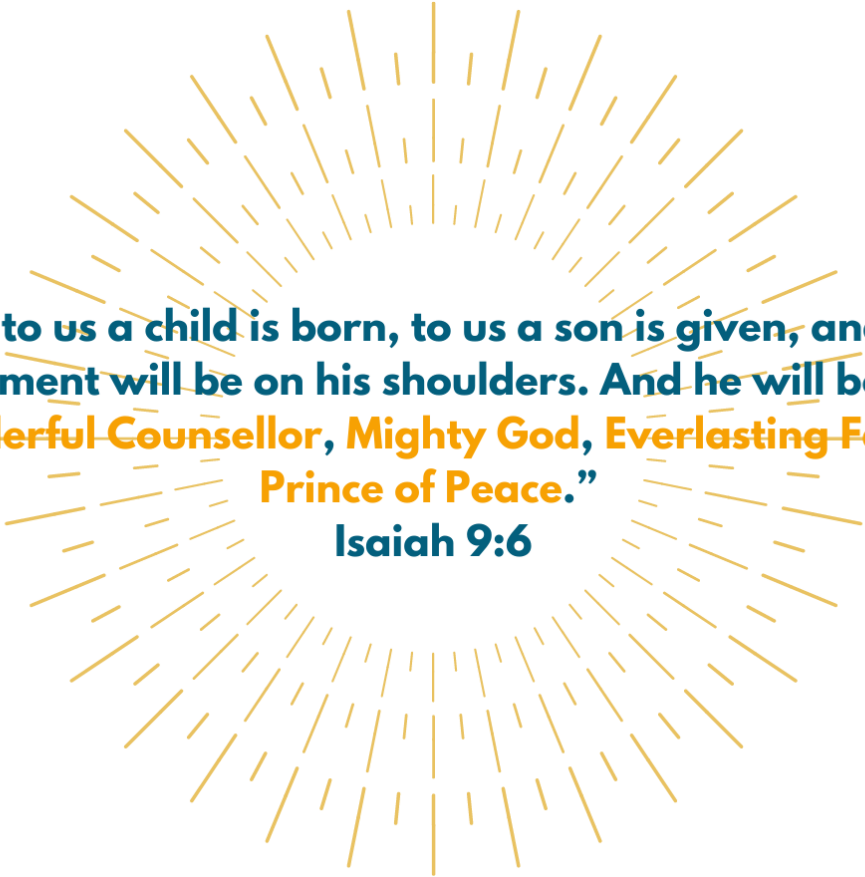




“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
Isaiah 9:6

This resource offers a reflection for each Sunday in Advent, exploring stories of how God’s people have been working for justice and peace throughout 2020 and how we see the God of Justice working for hope in our current world.

*How do we see the **God of Justice** as our Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace?*

*How do we see the **God of Justice** in the stories and situations of our Church in 2020?*

*What message of **Hope** can we hear after the year we’ve had?*

These resources could be used as individual reflections, or as inspiration for a service or sermon. All reflections and prayers can be reproduced with credit to the Joint Public Issues Team.

Resources will include:

- Story from the Methodist Church in Britain’s [God With Us](#) campaign
- Reflection
- Discussion questions
- Prayer



"We are so confused, so full of uncertainty. Day-to-day life in Cameroon is a nightmare."

How are we called to be enactors of peace?

I felt like it was a dream, I told myself 'you are not seeing this, this is not happening.'

When I was coming back there was a confrontation between the armed people and the military and I saw eight people lying dead by the side of the road, and I had to stay there for about an hour to wait for a ceasefire before I could go.

As the days went by I started seeing more of those things. And it is very common to see corpses on the streets. You are somewhere, and before you know it, somebody is shot. So these days it is commonplace to see killings, even in the streets. You don't even feel it anymore, you just tell yourself, 'okay, let me run from here before it becomes my turn. Let me run from here before what is happening to others comes to me.' It's becoming the normal lifestyle for us to see things like that.

We are so confused, so full of uncertainty. Day-to-day life in Cameroon is a nightmare.

- A member on the staff of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon

As Christmas approaches, the nativity story promises a familiar message of peace. Nativity scenes depict a company of angels appearing to shepherds praising God and proclaiming 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests'. It's hard to move through the Christmas season without encountering a card or Facebook post with 'Peace on earth and goodwill to all men' splashed across it.

This message isn't without good reason. In Isaiah 9:6, God's people are promised a '**Prince of Peace**': not merely a peace-bringer but the royalty of peace. In the Christmas story we witness the incarnation of such a promise: the prince of peace not found in an army general, national leader or world diplomat, but in a baby, born to bring unity to a world at war.

It's easy to forget that Jesus was born to such a world, amidst turmoil and persecution. Our nativity iconography often fails to depict Jesus' family fleeing hostile forces and living under a colonial power. And yet, in Jesus we find a beacon of hope for a lasting and just peace – through his birth, his teaching, his death and resurrection.

Throughout the teaching of the Bible, Jesus places a huge emphasis on peace. He warns against anger (Matthew 5), puts peace at the centre of the beatitudes (Matthew 5), and shows that human need overtakes conflict, such as in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). He even brings peace to the waves and the wind (Matthew 8).

Christ's death and resurrection serves as a fix to every broken relationship and every source of conflict, should we choose to engage with it, and his whole life lead up to this. Killed by a colonial power and yet forever resisting violence, when Jesus bids farewell to the disciples, the message he chooses to leave with them is one of peace:

'Peace I leave with you; my **peace** I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'

 (John 14:27)

This message of peace can be a difficult one to carry in a time when war and violence are so normalised. Two thousand years down the line, we might still find it hard to locate this peace in the world today. We live amidst conflict – some seeming endless, some normalised for communities who have known nothing else.

In Cameroon, conflict has become a more present reality in 2020. Stories such as this from the Presbyterian Church are disturbingly commonplace. So, for people like the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, what hope might we find in the Prince of Peace?

If Jesus is the Prince of peace, then are we, as followers of Christ, subjects of peace? If we are, it's important not to interpret that as something passive. In this difficult and violent world, we aren't just called to bask in the light of the peace which Christ brings, but to actively work to show it to more people around the world – just like Jesus did so many years ago.

The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon certainly treats the peace-making theme of the Bible as a mandate for actively seeking change. Cameroon is a country that's grappled with colonialism and war, violence and oppression. The message of peace which the Church aims to bring to the Anglophone region is not an easy or popular one. But the Church is working tirelessly to pursue peace in their area, however difficult a mission that might be.

They have coordinated ecumenical work on dialogue, calling for a ceasefire, [including a call from the women of Cameroon for peace in the region.](#)

On International Day of Peace, the sermon given in the service they held was based around Psalm 34:14:

"Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."

This is more than a wish for peace: it is a call to action. And it's what Jesus did, bringing a challenging message to a place which had grown accustomed to the day-to-day violence of colonialism and oppression.

A God of Peace is a God of Justice. Justice can never be obtained without the space for dialogue created by peace, and peace will not be true and lasting without a just foundation.

As God's people, we are called to follow that commandment from Psalm 34: seek peace and pursue it. In Cameroon, the Church is active calling for a ceasefire and a dialogue. Even from overseas, we can fully support that call, through prayer and through advocacy. But peace comes in many forms. We can start in our local communities, our families, and our lives. Where would you like to see peace this Christmas? How can you recognise the Prince of Peace in the God that you worship?

Questions

- How could you create peace in your community this Christmas?
- How can we build space for prayers for peace into our routines?
- How can the church support those living in conflict worldwide?

Prayer

God of Justice and Prince of Peace

You ask us to seek after peace and pursue it.

We thank you that you are the source of all peace,

And that you bring peace where there is conflict, safety where there is danger.

Help us to create space for peace in our own lives,

And comfort those who have lost loved ones to violence.

