down time that may await on the other side.

I commend AOA's booklet "Step into a deeper Christmas". I do hope that it will unlock some new understandings that will make this year's journey to Christmas rich and satisfying. This resource is available in both English and Chinese language versions.

The Most Reverend Dr Philip Freier is the Archbishop of Melbourne and President of Anglican Overseas Aid.



What is Advent?

Advent is a vital season in the church calendar when Christians focus on the coming birth of Jesus. It is more than simply waiting – marking time – perhaps by crossing the days off an Advent calendar. Properly understood, Advent is about doing the best we can to prepare ourselves in heart and mind to understand the significance of Jesus coming into the world. This involves the hard work of serious reflection.

Hope, love, joy, and peace are the traditional lenses through which we view Advent. This

year we have been thinking about alternative words that may help unlock some important implications of the season. We have landed

on welcome, insight, dedication, and sensitivity.

This grouping may help peel back the some of the more familiar veneer, delving deeper into our relationship with the divine and each other.

Advent is affirmed as a time of great joy and festivity. God coming among us in

the Christ-child is something wonderful to celebrate!

But we hope too that Advent will be a time of spiritual nurture and personal transformation. Please use this booklet to help stimulate your own thinking and

prayer. Whoever you are, and whatever your context, may the coming of the Christ-child light your way and forever warm your heart!

From all of us at AOA, we wish you a safe and blessed Advent and Christmas.

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Welcome

From the Garden of Eden onwards, the Scriptures record that God's people consistently rejected their Creator. Interestingly, this theme carries on through the story of Christmas.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, can find nowhere to lay her head. A lowly stable in Bethlehem becomes the make-do nativity scene for the King of Kings. Later, this little village will descend into sheer terror. Herod, a crazed despot, will kill all children under the age of two in a fruitless attempt to exterminate Jesus.

John tells us that Jesus is the light of the world, but that people preferred darkness and that even his own people did not receive

him. The supreme irony is that Jesus enters the creation that he has made, and yet is firmly rejected by it. That rejection will eventually reach its culmination on the Cross.

Jesus came to us at Christmas, and he comes to us still. God unfailingly offers himself to us in Jesus Christ. As families and friends gather at this time of year, we warmly receive one another. But do we open our lives fully to the One who made us, loves us, and redeems us?

Reflect:

- *How have you experienced the welcome of God this past year?*
- *What are some practical ways you can welcome others in the name of God this Advent?*

Photo by Jametlene Reskp, unsplash.com/@reskp



Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

John 1:12

Insight

While some rejected Jesus, others rejoiced at God's wonderful actions. Special blessings and insights are reserved in the Christmas story for those on the margins of life, and for those who are devout and humble.

Joseph and Mary accept the extraordinary news about the child given to them.

The shepherds, a social underclass, are privileged to hear a choir of angels.

Wise men from the East, from another culture and place, come and find Jesus. Then they prostrate themselves and worship him.

Elizabeth is stirred to praise when the baby jumps within her. In an inspired moment she pronounces blessing on Jesus and the

Photo by Patrick Schneider, unsplash.com/@patrick_schneider

mother of her Lord.

Mary simply cannot contain herself. She spontaneously bursts into song about God's amazing works.

Simeon finally sees God's salvation and departs in peace.

Anna's lifetime of prayer and fasting resolves in prophetic blessing over the infant Messiah.

Reflect:

- *Reflect on a time when you may have received an insight about God.*
- *As we recall the insights given in the Christmas stories, what stands out the most for you, and why?*



And as the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him

Luke 2:40

Dedication

Mary and Joseph presented their child Jesus at the Temple forty days after his birth. This practice was done in accordance with the Law to 'redeem' their firstborn son. They offer the appropriate sacrifices stipulated in the Law, in their case two turtledoves, indicating their low social status. The infant is dedicated to God.

