

13th December 2020 – Morning Service

Advent 3 Martin Rider

Advent Candle Liturgy

“Jesus said, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’”

Advent 3 - Candle of Waiting with Joy

The first candle reminds us of the light of expectant hope of the prophets. The second candle reminds us of the patience of John the Baptist who proclaimed Christ’s coming in faith. The third candle reminds us of the great light and joy which filled Mary as she was chosen by God.

[After the Candle is lit we pray]

Dear God, we thank you for calling and choosing faithful people to serve your purposes. May our hearts, like Mary’s, overflow with joy as we realise that in Christ you chose us. **Amen**

Call to Worship - Psalm 150

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD. **Amen.**

Our opening hymn, by Mark Earey, explains the significance of each Sunday in Advent and is set to the lovely melody ‘Angel voices’.

StF 165 – Advent candles tell their story

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| 1) Advent candles tell their story
As we watch and pray,
Longing for the Day of Glory,
‘Come, Lord, soon,’ we say.
Pain and sorrow, tears and sadness
Changed for gladness on that day. | 3) John the Baptist, by his preaching
And by water poured,
Brought to those who heard his teaching
News of hope restored:
‘Keep your vision strong and steady,
And be ready for the Lord.’ |
| 2) Prophet voices loudly crying,
Making pathways clear,
Glimpsing glory, self-denying,
Calling all to hear.
Through their message – challenged, shaken –
Hearts awoken: God is near! | |

Mark Earey © Mark Earey CCL No. 515642

Prayer of Adoration

Heavenly Father, Lord of creation and Saviour of the world, we have come to worship and adore you, for you are the Word who spoke life into being, whose wisdom and might are boundless. We acknowledge that you are the one true God whose power and wisdom are far beyond our understanding, yet who in loving-kindness provides our daily needs. You are the loving heavenly Father, who from the beginning, has tried to draw human beings close to you: first through the prophets and patriarchs, who gave us your law to show us how we ought to live; yet, when we rebelled against you, at the right time, you gave sinners like us the most precious gift of all, your only Son, Jesus. In Advent, we remember how you took human form and lived among us to show in words and actions how we should live. Come into our hearts, dear Lord, guide and empower us in our discipleship, so both our worship and our service are pleasing to you, proclaiming your glory, through Christ our Redeemer. **Amen.**

Prayer Confession

Merciful God, we know how deep is our need to set ourselves right with you, for often we fail to love and serve you as we ought, through weakness, sinfulness, wilfulness, carelessness or fear. For our disobedience and faithlessness,

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Forgive us**

In shame and sadness, we recall occasions when we have failed to care for neighbours who were lonely, distressed, needy or troubled, through our selfishness, pride, anger, cold-heartedness or indifference. For our failure to share your love with others,

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Forgive us**

Gracious God, whose redemptive love took Christ to die at Calvary for the world's sinfulness, we believe your gracious word that our sins have been forgiven. Renew us in your grace and empower us to serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' precious name. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;
thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the
glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are
yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

We continue our worship with a translation of a hymn by Charles Coffin, an Eighteenth Century rector of the University of Paris. It was translated by Revd. John Chandler, vicar of Whitley, in Oxfordshire and included in his hymnal, "The Hymns of the Primitive Church" during 1837.

StF 182 – On Jordan's bank

- 1) On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken, for he brings
Glad tidings of the King of kings!
- 2) Then cleansed be every Christian breast,
And furnished for so great a guest!
Yea, let us each our heart prepare
For Christ to come and enter there.
- 3) For thou art our salvation, Lord,
Our refuge, and our great reward;
Without thy grace we waste away
Like flowers that wither and decay.
- 4) To heal the sick stretch out thy hand,
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth, and let thy light restore
Earth's own true loveliness once more.
- 5) All praise, eternal Son, to thee
Whose advent sets thy people free;
Whom, with the Father, we adore,
And Holy Spirit evermore.