We pray for the churches in Cameroon,

That you might bring your peace and justice to that place.

Remind us that we must be active in our search for peace.

Amen

Lucy Tiller is this years' JPIT Intern. She has a particular interest in peace-making and nuclear disarmament.





"Our God is a God of community who is with us in the midst of our struggles."

Covid-19 has pushed millions of families into debt. How might the transformative promise of God become 'light in the darkness' for them?

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it" (Genesis 28:16)

For the past eight years I have worked from a small room in a local community centre. The two Methodist churches that previously served the area have been closed and subsequently demolished. The past eight years have been a lot about listening, learning about issues and concerns and working alongside community members to challenge the injustices they encounter on a daily basis.

Just over two years ago, in partnership with local Anglican churches, I established a debt advice project which has enabled people to get out of the spiral and entrapment of overwhelming debt.

Work in the debt advice project has been particularly challenging during lockdown. The centre we run the service from was closed for much of the time; there was no face-to-face contact with clients from the end of March until the end of September. This is an important factor for us because we are not just an agency dealing with debt; we're interested in people's stories: we listen, we build relationships. I have come to a new appreciation of the importance and value of these relationships during the months of lockdown. It's been wonderful to start meeting with people again, and I believe the feeling has been mutual.

I've borrowed Jacob's words from the Bible for the title of this piece because they feel close to my own experience of working in community. Yes, we know, we pray, we sing (when not restricted by coronavirus) of God's presence everywhere. Yet it's difficult for me to explain the sense of God's presence that fills the space when I'm sitting alongside another person and sharing in their struggles, anguish and despair. When love and justice come together, the presence of God is powerful and tangible. At the heart of justice there needs to be an understanding and acceptance of our shared humanity and shared vulnerability. This can be painful but it opens the door to the power of God's love.

I often offer a prayer at the end of a debt advice session. Most people are open to this – and God comes, tangibly, quietly into that moment which is the intersection of our lives. Our God is a God of community who is with us in the midst of our struggles.

During the lockdown of 2020, over 6 million people fell behind on one or more household bill. In July, almost 1 in 5 household had to borrow money to make end meet. Because of extraordinary circumstances and a safety net that didn't meet everyone's needs, millions of families have been weighed down by unsustainable and unpayable household debt.

This is an amplification of a crisis that has been deepening for some time. At the Newcastle Money Advice Centre, volunteers and staff see daily that debt is a millstone that weighs people down and holds them back. It can grow heavier for so many reasons. But by people like Chris, families and individuals can be met in their distress and recognised for their 'shared humanity and vulnerability'. What so many of these families share is the need for change that will break the spiral and entrapment of overwhelming debt.

In Isaiah 9:6, when the prophet Isaiah promises a '**wonderful counsellor**' for God's people, he is promising more than someone to meet us in our distress. The wonder of this counsellor is that he not only hears our need, but offers transformation. Earlier in Isaiah 9, Isaiah says:

"The people walking in darkness
have seen a **great light**;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a **light** has dawned....
you have **shattered**
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor."

Through this promised counsellor, God is not only offering company in the darkness, but the transformative power of light. God is not only offering to share the weight of burden, but to shatter it completely. This is a different vision. A vision which says a just response to our distress not only meets us in it, but transforms it.

And, in Jesus, this word becomes flesh. Arriving bearing the vulnerability of a child, he embodies a God of transformation who professes compassion, 'lifts up the humble' and 'fills the hungry with good things' (Luke 1). Who recognises our shared humanity and offers liberation from the challenges that can entrap us. He bears a light that exposes the injustice of the darkness, and reshapes reality that all might be brought life.

Covid-19 has pushed millions of families into debt. As we all face a challenging winter ahead, these families will undoubtedly do so weighed down by this heavy burden. How might the transformative promise of God become 'light in the darkness' for them?

The work of Chris and the Newcastle Money Advice Centre play a crucial part in embodying God's promise of 'light in the darkness' for these families.