Then a wonderful encounter occurs. Moved by the Spirit, the elderly Simeon takes the child in his arms and utters some amazing words. Presenting the child back to his parents (and to us), a kind of 'reverse' dedication takes place. Simeon recognizes this infant as God's gift to the world. Here in the Temple, Simeon aptly announces Jesus as the Messiah, a new vision of salvation.

Photo by Bruno Oliveira, unsplash.com/@boliveira

This declaration is for the Gentiles and for the glory of Israel. Jesus is truly God's gift to all!

Christmas is a time of rich fellowship. In our homes and churches we gather, trusting ourselves to the love and care of each other. Bonds of love and friendship are renewed.

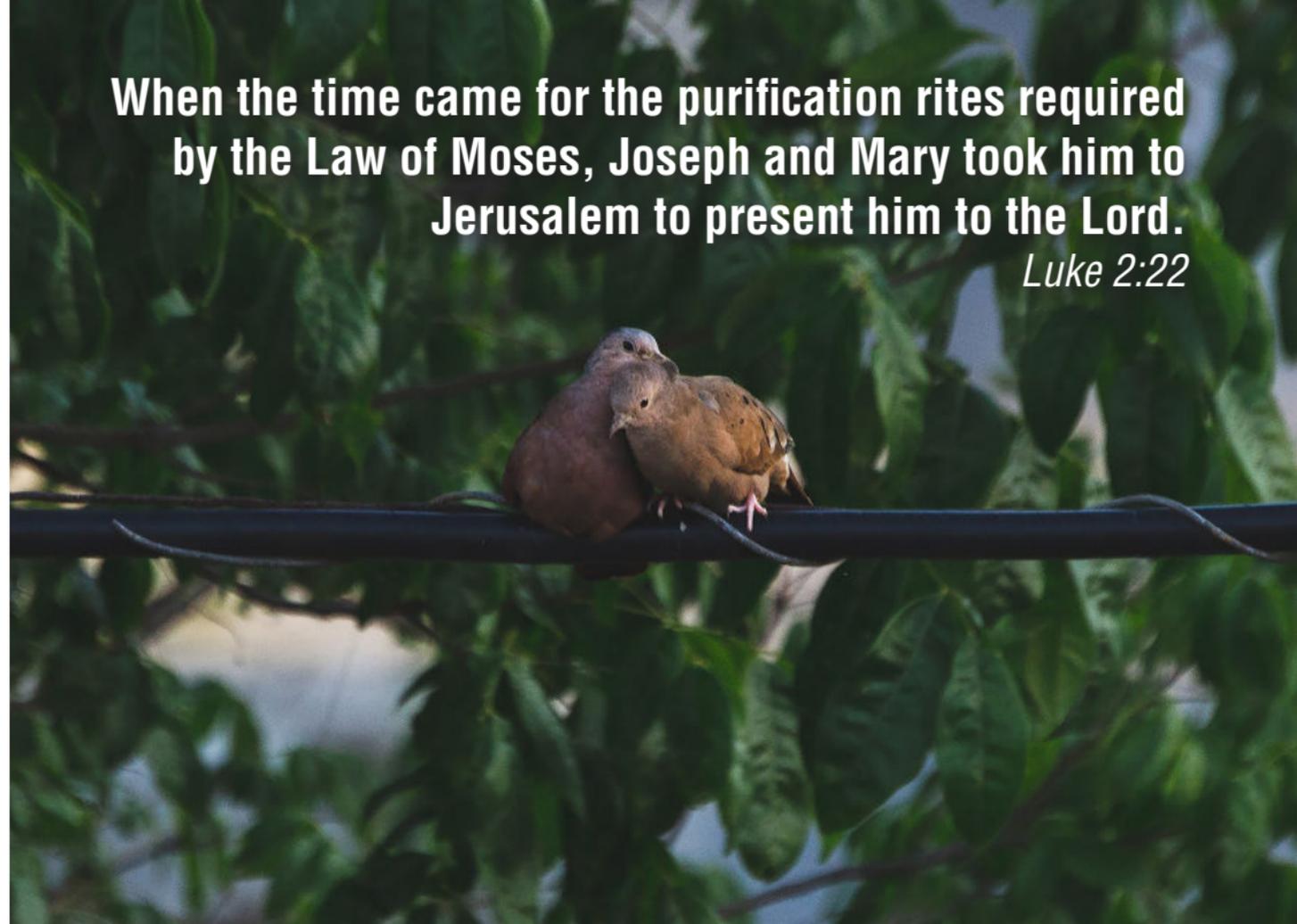
However, an important question lingers. Do we dedicate ourselves to Jesus, just as Jesus has been dedicated to us?