Prayers of Intercession

In joyful expectation of Christ's coming to reign, we pray L: Come, Lord Jesus R: **Come, Lord Jesus**
Come to the world as King of the nations. We pray for rulers of countries afflicted by warfare, persecution and terrorism, asking that they may turn and seek mercy and justice for their peoples. We pray for the victims of man's inhumanity to one another. May they be granted comfort, healing and hope. We pray for a peaceful transition of power in the USA and that political divisions there may heal. We know that before you rulers will stand in silence. L: Come, Lord Jesus R: **Come, Lord Jesus**

Come to the world as Lord and Judge and so we pray for the poor, here and abroad, that they will receive practical help from governments and charities, especially as winter tightens its grip. We pray for all who are unemployed and homeless, for people who suffer with alcohol or drug-dependency, as well as mental ill-health, that they will receive help to turn around their lives. Remember, too, young people whose education has been adversely affected and older people, especially in care homes, who have been isolated and lonely because of COVID19, that the future will offer them hope and healing. May we use the freedoms offered during Christmas wisely, so this virus is not encouraged to spread by our actions. Help us all to live in the light of your coming, give us a longing to do your will and enable us to be part of the healing our community needs. L: Come, Lord Jesus R: **Come, Lord Jesus**

Come to your people as Saviour and bearer of pain. Lord, we pray for neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; for people who live with a dementia and their families and carers, especially in these troubled times. May they find healing, comfort, courage and peace, not only as a result of the treatment they receive, but because of your presence in their time of need. We pray for the NHS and key-workers as they labour to contain coronavirus, that they are given the practical and spiritual resources to succeed in their vital work. Enfold them with your love and keep them safe.

L: Come, Lord Jesus R: **Come, Lord Jesus**

Lord, we don't know what we should pray for during this pandemic: we feel helpless, fearful, dispirited and distraught – almost a sense of abandonment, but we know that you love us enough to have come as Jesus Christ and that his life, death and resurrection are your assurance of his redemptive grace. Grant us the spirit of steadfastness, so we may bear what has to be borne with courage grounded in faith in your unfailing loving-kindness. Guide our leaders and their advisers, that they may devise effective policies that not only shield us from coronavirus, whilst protecting us from economic catastrophe, but take into account our mental and spiritual needs. Enfold us all in your love and mercy. Wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress and free us to serve you for ever. L: Come, Lord Jesus R: **Come, Lord Jesus**

Come to us from heaven with power and great glory and lift us up to meet you where, with all your saints and angels, we will live with you for ever. L: Come, Lord Jesus R: **Come, Lord Jesus**

Abba, Father God, bless us all and our friends and families. Keep us free from harm, help us to resist the temptation to sin and may the way we live bring you glory, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and King. **Amen.**

Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4 & 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed. I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the young plant come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. Amen.

Reading: John 1:6-8 & 19-28

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally, they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising. Amen.

Sermon – *"Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John 1:25*

John's gospel was the last to be written and reflects upon Jesus' ministry and puts the story of God's saving grace in perspective. When he was writing his gospel, John was aware that there were some who still argued that John the Baptist was the Messiah, despite the Baptist's own denials. We ought to remember that John the Baptist had a number of followers, for despite his tough message, he was clearly respected, because his influence was such that many people began to question whether or not he was the longed-for Messiah, God's anointed. It wasn't fanciful reasoning, for Simon Peter and Andrew had followed John, before he pointed out Jesus as the 'Lamb of God'.

We know John the Baptist was related to Jesus through his mother, Mary, who was a relative of John's mother, Elizabeth. John was the only child of elderly parents and his father was the priest Zechariah, who served in the temple. Zechariah was told by an angel that John would be great, but he must never touch alcohol, nor cut his hair, in other words John was a Nazarite, given to God by a sacred vow, either his own personal commitment or by a parent's. Nazarites were pledged to live simply and faithfully for the duration of the vow and Nazarites were regarded as special by Jews – both Samuel and Sampson were listed in their number.

It is most likely John was a member of the priestly sect called Essenes, who lived at Qumran, by the Dead Sea. Essenes devoted themselves to God in monastic communities. John, however, began to call Jews to repent and baptised them in the River Jordan to symbolise the washing away of sins and the granting of a fresh start by God. John's wasn't a comfortable ministry: indeed, his message was often as stark and uncomfortable as his lifestyle and clothing, for he was uncompromising in his criticism of those Pharisees and Sadducees who came seeking baptism, describing them as 'vipers' and demanding to see the fruits of repentance rather than a public pretence of piety.

