

Your weekly bible study guide for Advent



**Christmas
Bowl**

Sharing God's love through the Christmas Bowl.

The Christmas Bowl is the Christmas appeal of Act for Peace, the international aid agency of the National Council of Churches in Australia. ABN 86 619 970 188



National Council of
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ACT FOR PEACE

CONFRONTING INJUSTICE TOGETHER
THROUGH THE actalliance

Sharing God's love through the Christmas Bowl



Since 1949 the Christmas Bowl has been bringing together congregations, families, friends and communities to share God's love with those in need. To me, the Christmas Bowl is an opportunity to pause and be grateful for what we have, and thoughtful

about how we can share this with others.

This year as we celebrate Christmas, I'd like to invite you to join us on a journey through Advent. In this booklet, you'll find a weekly bible reading, reflection, and a story about how your gifts are helping communities around the world. A special thank you to Reverend Dr Clive Ayre for his help in writing the reflections used in this booklet.

In a time when we seem to face a never ending storm of conflict and natural disasters,

responding to God's call to 'Love your neighbour' can feel an overwhelming task. But I take comfort knowing that through the Christmas Bowl we are working with the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus, fulfilling the calling that He gave us. We can walk forward trusting Him, knowing that He is able to do what we are not able to do in this

circumstance. Our role is to trust Him, to pray, and to step out with practical acts of support.

Thank you for all you do for



communities around the world threatened by conflict and disaster. I pray God's blessing on you and your family this Christmas.

Janet Cousens

Janet Cousens
CEO, Act for Peace



Janet Cousens,
CEO, Act for Peace

First Week of Advent: Hope

Act for Peace's Disaster Risk and Reduction Senior Field Officer, Sharin, has witnessed first-hand how your Christmas Bowl gifts can bring hope to her community in Vanuatu.



Sharin Boyall/Act for Peace

Bible Reading

Luke 21:25-33

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Reflection

Reading the signs – of hope

“There will be signs,” Jesus said – and to be sure, some signs can be confusing. When we think of what is going on in the world about us and try to read the signs Jesus is talking about, it can be difficult to understand. But as we move towards the Christmas story, and the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, we learn to read the signs through the eyes of God – through the eyes of healing and restoring love.

In a country like Vanuatu, the impacts of climate change are becoming apparent, and must increasingly be taken into account: this adds significantly to the difficulties of people like May, a mother in Vanuatu.

May’s story is inspirational in the way she responded to the support she and her community received through the Christmas Bowl. It became a true sign of hope, and enabled May to bring hope to others. Our gifts therefore have a multiplying effect.

The signs Jesus talks about point towards the Kingdom of God, when God’s will is done on earth as in heaven – when we begin to create the kind of community which reflects God’s will. So also, in our own time, and together, may we read signs of hope through the work of Act for Peace’s local partners and our gifts to the Christmas Bowl.





Bringing hope in times of disaster

May knows all too well the destruction a cyclone can cause. She has seen the disasters affecting her home in Vanuatu get more devastating with climate change each year, increasingly making it harder for families like hers to recover and rebuild their homes, crops and lives. She's also seen how Vanuatu's women and girls, who already face huge inequalities, are hurting the most.

But May is now teaching others in her community how to stay safe and keep their faith through the next calamity. She was one of the female church champions to be trained through the Disaster Risk Reduction Program, launched by Act for Peace's partner, the Vanuatu Christian Council, in 2016.

Today, she's the chairwoman of her village's disaster response committee, and runs regular practice drills with the children in her pre-school and their parents.

Around the world, women and girls suffer most during and after a disaster. They die in greater numbers and the daily injustices they already face worsen. In the chaos after an emergency, they also have less access to food and water and are at higher risk of violence and exploitation.

When you give to the Christmas Bowl, you contribute to the Disaster Risk Reduction program which helps Vanuatu's vulnerable girls and women, as well as boys and men, to become more resilient to disasters and the influence of climate change.

Please pray for the women in Vanuatu like May who are taking a leading role in disaster planning and are breaking down the traditional attitudes that limit their opportunities and hope for the future.

May, a mother of 5, lives in Vanuatu, one of the most disaster prone countries in the world.