Reflect:

- *What does it mean that God has dedicated himself to you in Jesus?*
- *How can you dedicate yourself to Jesus again this Advent? In what ways do you need to?*

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

Luke 2:22



Sensitivity

The coming of Christ is a fundamentally joyous occasion. God has come to us as a human who will lead and save. But there can be melancholy moments. We each have our own path to tread.

The wise men come in joy and wonder, but apprehending great danger, they go home by a different route. The Holy Family will soon flee to Egypt, experiencing dislocation as refugees.

Poignantly, Mary is told her soul will be pierced. Simeon's grim warning speaks of the price her son will pay for bringing light and truth into the world.

Photo by Phil Hearing, unsplash.com/@philhearing

The angels announce Christmas as a time of peace and goodwill, but for some of us, their song soon gives way to disquiet and anxiety. Our world is a broken place. Family dynamics are complex. Festivities can be overwhelming. We may ache for loved ones no longer with us. All this can make Christmas a very difficult time.

Reflect:

- *How do you see that God has been sensitive to you in your life?*
- *As Jesus comes to us again, how can we be as Christ to one another? Ask God to teach you how to deal tenderly with others this Christmas.*



The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God”

Luke 1:30

Our work in the Holy Land

In AOA's programs, we *welcome* everyone in the communities that we serve. We work with our partners to identify existing community strengths. This *insight* helps us to maximize program impact. AOA prides itself on long-term partner relationships around the world. This *dedication* to our partners has built goodwill and trust over many years. We also try and operate with *sensitivity*, recognizing the huge trauma and challenges that program communities experience.

In Gaza, we support the work of breast cancer awareness, screening and treatment at the Ahli Arab Hospital. We also support the work of the Spafford Children's Center in East Jerusalem, where children traumatised by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict receive different types of therapy to help them cope.

This year we once again invite you, your home group or church to prayerfully consider donating to our work in both Gaza and the Spafford Children's Center so we can support communities in the Holy Land.

Pray:

Lord, We thank you for the welcome you give to each of us individually and as a people, wherever we are and whoever we are. We dedicate ourselves to you again as we seek to serve those who are less privileged than us.

Lord, Christmas can be a difficult time for many of us. We therefore pray for sensitivity towards others, particularly the more vulnerable.

As we live out the compassion of Christ in the world, we ask you to fill us with your Spirit as we share your love with others.

Amen.

Photo: A view of Jerusalem, Israel.



Advent is a time of intentional reflection on the coming of Christ into the world. It is a time when many people think about the traditional themes of hope, love, joy and peace. While respecting these time-honoured motifs, this booklet offers some new words to help frame our Advent reflection: welcome, insight, dedication and sensitivity. We hope these words will unlock new and transformative understandings that will feed your spirit.

At AOA, our important work aims to achieve greater health, prosperity, opportunity and dignity for all people. As we reflect on our relationships with God and each other during Advent, we pray that the coming of the Christ-child will fill us all with a renewed understanding of God's goodness and love. May you be warmly and richly inspired as the living Christ comes to you. AOA takes this opportunity to thank all our wonderful supporters for helping our ministry to flourish this year.