They stand with people experiencing debt, hearing their story and recognising their distress. But this year, they have also become part of a bigger call for transformation.

In October 2020, the four denominations that make up the Joint Public Issues Team, together with Church Action on Poverty, launched the [Reset The Debt](#) campaign. We know that for those weighed down by lockdown debt, transformation is needed. The existing support on offer just isn't enough: for so many families it won't even shoulder the weight of the burden.

That's why we're proposing a Jubilee Fund, to buy up and pay off lockdown household debt for some of the poorest families in the UK. We believe in a God who shatters the burden, and who transforms light into darkness. It is this kind of transformative action that is needed now, to respond to the urgent need for change experienced by millions of families within our communities.

As you reflect on the year we are leaving behind and the time we are facing, how might you be challenged to become 'light in the darkness'? How might the Church enact the message of our 'wonderful counsellor', and be part of the transformative change that can shatter the burden of debt?

Questions

- When has God been 'light in the darkness' for you?
- How might you/your church community be able to act locally to support those weighed down by debt this winter?
- Could you add your voice to the Churches' call for a Jubilee?

Prayer

Wonderful Counsellor

In you the weight of our burden is shattered,

And we are set free to live life to the full.

You see our distress,

Meet us there,

And transform us.

Empower us, your Church, to embody your transforming love,

To bring light into the darkness for those weighed down by debt this Christmas.

For on them, your light has dawned.

Amen.

Hannah Brown is JPIT's Campaigns and Church Engagement Officer.
She has been part of building the Reset The Debt Campaign.





"In our Everlasting Father, we find a home that will not pass away, beyond the brokenness of this world."

How might you be able to act locally to support those experiencing homelessness this Christmas?

"I ain't going back to the streets"

I have been working in homeless services for over 15 years, and since March I have seen a real difference in services. From day one of lockdown we saw agencies across the sector really coming together. I was asked to help manage a hotel for people who have been rough-sleeping within the 'Everyone In' government programme. This was initially for 45 people with complex needs. We worked with the hotel, mental health services, substance misuse team, doctors, police, faith groups and charities.

This was an amazing time of relationship building and of seeing people's lives becoming more settled through being given a safe place to stay and being supported by people who care. I was very aware of God keeping me strong and peaceful during this busy time as I worked with our guests.

I can remember one of the guests said to me: "Lockdown saved me from life on the streets. It's just having that connection with people in the hotel. I ain't going back to the streets. I'm looking forward to the future in a place of my own".

- Eleanor manages a provision for people experiencing homelessness in Manchester, which is supported by the city's Methodist Central Hall.

For many, 2020 saw us spend more time at home than any year before. As jobs, social lives, and studies ground to a halt in the wake of coronavirus, the places we call home and the people we share them with have never been more important, or more immediate to us.

For people experiencing homelessness, this year too has been a diversion from the norm. In spring, the Government began providing temporary housing for around 5,400 people experiencing street homelessness, as well as families within the immigration system, as an emergency response to the pandemic. And yet whilst in the immediate term fewer people were forced to sleep on the streets over summer, the other shoe is yet to drop.

Homelessness is no less an issue now than it was before the crisis, and in all reality, it looks likely to worsen as the economic consequences of the pandemic begin to emerge.

As life begins to fit itself around this virus, responses to homelessness must adapt to the new normal. Practically, the playbook of church homelessness outreach no longer fits, as night shelters and the like are just not feasible this winter. Instead we, as the Church, face a new challenge. How can we provide hope and support for those without home this coronavirus Christmas?

In Isaiah 9:6, God's people are promised a leader who will be called '**Everlasting Father**'. In some ways, this name can be confusing. Most of us know Jesus as the Son to God's father. Yet in Him, a baby born into a stable and a man killed on a cross, we see lived out God's heart as father for His children. As Jesus himself says, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). His life provides us with a tangible vision of what having an Everlasting Father means.