A prayer for Vanuatu

In Vanuatu, December and January is a time for families to get together and celebrate the year's successes. However it is also cyclone season, leaving the country and its people vulnerable.

Our partner, the Vanuatu Council of Churches, has invited us to join them in this prayer of commitment:

“God of all wisdom, we are thankful for the knowledge and wisdom bestowed upon our lives this year. Your word became the precious navigating tool and instrument that set the course of our lives. In times when we walk through the valleys of death and the land of dryness, you become our guidance and protection. We pray that your calling to serve is our mission for 2019. May this energise our faith, commitment and confidence to be the faithful servant of all.”

Second Week of Advent: Peace

Thanks to your Christmas Bowl gifts, children like Sadia* are able to attend school and get an education.

Bible Reading

Malachi 3:1-4

“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.”

Reflection

The Messenger – of Peace

Long ago, Malachi declared God's promise: "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me..." But will we recognise the messenger? The Russian writer Tolstoy told the story of Martin, who was encouraged by a Christian pilgrim to live for God rather than his own pleasure. One night he heard a voice in his sleep: "look into the street tomorrow. I am coming to visit you." The next day, one by one, needy strangers crossed his path, and he gave them food and shelter. But Jesus had not come as he had promised – until Martin realised that Jesus had indeed come in the form of his needy visitors.

John the Baptist was "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord..." He may have been an unlikely messenger, but he understood that the gift of peace was in many ways dependant on conditions of social justice being met. A war-torn country like Pakistan presents its own issues, including the need of education for girls and the closure of the gender gap generally.

It may be said that Jesus the Christ is both messenger and message; but will we recognise him? The angelic declaration of "peace on earth" requires us also to be messengers of peace, indeed to be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation, and one way we can respond to that calling is through the Christmas Bowl.





Creating peace through education

Ten-year-old Sadia* lives in southern Pakistan with her parents and seven brothers and sisters. She's one of the few girls in her entire region who go to school.

Where Sadia* lives, many families can't afford the cost of schooling or don't see the value of education. Only 15 per cent of poor rural girls in Pakistan finish primary school, compared to 40 per cent of males. Without an education, these girls are more likely to marry young, get sick, miss out on work opportunities and live in poverty.

But through your support of the Christmas Bowl, you are helping Act for Peace's local partner, Community World Service Asia, (CWSA) to roll out an early education program in her province.

You are helping to train female teachers, fund teaching materials and raise awareness about the importance of education for both girls and boys.

