

Light Breaks In Advent 2020



Mughal artists from Gujarat *Jali Lattice Window*, c.1572,
Humayun's Tomb, Delhi, Pocholo Calapre / Alamy Stock Photo

Almighty God, Give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and to put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that on the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Collect for Advent 1

When we come to consider questions around death, our Christian conversation does not revolve around a what, or a how, but a who: Jesus Christ, whose life, death and resurrection is key to all the thinking about life and death that we've done as a community in the last 2000 years.

**On that day you will know that I am in the Father,
and you in me and I in you.**

John 14:20

“The New Testament originates from bereaved and traumatised communities, but they act completely at odds with this trauma because of their hope in the bodily resurrection of Xt.”

Joanna Collicutt

Christianity is clear that our hope is grounded in Christ's resurrection, where - for the very first time - God brings something new and transformative out of death.

Though the idea of resurrection was common in 1st Century Jewish thought, the understanding that the early Church had of Jesus' resurrection was quite unique. Jesus wasn't just the first raised, but rather he is the basis of our belief in resurrection. It is through his life death and resurrection that we are restored into fellowship with God. The authors of Scripture found themselves here on the edge of language as they tried to describe this. St Paul, in Romans 6:3-6:10 lays out how he understands that it is our baptism as the time and place when we are incorporated both into Christ's death and into his resurrection. We die to sin with Christ and because of this, says Paul, we too will walk in newness of life being united with him in a resurrection like his. This understanding of a 'resurrection like his' we will come back to a little later in the resource.

The writers of these early Christian Scriptures used many different images to explore the idea that in Christ's death and resurrection something transformationally significant had occurred. They use the language of victory - Christ triumphing over death and the language of solidarity - Christ doing something on our behalf, something that we could not do ourselves. The latter image is called atonement - God bringing us into a new relationship with God.

This image of solidarity echoes the way that God has always sustained and longed for relationship with human beings. And it became a very profound and rich image that many artists, writers and musicians have been able to do business with over the last two millennia. This has become such a powerful image because it means that with his death and burial there is no part of human experience, and no place in this life or the next that God has not been.



Some versions of the Creed say that Jesus descends to the dead after his crucifixion. In the wall painting from the St George in Kourbinovo, we can see an expression of the medieval tradition of the harrowing of hell which grew out of this; on Holy

Saturday God in Jesus Christ is powerfully, physically present with those lost to death, bringing them salvation. (As this wall painting shows, Jesus is often pictured forcefully yanking them into redemption!) This reinforces our understanding that there is nowhere that God has not been, which means that if we find ourselves in desolation, in pain, in fear, in dying, in death, and in grief, God will be there also to meet us.

We look for the resurrection of the body, and the life of the world to come.
Nicene Creed

It is Jesus' Resurrection that transforms his death on the cross from horrific tragedy to door through which the Kingdom pours into creation, crashing and tumbling through like the rivers of Amos bringing justice and righteousness. Showing us that God's power is not founded on fear, or sustained by violence, but found in total self giving love.

In Romans 8 and in Corinthians 15 Paul is clear that the shape of Jesus' resurrection will be ours. As his was bodily so will ours. If you find the idea of bodily resurrection tricky then you're not alone: Paul was practically laughed out of Athens when he preached it. In one of his letters to his fledgling church in Corinth Paul is at pains (and at the very edge of comprehensibility) to try to show that the resurrection that he was talking about wasn't a revivification like Lazarus, but rather a transformation of our whole selves - including our bodies. Our bodies, just like Jesus' was, will be recognisably ours, even if transformed. Paul uses imagery of seeds, and different ways of being in the world to try to explain bodies before and after resurrection.

Whether you find these more or less helpful images, the New Testament and the early Church takes the redemption of our whole beings very seriously. Rowan Williams puts it like this: "God does not redeem us by making us stop being what we are...If God holds onto us through death, he holds on to every aspect of us - not just to a specially protected 'immortal bit of us.'"

The wall painting can be seen as expressing how there is nowhere beyond God's saving love. Is this an image, or an idea that resonates with you?

Is the idea of a bodily resurrection one that you've spent much time with? Does it have any impact on the way that you think about your body today?



The Christian faith understands that this resurrection will take place when Christ comes again, when all of creation will be transformed. This is called the eschaton - the end of all things. It is the flip side of creation. Similar to creation being about how we understand ourselves in terms of our beginnings, so the eschaton is about how we understand ourselves in terms of our endings. Or, more accurately, how our point of ending - God - understands us. And that is with the same love that led him to create us, to sustain us, to seek us out and to redeem us.

The Bible offers us a deep vision of what the transformed creation might look like in John's vision of a heavenly Jerusalem, where it is revealed to be a harmonious city, a garden, and a place of rest. It is in this hope of a transformed creation that we look to when we wait at Advent for the coming of Christ.

Both Scripture and the Christian tradition has always had a deep sense that Christ brings in the Kingdom of God and its reign of grace, mercy and justice onto this world. By rising with Christ in our baptism, we are now Kingdom people, living in the now and the not yet of the transformation of creation that will be only be completed with the coming again of Jesus. This means that we have a particular call to be people who lives reflect brightly God's grace, mercy and justice.

This year, many people have felt loss and hopelessness at times. Have there been any moments where you have felt the spark of hope in your wider community or church that the author of Hebrews talks about? What would it look like for you to live out this kind of now-but-not-yet life?

“In the mystery of death we encounter the greater mystery of God.”

Paul Sheppy

“Death is a passage towards Christ. I hope that the Son of God will come to take me by the hand.... At the hour of death the monk would like to be a kitten carried in the mouth of Christ.”

Dom David

Along with the early church in Thessalonica we may be asking what happens between death and the resurrection at the return of Christ? There is no clear answer to be had, and it is worth reflecting that even St Augustine, one of the most insightful and prolific writers of the Church, found himself unable to offer much absolute surety beyond loving communion with God.

We are given in Scripture, however, a wealth of metaphorical images. Like all metaphors, some may strike a chord and others may leave you cold, which is to be expected. But if we spend some time with the ones that resonate with us in some way, we may find our horizons being opened up. Metaphors are famously good at offering us ways to stretch and challenge our horizons.

You may want to spend some time with some of these metaphors. If you are particularly struck by any, you could note down what it is that has resonated with you. You might also wish to bring it to God in prayer.

God as a loving parent - Luke 15:11-32,

Going home - Hebrews 11:13-16

Where there is a place for us - John 14:1-4

A garden bursting with new life - Song of Songs 2:10-13.

With God, known and loved - Psalm 139

Finally understanding - 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

Take some time with the image opposite. Then read the reflection by the artist Lisle Gwynne Garrity below.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light (John 1:5). God is light that pierces through the darkness. Nothing can stop it or dampen its might.

In this painting, I meditated on the persistence of light. Light can travel endlessly through a vacuum; light waves won't diminish no matter how far they have to travel. Therefore, starlight travels through space for billions of light years to reach us on earth. Can you imagine that?

Perhaps that's God's nature and constant posture—endlessly traveling through time and space just to reach us.

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**Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.**

**Jesus by your dying we are born to new life;
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.**

**In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us
Amen.**

A Song of Anselm

[Light Pierces Through, Lisle Gwynn Garrity]
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