Later on in the same book, Isaiah again writes about the coming King, Jesus. He says;

'The Sovereign LORD is coming to rule with power,

bringing with him the people he has rescued.

He will **take care** of his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs together

and **carry them** in his arms;

he will gently lead their mothers.'

Here we see a model of a father that rescues, not only spiritually, but practically. A father who gathers up His children, leads them forward, and literally carries them himself, when they cannot continue on their own. In Jesus, we meet this father in the flesh. He is a father that loves justice, urges us to stand for the oppressed (Isaiah 61:8), welcome the stranger and feed the hungry (Matt 25:45).

As we learn what kind of father God is to us through Jesus' life, we are invited into a family in which we too play a part. As brothers and sisters, we are called into God's redemptive plan to make all things new.

We are made part of a family that is led by a father that loves completely, and so are invited to love others just as he loves us. To love sacrificially, giving away what we have and carrying one another when we cannot go on alone. As Jesus demonstrates in His life, this is a love shown not only spiritual, but practically. As Jesus, did, we are called to seek out justice and to stand for the marginalised and oppressed.

And as Isaiah points out, in God we have a father who is everlasting. He is beyond this life, greater than the earthly struggles and daily trials, and yet chooses to be present in them anyway. In John 14, Jesus tells us that the father's house has many rooms, and that there is a place prepared for us there (John 14:2). God is not only our father in the now, but forever; His love for us is beyond our conception or limitation. In our everlasting father, we have a home that will not pass away, beyond the brokenness of this world. There is a hope beyond our current circumstances, beyond coronavirus and the trials that 2020 has brought.

This winter, as we reflect on the trials of this year and the times that God has carried us when we could not continue on our own, what would it mean for those without a home to know tangibly today an everlasting father who has prepared a place for them? How can we, as brothers and sisters in that family, follow Jesus' example to seek out justice and share with those in need?

Questions

- Where this year have you seen God as a father who has carried you in times of trouble?
- How might you/your church community be able to act locally to support those experiencing homelessness this Christmas?
- How might you be able to join calls nationally for housing justice this winter?

Prayer

Everlasting Father.

We thank you that in you we find family,

That you call us your sons and daughters,

And that you have prepared a place for each of us in your presence.

Gather up your children who are lost and hurting this winter,

Especially those who are without a home,

And carry them onwards.

Help us love one another as you have loved us,

And pursue justice for our brothers and sisters in need,

In the knowledge you are coming in power.

Amen.

Meg Read is one of JPIT's Parliamentary Interns. She is involved in JPIT's work on responding to homelessness.





"The most mighty and powerful thing we, as God's people, can do for creation is to honour the voices of those who are vulnerable and work to protect and restore what God called 'good'."

How might you ensure that you are listening to the voices of those whose lives are being challenged by the climate crisis?

The year 2020 has been filled with ups and downs and uncertainties, but I am grateful to be alive today and to share my story with all of you.

I am Jessica Bwali from Zambia and I am a journalist by profession.

This year will go down in my life as one of the years that pushed me to the wall. At the beginning of the year, I had laid down a number of resolutions that I was hoping I could achieve by the end of the year. But barely three months into the year, the corona pandemic struck, and we went into quarantine! To make things even more difficult, depressing, and stressful for me, I was away from my family and friends, living in Germany.

Yet, in the midst of the pain and grief the whole world was going through due to the pandemic, I saw hope. I saw people coming together, helping one another; people sharing what they had. I saw medical personals working tirelessly to see to it that they saved lives. I saw people praying for one another and doing their part to handle the pandemic. To me, that meant there was still hope for a better tomorrow, despite the losses and the pain.

Mid 2020, I was picked as the African ambassador for the British Methodist COP-26 campaign. This means I will represent my country and the Methodist Africa region on issues of climate crisis. The fact that I'll do this with fellow young people from Italy, Fiji and Britain is the icing on the cake.

Being part of this campaign is not something I saw coming, but being part of it is definitely one of the most amazing things that has happened to me this year. Championing climate justice is close to my heart and I hope that, by the end of this campaign I, together with my fellow youths on this project, will have contributed fully.

Looking at 2020 and everything that has come with it I can safely say that, despite the ups and downs, God is with us. God is there at the heart of our passionate fight for climate justice. God is there as comfort and strength and hope – in the face of coronavirus and in the face of the climate emergency.

To everyone reading this, I wish you the best and to those who have lost loved ones or who are not in a good space due to the corona pandemic - I send my love to all of you. Do not lose HOPE.

- Jessica Bwali, COP26 Campaign Worker, Zambia

In 2020, the world has been upturned by an unexpected disaster which has consumed our attention. And yet, the world continues face a disaster on a greater scale. Communities all across the global south continue to be disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. Those who are frequently the least responsible for the causing the pollution that is destroying our planet. And yet, many find their lives disrupted by the unbalancing of the creation upon which they depend. In a year that has been dominated by worry, it is vital to remember the urgency of the climate crisis, particularly for those for whom the crisis isn't a distant future but a current reality.

In the places across our shared home which find themselves on the frontlines of the climate crisis, there is hope to be found in the work of climate activists such as Jessica. Her care and concern for the Earth can encourage us to value the Earth more; seeing it as a testament to the creative and mighty power of the One who created it. As Jessica's story tells, Covid-19 allowed her to see people coming together in moments of crisis and distress despite pain and loss. It would be invaluable to the efforts of climate activists if individuals and communities channelled this same attitude of care and concern for others when acting for the protection of the planet.

When the prophet Isaiah declares that the coming leader for God's people will be named **'mighty God'**, he calls attention to the impressive power and strength of God. The mighty work of God is evident long before Isaiah's prophecy, particularly when we consider God's crafting and sculpting of the Earth in Genesis. Genesis 1 tells us of a God who creates a 'good' Earth from a formless void and who delicately and carefully fills the Earth with things which enables life to flourish. From nothing, God created everything, and into it breathed life.

But this promise of a **'mighty God'** is contrasted by Isaiah's prophecy that it won't be a King or warrior coming to deliver God's people, but a child. All the might of the creator commanded not by strength and power, but by humility. God's might incarnated to show honor even to the smallest, and most vulnerable among us.

Just as God incarnate chose not strength but vulnerability to carry his might, where might we look today and see God present among those most vulnerable? When the voices of our brothers and sisters in the global south tell us that the world around them is rapidly changing, we ought to act to rectify what we have been complicit in. God is present in the lands and communities where the climate crisis is most apparent and God shares in their sorrow and vulnerability. The most mighty and powerful thing we, as God's people, can do for creation is to honour the voices of those who are vulnerable and work to protect and restore what God called 'good'.

How often do you consider that God's care and thought went into the creation of life that isn't human and that God sees that life as 'good'? Would you treat the Earth and non-human life differently knowing that creation is our mighty God's 'good' work? As we approach the start of a new year, how might you be challenged to mirror the humility of God and honor those across the world who are most vulnerable to the climate crisis?

Questions

- When was the last time you appreciated God's Earth and felt connected to it?
- How might you/your church community act to protect the Earth from harm?
- How might you/your church community ensure that you are listening to the voices of those whose lives are being challenged by the climate crisis?

Prayer

Mighty God

The skill of your hand is apparent throughout creation.

We ask forgiveness for all of the times we have depreciated Your Earth, our home,

And we ask that you walk alongside us as we commit to tread lightly upon the world.

Remind us that the Earth is the work of a mighty and powerful Creator,

Who chose to live amongst us in the home you created.

We pray for communities whose homes are being destroyed as a consequence of our actions,

Be with them as they mourn unbearable losses

And be with us, as we accept our role in their suffering.

Strengthen us as we seek to reconcile humanity with your wonderful Earth.

Amen.

Mollie Pugmire is one of the Methodist COP26 Campaign workers. She is working with the Methodist Church in Britain on taking climate action in 2021.