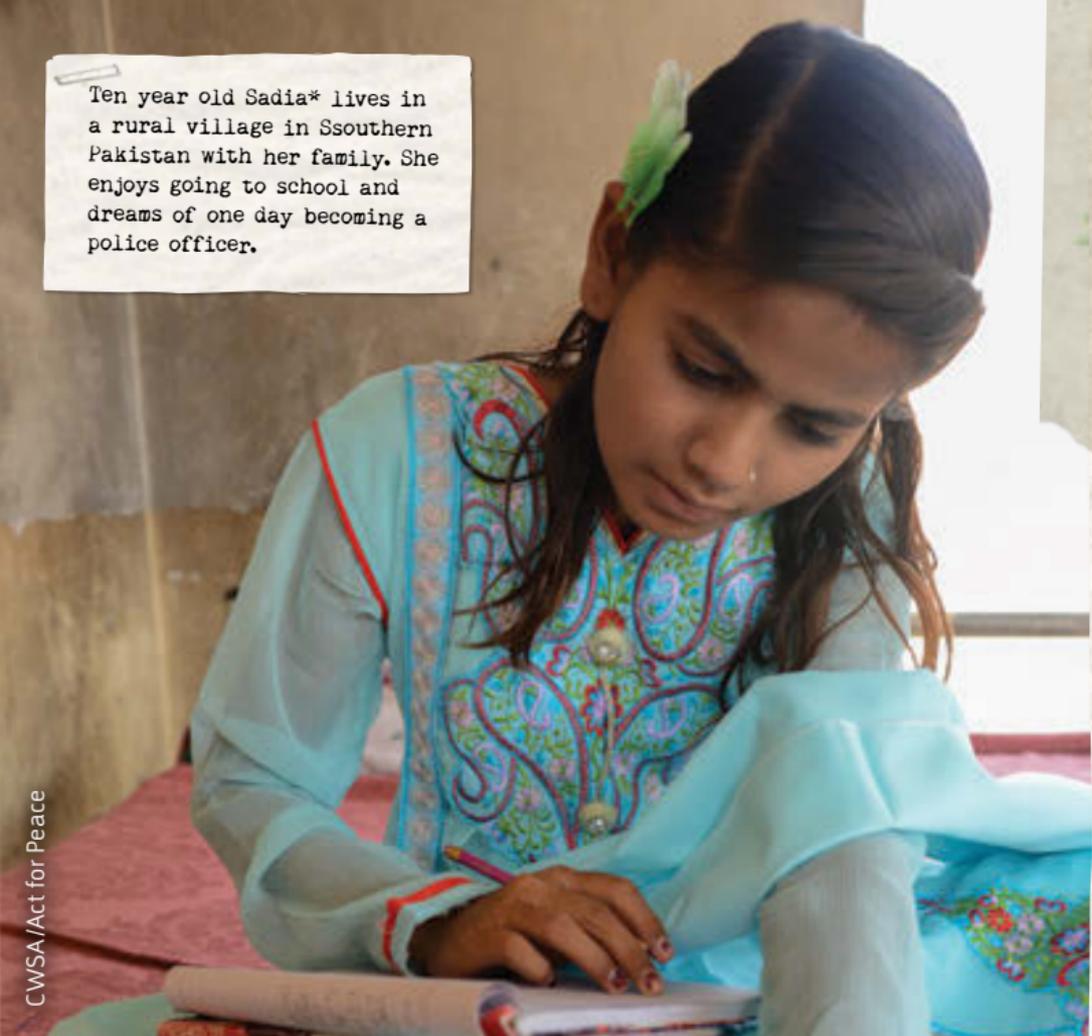
Thanks to the generosity of past Christmas Bowl supporters, Sadia* has a trained teacher who creates a fun and supportive learning environment. She loves going to school and dreams of one day being a police officer.

While Sadia's* parents often struggle to make ends meet, they have seen how passionate their daughter is about learning and are determined to keep her in the classroom. Her mum Shanti said she's grateful her daughter is getting the chance to go to school that she herself missed out on.

Through your gifts to the Christmas Bowl, you are helping girls like Sadia* start school, so they can learn, break down gender roles and contribute to a more equal workforce and society.

Please pray that children in Pakistan are able to get an education and to help shape a more peaceful and prosperous future for their country.

**Sadia's name has been changed to protect her identity as a minor.*



Ten year old Sadia* lives in a rural village in Southern Pakistan with her family. She enjoys going to school and dreams of one day becoming a police officer.

A prayer for Pakistan

Please pray for people in Pakistan; for government stability, rule of law, the strengthening of human rights and the ability of different groups to work with one another.

Please pray for peace and harmony among different communities, and for those affected by flooding, drought, environmental pollution, cyclones, and earthquakes.

Through the prayer "With All God's People" (comp. John Carden), and

shared with permission from the World Council of Churches, we pray:

*O Creator and Mighty God,
you have promised
strength for the weak
rest for the labourers
light for the way
grace for the trials
help from above
unfailing sympathy
undying love.*

*O Creator and Mighty God
Help us to continue
in your promise.*

Third Week of Advent: Love

Assala* lives in a tent with her husband Raed and their 13 year old son Naser.

They were forced to flee their home in Syria when the war came to their city.



Mitchell Loveday/Act for Peace

Bible Reading

Zephaniah 3:30

“At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;

for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,

when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.”



Reflection

Christ the Gatherer – and Love

There's a subtle but important difference between hoarding and gathering. Jesus was certainly not a hoarder, but he was a gatherer in an important sense. Zephaniah 3:20 speaks of a time after the Exile, and the promise of a brighter future.

Families often gather at Christmas, and the drawcard is love, and a sense of belonging – community rather than isolation. That is surely what Assala*, a Syrian mother, now living in a refugee camp in Jordan with her husband and son, along with many other refugees, experienced through the support they have received through the Christmas Bowl. It was not so much a hand-out as it was assistance to enable

Assala* and people like her to remain strong in their difficult situation. Their problems have not gone away, but they gain a new perspective in knowing they are not alone; the love of God is shared through the Christmas Bowl.

