# **First Sunday of Advent: Ancient truths, modern times**

*God rest you merry, gentlemen,*

*Let nothing you dismay,*

*For Jesus Christ, our Saviour*

*Was born upon this day*

*To save us all from Satan’s power*

*When we were gone astray.*

*O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy,*

*O tidings of comfort and joy!*

**(‘God rest you merry, gentlemen’ from *Christmas Collection*, no. 33)**

‘God rest you merry, gentlemen’ is one of the oldest Christmas carols in existence, dating back to the 16th century. The somewhat patriarchal language of the first line would be expressed differently in modern times. Perhaps today the lyrics would be something like ‘Don’t be in despair, good people, God grant you peace and happiness’.

The lyrics of each verse of the carol centre around different aspects of the Christmas story. At times the carol focuses on Jesus’ love and calling, then on the shepherds who, in hearing the angels, went to find Mary, Joseph and the baby. Each verse ends with the great news (tidings) of ‘comfort and joy’ which everyone can experience in Jesus’ coming.

## Scripture

* Isaiah 40:1-2 ‘Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.’
* Luke 2:10 ‘But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people”.’

## Introduction

* God’s desire to comfort his people is frequently expressed throughout Scripture. We can therefore safely assume that it remains an essential part of his nature and purpose today. God continues to offer comfort to us whatever we are going through.
* The language used in Isaiah 40 is that of a Father who loves and consoles his children with tender words that reassure them and bless them.
* In the carol ‘God rest ye merry, gentlemen’ the lyrics remind us that God remains ever present in our lives. To a world ‘astray’, the good news is that God will save us all from ‘Satan’s power’. Despite it being one of the oldest carols, the message remains true for us and modern-day society. You will find comfort as you remember that God is for us, God is with us and God is in us.

## Context

* One of the important roles of the Holy Spirit is that of

‘Comforter’. In John 14:26 (*KJV*) Jesus says: ‘But the Comforter,

which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.’ Similarly, in John 14:16he tells us: ‘And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever.’

* Events in our world seem to contradict God’s loving comfort. Division is wrecking unity, war destroying peace, poverty and economic hardship causing suffering and despair, climate change blighting the planet’s living systems – the list seems endless.
* When we read the news, we can often feel powerless. It feels like we are so small; what can I as an individual do to effect change in the face of such massive global issues? Where is the comfort in that sense of powerlessness? Where is joy in the moments of suffering, when I feel that I cannot make a difference? This is precisely when God steps in and reminds us that with his strength we can speak words that bring comfort, joy and healing.

## Reflection – looking inwards

* Is there a verse of Scripture that has brought you comfort over the years? It might be a Bible verse that you turn to frequently, or one that someone gave to you.
* Would it be helpful to take a ‘comfort’ verse and use it through Advent, inviting the Holy Spirit to speak into your soul? What about using the opening verses of Isaiah 40, reading it throughout Advent and listening to God to speak to you each day?
* Consider how God has offered you comfort in various aspects of your life. What does this look like and how have you been made aware of it?

## Reflection – looking outwards

* Reflect on how your life and presence might be a source of comfort in your family and community. Who, right now, might benefit from your prayers, words or actions?
* *My* comfort and joy is dependent on *our* comfort and joy. Is our church a place filled with comfort and joy – evidenced by people feeling accepted, loved and valued? Would ‘loving relationships’ be a phrase that would characterise our fellowship?

## Prayer

Our Father, help us to love those in our community whom you love infinitely more than we can love. During these weeks of Advent, as we remember Christ our Saviour, may the people who make up our local community know your comfort and joy in all the varying circumstances and challenges of their lives. In Jesus’ name. Amen.