Since the return from exile in Babylon, Judea had suffered conquest and oppression by the Seleucid Greeks and Romans, so most Jews were looking for God to send his Messiah and the Sanhedrin were both intrigued and excited by John the Baptist and his stark message. His appearance, lifestyle and fearlessness made them think that he might be the Christ which is why in our reading from John, priests and experts of Torah came from Jerusalem to demand whether he was a prophet, Elijah, the greatest of prophets, the Prophet – an allusion to a second Moses – or the Messiah. The Baptist made it clear that he was neither Elijah nor the Messiah, declaring, in Isaiah's words, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" In other words, the Baptist declared that he was the forerunner of Christ, telling the world to prepare for his imminent coming.

Clearly, the questioners were irritated by John's reply, for they demanded, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" The Baptist made his calling clear: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' In other words, he could symbolically wash away their sins, but only Jesus can cleanse us completely through the Holy Spirit. John's interrogators wanted certainty and security, but although the Baptist's words indicated that the Messiah would be divine, the Jewish Establishment failed to recognize the 'signs' they craved in Jesus' ministry, mainly because of their prejudices.

This Advent, we are in a period of insecurity and the future remains uncertain, even threatening. 2020 has been a dreadful year with COVID19 spreading its malevolence throughout the world, confining and restricting us in so many ways. Even the concession of five days of easing restrictions around Christmas is not as simple as most of us would like, because the announcement has been followed by dire warnings about any 'unnecessary' visits possibly resulting in the death of those we love and from whom we have been separated for nine months. Many churches will not open for communal worship, for fear of infecting congregations, so it is likely that celebrations will be muted. However, before you yield to despair, remember that families were often separated at Christmas during the Second World War and between 1940 and 1953 rationing and shortages meant lavish celebrations were confined to the wealthy and privileged, but people managed by supporting one another and keeping the flame of hope burning.

The likelihood of vaccines coming on stream in the near future offers us hope, as does the rolling out of mass lateral flow COVID tests. If the lockdown and tier restrictions work, the rates of infection will decline, so test and tracing will actually work. If that is so, then there is a possibility that the threat posed by coronavirus will pass and we can enjoy a new normal sometime next year. Meantime, amidst the darkness of lamenting for people who have died in the pandemic, for others who are suffering psychologically and spiritually through fear and isolation and for so many whose livelihoods have been lost as a result of lockdowns, there is still light shining.

We can and should rejoice about many people who have gone far beyond the call of duty to support neighbours throughout the crisis: those working in the NHS and ambulance services; keyworkers; local authority workers who have faced the challenge of housing the homeless; workers in and supporters of foodbanks; scientists who have managed to compress the usual ten years' work to produce a vaccine into ten months; campaigners like Marcus Rashford, who have persuaded the Government to support deprived children throughout school holidays and everybody who small random acts of kindness has brought cheer in these trying times.

As a natural Luddite, I never thought I'd be saying this, but let's rejoice in technologies that allow us to communicate remotely at a time when close communication is prohibited. Zoom, Jitsi, Youtube, Facebook and other forms of video-conferencing may not be perfect, but have been invaluable. Smartphones, tablets and computers, telephones and radios have played their part easing some of our isolation during the past year. Imagine how we would have fared if this pandemic had struck in 1970.

At Advent we await God's salvation, so let us do so patiently. We can, of course, prepare ourselves for Christmas by dwelling upon Jesus' nativity story, reflecting upon God's amazing love for us and his assurance that he is Immanuel, God with us and beside us in all things, but what about preparing for his coming again in glory? If Christ should come back today, would any of us be ready to face him? What should we be doing for such an eventuality? The answer is to copy the example of previous generations of Christians: to stand alongside the broken and grieving; to offer what help we can for as long as we can, but above all else to remain a loving presence in our community. Come, Lord Jesus, fill us with your love and teach us to share it always. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Revd. Charles Silvester Horne in 1909. He was Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales and MP for Ipswich from 1910 until his sudden death following a lecture on preaching at Niagara Falls in 1914. You may be surprised to know that Revd. Horne had a son, Kenneth, who achieved fame with his radio programme, "Around the Horne"!

StF 185 – Sing we the King who is coming to reign

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| 1) Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King: | 3) Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
Doubt shall not darken his witness within;
Hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
Love is victorious when Jesus is King: |
| Ch) <i>Come, let us sing: Praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:
This is our song, who to Jesus belong:
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.</i> | 4) Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray;
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
When this new song thy creation shall sing:
Satan is vanquished, and Jesus is King: |
| 2) All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
Justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King: | |

Charles Silvester Horne CCL No. 515642

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.