Marty Haugen's 1983 song affirms that "Here in this place, new light is streaming," and prays, "Gather us in the lost and forsaken – the blind and the lame – the young – the old" – and so it continues. The song concludes with the prayer, "Give us to drink the wine of compassion." We can share the love and compassion through the Christmas Bowl.





Love in action for Syrian refugees

When the war came to their city of Hama, Assala*, her husband and their teenage son fled to Jordan. It took them two days to reach the border and they cried the whole way for their home and the family they had to leave behind.

Six years on and Assala* still longs for her mother and sisters who remain trapped in Syria.

Today, Assala* and her family live just outside Amman. Their 'home' is a flimsy tent and they regularly go hungry. In the brutal winters, they huddle between the few blankets they have for warmth. It's a far cry from their happy life in Hama, where they

owned a farm, sold olive oil and gathered every week for meals with their family and friends.

Because Assala's* husband has severe back pain and can't work, she carries the full burden of providing for her family. Like any mother, Assala* desperately wants to give her son the best chance in life and it breaks her heart when he goes hungry. Despite the enormous challenges, Assala* faces each day with courage and the determination to give her family a better life.

Your gifts to the Christmas Bowl bring Christ's inspiring, selfless love to families like Assala's*. Through your gifts, you help Act for Peace's partner in Jordan, the Near East Council of Churches, to provide essential food packages, hygiene kits and training to vulnerable families.

Please pray for displaced Syrian families. Ask that they be healed from their pain, that they may be free from fear and injustice.

**Assala's name has been changed to protect her identity as a refugee.*



A prayer for Jordan

We invite you to pray for Syrian families, forced from their homes, and now living as refugees. Please pray for families like those supported by our partner in Jordan, the Near East Council of Churches.

Through an excerpt from the Coptic Anaphora, and shared with permission from the World Council of Churches, we pray:

O King of peace, give us your peace, establish for us your peace, and forgive us our sins. Bless us all, purify our hearts. Heal the sickness, of our souls and our bodies. We worship you, O Christ, with your good Father, and the Holy Spirit, for you have come to save us. Have mercy on us.

Through the Christmas Bowl, Assala* and other families like hers, are receiving life-saving food packages, hygiene kits and skills training.

Fourth Week of Advent: Joy

Saliwe is a poultry farmer in Zimbabwe and thanks to the skills she learnt from Act for Peace's partner, ZCC, she can now feed her children and give them the education they need to build a better life.

Bible Reading

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Reflection

Promise, Preparation and Joy

Sometimes we get it all wrong! Promise and preparation are reduced to relatively trivial events of every day, while joy, surely, has little to do with the troubles of our time.

But consider Mary's Song, the Magnificat recorded in Luke 1. Her joy is obvious and overflowing, but it is clearly related strongly to problems and injustices of every age. The reason for her rejoicing was not in what she herself might do, but in that which might be done by him who was to be born of her.

The earliest Church saw the Magnificat as the kind of salvation God wrought through Jesus. Then as now, joy comes with engagement.

Let us ensure that the true meaning of God's coming in Christ is reflected in our lives throughout the year; and to that end, let us commit ourselves to God in these final days of our Christmas preparation.





Joy amidst the drought

Saliwe and her four children live in a rural part of Zimbabwe, where the worst drought in 35 years is crippling people's crops and livelihoods. After she lost her husband and his family abandoned her, surviving became even harder. With little income and no support, she struggled to feed her children and keep them in school.

Saliwe felt desperate and afraid. She prayed constantly, asking God to protect her and her children. Thankfully, through the generosity of Christmas Bowl supporters, her prayers were answered.

Act for Peace's local partner, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches,

saw the dire situation that Saliwe was in, and invited her to join the chicken farming program. With the help of Christmas Bowl gifts, she was given chicks and feed and taught how to raise healthy chickens and run her own business.

With this support, Saliwe very quickly turned life around for herself and her family. She built a thriving poultry business, and using her new business skills, began supplying to the school down the road.

