

Advent Thought for the Day 2021

Advent 1-7 by Rev Alan. Stewart

ADVENT Day 1

Sunday 28 November

Advent Sunday

During Advent we will be reflecting on the lives of the Saints. But who are the Saints?

Here's a story that might give us some clues.

One day a little girl went with her school to visit a church. The little girl particularly loved the beautiful stained-glass windows with the sunlight shining through them. She asked her teacher who the people were that she saw pictured in these windows. The teacher told her that these are the Saints.

Later, when the little girl got home, she told her family about all she'd seen. 'Today,' she said, 'I learned who the Saints are. **They're the people who let the light shine through them.**'

Saints are those who let God's light shine through them; through their words and their actions; their kindness and compassion.

Maybe, we can all be Saints.

In what small way today might you allow God's light to shine through you?



Light of Christ, shine through us.

ADVENT Day 2

Monday 29 November

'Say a prayer for me'

I remember once stumbling across a little shop in the back streets of Belfast which sold lots of different religious bits and bobs, and feeling confused by the various prayers offered to various saints. It wasn't until much later that I realised that these weren't prayers *to* the saints but prayer offered *through* the saints. Just as we might ask a friend to say a prayer for us, so some people might ask a particular saint to say a prayer for them.

Saints are people 'who let the light shine through them'. Maybe that's also a way of thinking about prayer. To pray is to channel the healing light of God. Often when I pray for someone, I imagine holding them within a shaft of healing light. Most of us, I imagine, have had times in our lives when we couldn't pray. Those are the moments when we rely on the prayers of others.

Don't be afraid to ask another person (or indeed one of the saints) to say a prayer for you. Likewise, when someone unexpectedly pops into your mind, see that as a prompt that that person might just in that moment be in need of that healing light channeled through you.



Light of Christ, shine upon those we pray for and those who pray for us.

ADVENT Day 3

Tuesday 30 November

St Patrick/Padraig (born c. 385 AD)

We begin our whistle-stop tour with some of the Celtic saints (those associated with Ireland, Scotland and Northumbria), and where better to begin than with patron saint of the Emerald Isle himself, St Patrick.

Often details of the lives of the saints are a blend of legend and fact. We do know that Patrick was born in Cumbria and at the age of sixteen was captured and taken to Ireland as a slave. After six years of hard labour, he escaped and returned home. A few years after, Patrick recounts a vision he had of an Irishman who delivered a letter inviting this 'holy servant boy to come and walk among us'. Patrick would later be ordained and returned as the first bishop of Armagh in what's now Northern Ireland. As an outsider he was at first persecuted, but with time his obedience and faithfulness went on to transform the life and future not only of the island of Ireland, but elsewhere in the British Isles.

Famously, Patrick is reported to have banished snakes from Ireland, although it's thought that this was actually a reference to the banishment of the Druids whose coins carried an image of a snake.

The invitation of Advent is to look deeper. The example of Patrick confronts us with the challenge of forgiving those who have wronged us, and to ask ourselves what we need to embrace within our lives and what we need to banish.

*'I bind to myself today God's
Power to guide me, God's Might
to uphold me, God's Wisdom to
teach me, God's Eye to watch
over me, God's Ear to hear me,
God's Word to give me speech,
God's Hand to guide me, God's
Way to lie before me, God's
Shield to shelter me, God's Host
to secure me.'*

From St Patrick's Breastplate



ADVENT Day 4

Wednesday 1 December

Columba (born c. 522 AD)

Columba (or Colmcille) was an Irish prince who chose to forgo royal privilege in order to take up monastic orders. Having founded monasteries in Derry and Kells, he made the brave decision to leave Ireland and travel to the west coast of Scotland, where with twelve other monks he helped establish an abbey on the island of Iona.

Incredibly, these monks made this long and dangerous journey in small wicker rowing boats called currachs. Their courage and faithfulness would later be rewarded when this tiny island became one of the most important and influential religious and cultural centres in ancient Britain. From here the gospel would spread throughout Scotland and beyond.



The journey to Iona today is somewhat less dangerous, but is still something of a pilgrimage. It involves hours of driving and two ferry crossings, but it's worth it. This is truly what the Celts called a 'thin' place; a holy island where heaven touches earth.

Thin places need not be geographical. Often they occur within silence or music, within laughter or tears; in a cathedral made with or without hands.

Where are your thin places? This Advent may we each search out those thin places in our days; moments where light pierces through clouds and we commune with a mystery greater than ourselves.

'Dear God, be good to me. The sea is so wide and my boat is so small.'

ADVENT Day 5

Thursday 2 December

Aidan (born c. 590 AD)

Originally a monk on the Island of Iona, Aidan helped to found another influential monastic community on the Northumbrian island of Lindisfarne. From this base, Aidan travelled far and wide sharing the love of Christ with kings and paupers. Over time he developed a reputation for his kindness to those less fortunate, often providing room, board and education to orphans, and using donations to pay for the freedom of slaves. Many of these freed slaves went on to follow Aidan's example and enter the monastic life.

Advent is a perfect time to reflect on the power we each possess. How can we show hospitality to those outside our usual social group? In what small ways can our actions and words bring freedom or affirmation to others? What small act of anonymous kindness today might bring a smile to the face of a friend or stranger?



A prayer of Aidan.

'Lord, this bare island. Make it a place of peace. Here be the peace of those who do Thy will. Here be the peace of brother serving man. Here be the peace of holy monks obeying. Here be the peace of praise by dark and day.'

ADVENT Day 6

Friday 3 December

Cuthbert (born 634 AD)

Born into a noble family in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, Cuthbert became Aidan's successor on Lindisfarne. Having served as abbot for many years he withdrew to become a hermit, first on a rock now known as Cuthbert's Island, and later to Inner Farne Island just off the coast of the great Northumbrian fortress of Bamburgh. Here he lived a life of solitude and contemplation.

Lindisfarne is a tidal island, accessible by land at certain times and cut off by the tides at others. If you don't keep a close eye on the crossing times, it's easy for visitors to get stranded on the island or in the little huts on stilts which line the causeway. The island reminds us that there are times in our lives when, like Cuthbert, we need to retreat and draw aside from the busyness and business of life.



What times of solitude will we carve into these days of Advent in which we can listen to our souls and to the still small voice of our God...

'Lord, you are my island, in your bosom I nest. You are the calm of the sea, in that peace I rest. You are the waves on the shore's glistening stones, their sound is my hymn. You are the song of the birds, their tune I sing. You are the sea breaking on rock, I praise you with the swell. You

are the ocean that laps my being, in you I dwell.'



ADVENT Day 7
Saturday 4 December
Brigid of Kildare (born
421 AD)

Many legends and few facts survive about this Irish woman who founded a community at Kildare primarily for women. As a young woman, Brigid was in the

habit of giving freely of her father's possessions and food to the poor and needy. Her father became so frustrated he decided to sell her to the king and bundled her into his chariot. He left her at the castle gate while he consulted with the king, where Brigid was approached by a beggar asking for alms. She gave him her father's sword. Brigid's father and the king were amazed, and the king said he could not buy her from her father: 'She is too good for me – I could never win her obedience.'

Brigid became famed for her generosity and hospitality, and for this reason she is the inspiration of the liturgy used for house blessing by the new monastic group called the Northumbria Community.

We spoke on Wednesday of thin places. Perhaps we could use this ancient prayer as a blessing over our own homes each day of Advent, offering it as a thin place where the presence of God is felt through our kindness and hospitality:

'We call upon the Sacred Three to save, shield and surround this house, this home, this day, this night, and every night.'