

THE  
GOD  
WHO  
SPEAKS

# ...THROUGH THE PROPHETS

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### LEADERS' NOTES



We are very close to Christmas now and well into the “Octave” marking the week leading up to the Festival. It is understandable, then, that our Readings focus on the promise of the Messiah.

In our First Reading, we meet a king called Ahaz. He does not appear often in the Bible and where he does, it is made clear that he is not in the same league as King David. Our Reading indicates one of the reasons for this. His kingdom is under assault and he and his people were terrified... Earlier in Isaiah Chapter 7, it says that they ‘shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind’. Isaiah goes to Ahaz and says that he has heard the Voice of God and God has said that the enemies will not prevail... at least, not if Ahaz keeps faith with God. As we said, he is not in David’s league and though he might come across as trying to be holy – “I will not put the Lord to the test” – it is probably not because Ahaz trusts God so much but because he would rather not be beholden to him.

#### **Suggested Outline for an Afternoon/ Evening of Reflection (1½ hours)**

The timings are based on a 7pm start – adjust to your own group’s needs.

- 7pm Welcome and Opening Prayer
- 7.15 Introduction – You may like to use the information and ideas above and/ or the PowerPoint if not used previously. *NOTE – if this is your only session, consider also using the notes about the Year of the Word from Week 1)*
- 7.30 Listening to the God who speaks
- 7.50 Listening with the Heart
- 8.15 Closing Prayer
- 8.30 Departures

## OPENING RESPONSES

- Reader We gather in the name of the Father:  
**All Whose Creative Word was spoken  
and all Creation came into being.**
- Reader We gather in the name of the Son:  
**All The Word of God made flesh  
who made his home among humans  
to help humans discover the divinity with them.**
- Reader We gather in the name of the Holy Spirit  
**All Who opens our ears to hear the Word of God;  
our minds to know and begin to understand it –  
and our hearts to feel the love of our God  
spoken to us by the God who speaks.**

## LISTENING TO THE WORD OF THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

*Have someone read the First Reading- ensuring that they are someone who will read it well – have had chance to read it – and pray with it – first!*

*Use these or your own words:*

*We are going to listen to an extract from Isaiah's writing that was written for his own time – but which Christians have interpreted as one of his clearest prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. We are close now to Christmas so you might want to listen to these words with your eyes closed – trying to imagine a world without Christ – and what his coming meant for the people who would live after him.*

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

*Isaiah 7: 10-14*

*Allow time for people to read it through again for themselves – inviting them to notice any words or phrases – or ideas – that seem to strike them particularly as they listened or read.*

**Then use these or your own words.**

*The kingdom was under attack and Ahaz and the people were afraid. This is actually the kind of time when many people turn to God for help – but Ahaz seems to do the opposite. He does not openly defy God – but wraps it up in apparently holy words – almost mocking those who truthfully say “do not put the Lord your God to the test”. Isaiah sees through it – and expresses his annoyance about people who not only try the patience of human beings – but try it on with God too. What is interesting is that he does not predict a thunderbolt hitting Ahaz– but a simple, everyday miracle... a young woman would become pregnant and give birth to a child who would be God-with-us: Emmanuel. Ahaz probably did not think much of this as a sign – but it was a birth that would change the world.*

- Invite people to ponder any words or phrases that really spoke to them and then to share them with the group. If the group feels a little large for that, suggest people form smaller ones of three or four. Ask them to reflect together on things like:
  - What images did the Reading conjure up for us?
  - When do people in power pretend to be religious or holy – and why?
  - Is it right to put the Lord to the test? Does it speak of trust or doubt?
- Point out that there is no right or wrong answer in their conversations – the important thing is to listen to the God who speaks – through his Word and through his Spirit at work in themselves and in each other.

## LISTENING WITH THE HEART...

You might use the following ideas in a quiet time in your meeting room or head into church for Adoration.

- Encourage people to pray again with the Word of God. Remind them that the Spirit might speak through the words – or the images that come into their minds – or just a sense in their heart – as they ponder God’s Word. All are valid in this kind of prayer.
- Create a focal point using the manger from your nativity scene. Invite people to think of some of the suffering people and places in the world. They may be close to home – or things people have seen in the news. Invite them to write them down on a piece of paper (or cloth) and to spend a few minutes praying for them. With quiet music in the background, place the concerns into the manger – a reminder that Emmanuel – God-with-us is about God being with us in the trials as well as the joys of life. (*See also the ‘Cloth for the Cradle’ idea in Blue Christmas Services folder*).
- Set Prayer Stations around the room or the church for people to sit quietly next to and use their senses or other ways of praying.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Use these or your own words – much will depend on what you included in the session. Take it slowly and gently – allow people time to reflect and ponder their own answers to the questions.

Reader      As we close our meeting, let’s call to mind some of the ways in which we have heard the God who speaks...

Perhaps there was a word or phrase in the Reading that seemed particularly significant...  
Why might it have struck you today?  
What does it invite you to take away?

Was there something someone said that seemed to come from God through them?  
Was there something you received in the silence?

And now, let us pray together “The Angelus” – the prayer that celebrates the mystery of the Feast we are about to celebrate:

Reader  
**All** The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary:  
**And she conceived by the Holy Spirit.**  
**Hail Mary...**

Reader  
**All** Behold the handmaid of the Lord:  
**“Be it done unto me according to your word”.**  
**Hail Mary...**

Reader  
**All** And the Word was made flesh:  
**And dwelt amongst us.**  
**Hail Mary...**

Reader  
**All** Let us pray,  
**Pour forth, we beseech You, O Lord,**  
**Your Grace into our hearts;**  
**that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ your Son,**  
**was made known by the message of an angel,**  
**may be brought by his passion and cross**  
**to the glory of His Resurrection.**  
**Through the same Christ, our Lord.**  
**Amen**

Reader  
**All** And may God bless us this night and all nights (*or today and all days*)  
**The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.**

Reader  
**All** And until we meet again, may God hold us in his eternal love and mercy.  
**Amen.**