Today, Saliwe can support her children and give them the education they need to build stable, confident and happy lives. Through your compassionate support of the Christmas Bowl, Saliwe has lifted her own family out of poverty and helped others around her to survive. Pray for farmers in Zimbabwe as they struggle through the drought. May their efforts be rewarded, and the lives of their wider family be improved.

With the help of Christmas Bowl gifts, Saliwe was given chicks and training, and now has a thriving poultry business.



A prayer for Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, December and January are a time to visit family, and to celebrate life together.

Our partner, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, has offered this blessing and they invite you to pray it with them:

“Gracious God, we are thankful that in spite of the many challenges in 2018, we saw your grace and protection over us. We pray that we may carry out our mission in 2019 with courage and confidence in your continual presence with us.”



Christmas Day: Light of the World

A Rohingya man carries his father to a medical tent after crossing the border into Bangladesh.



Joshua Paul/Act for Peace

Bible Reading

Luke 2:13-14

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”



Reflection

The light of the world

Christmas carols can sometimes create an impression of Bethlehem enveloped in a wonderful haze of unreal glory. But as John puts it, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” If you have ever been to a place like Bethlehem, you might understand the thought that God did not choose that town because it was special, but rather because it is in God’s nature to bless the ordinary.

When life gets tough, and an avalanche of adversity threatens to swallow us, and violence is looming before us, the feet of “the messenger upon the mountains are beautiful.” As Frank Byatt said in 1959, “every political crisis

and every unpredictable extravagance of nature in flood and earthquake produce new emergencies and human suffering.”

We have all heard the plight of the Rohingya refugees; the story of Ayesha* on the following page, and her family personalise that for us. It is also worth reflecting on the fact that Mary and Joseph, with the infant Jesus, were themselves refugees. But whether it is the Rohingya people, or others closer to home, we can help to personalise the meaning and good news of Christmas through the Christmas Bowl.

On this Christmas Day, let our spirits echo the song of the angels, of “glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours,” as we reflect the Light of the world, and become messengers of hope, peace, love and joy in the world.





Lighting up the darkness for Rohingya refugees

Ayesha* and her husband escaped at night with their two young daughters and tiny newborn baby. They travelled for days through the jungle with little food or water. Finally they reached safety in Bangladesh, but more hardship lay ahead.

Jamtoli camp has sprung up spontaneously across rough terrain, creating big infrastructure problems. And building new shelter is difficult in the heavy monsoon rains. When Ayesha's* family first arrived, there wasn't enough shelter for them. Her baby became ill, and despite receiving medical care, passed away.

Like so many other Rohingya refugees, Ayesha* and her family are doing their best to survive in difficult conditions, cut off from

many basic necessities. While aid workers are doing their best, there isn't enough funding to meet the growing need for food, shelter, safe water and sanitation.

Despite the challenges, and her huge grief and loss, Ayesha* faces each day with incredible dignity and resolve. She is determined to raise her children with safety and opportunity. And through your gifts to the Christmas Bowl, you are showing her it's possible. Your generosity proves that even in the darkest times, Jesus's love and mercy can light their path.

Just as Jesus reached out to the poor and the hungry, the sick and the stranger, the Christmas Bowl is a way for you to reach out to people like Ayesha* and her family. Through the Christmas Bowl, we come together to represent the body of Christ and shine a light on people like Ayesha*, so they can live with the safety and justice that each of us deserves.

**Ayesha's name has been changed to protect her identity as a refugee.*

Ayesha* lost her newborn baby after her fleeing her home. You can give her surviving children the love and support they need, through the Christmas Bowl.

A prayer for the Rohingya



We invite you to pray for Rohingya families, forced from their homes, and now living as refugees in Bangladesh.

Through an excerpt from Dear Life, J. Morley, J. Ward and H. Wild, eds © Christian Aid 1998, and shared with permission from the World Council of Churches, we pray:

*O compassionate Lord,
I would prefer power
over the storm,
a secure home,
a life protected from
the winds.
But help me to live
with storms,
shelter with friends,
see my plans broken
but not my life:
rebuilt again and again
from the earth.*



Christmas Bowl

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For more information or resources please call us on 1800 025 101
or visit actforpeace.org.au/christmasbowl

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