

I will use one version of what the advent candles symbolise as a focus for our prayers today, so in the spirit of advent, the response to

Eternal God,

is

help us to wait and notice.

The first candle is for hope, and for God's people.

We thank you for the record in the Bible of the thoughts and feelings and ideas about you of people just like us over the many ages, like Hagar – who eventually despaired, cast out in the desert, leaving young Ishmael under a bush, unable to 'watch him die'.

Muslims now run seven times between the hills where she wandered to celebrate her endurance as part of the pilgrimage at Mecca, because she met your angel there.

We ask for a palpable sense of your presence for everyone who endures and hopes for better, and for those who feel their strength waning.

We think of the people of Yemen and of Syria, holding to you particularly those in Aleppo.

Closer to home, we bring to mind:

We remember those who have recently died and wait no longer for you:

And the anniversary of the deaths of those who have died, part of our story and yours as Hagar was:

Remind us we can be your agents of hope every day.

Eternal God, help us to wait and notice.

The second candle is for peace, and the Old Testament prophets.

Isaiah said:

You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you ...

That peace with you, Father, that Jesus enabled, we seek to replicate in our doings with each other. This year has in some ways been an awakening for fear and enmity, a darkness always present in our psyche, but so often unacknowledged. Isaiah's people saw the darkness and were led by you from it.

Please, crush our illusion that we can handle things alone in our deserts. Lead all people to allow more humility and risk-taking into our personal and societal/political/economic decisions, that we may find a deeper peace guided by your hand.

Eternal God, help us to wait and notice.

The third candle is for John the Baptist, and is the candle of love.

"In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

One of my favourite songs says 'when the whisper falls and the shadow turns and the coldest heart begins to burn, rain your love down on me'.

Help us to notice everyone, see all people as you do.

Help us to treat the astounding home you gave us as a precious inheritance, ours only to protect in love as we wait to hand it to the next inheritors. We pray especially for world leaders, thinking maybe of Donald Trump especially right now, as we consider your simple command to love you and one another, and how to manage the stewardship of our planet.

Eternal God, help us to wait and notice.

The forth candle is for Mary, and joy

That which we feel and that which we do cannot be separated and you see it all. Mary treasured mystery in her heart. We ask your Holy Spirit to guide us to relish and revere mysterious things, not to seek to control all things by explaining them, and risk diminishing our worlds and closing ourselves a little to you. Give us the wonder of the child who catches a luminous curiosity in the texture of a fence, or of the scientist who feels they know less and less but marvels more and more as they study the dances of creation.

Never let us dismiss a moment as we wait.

Eternal God, help us to wait and notice.

On Christmas Day we will light the Christ candle, for you are the light of the world.

Whoever follows you will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

And we find you everywhere, if we notice. Help us to notice.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen