

4th December 2022 – Morning Service

Andy Haynes

Call to Worship - Psalm 72 v 1-3 & 18-19

Endow the king with Your justice, O God, the Royal Son with Your righteousness. May He judge Your people in righteousness, Your afflicted ones with justice. May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness..... Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvellous deeds. Praise be to His glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with His glory.

Advent Candle Liturgy – There is room for difference

It's Advent. Not yet Christmas. It's not just time for you and me to prepare. It's time for all the world's different people to prepare. From east and west, north and south, to gather as one human family.

How do we welcome and receive people who seem so different to us?

When God reigns **there is room for difference.**

How do we see the prophecies that arise from different cultures?

When God reigns **there is room for difference.**

How do we understand a message from someone we don't expect?

When God reigns **there is room for difference.**

How would we welcome amongst us John the Baptist, with camel's hair and leather belt?

When God reigns **there is room for difference.**

How do we see God's message beyond our circle of family and friends?

When God reigns **there is room for difference.**

How do we live together in harmony, in peace and love with people who are different from us?

When God reigns **there is room for difference**

We lit our first candle for you and me. Let us light our second candle for people who are different from us, as we watch and wait.

StF 172 – Hills of the north rejoice

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| 1) Hills of the north, rejoice,
River and mountain-spring,
Hark to the advent voice;
Valley and lowland, sing.
Christ comes in righteousness and love,
He brings salvation from above. | 4) Shores of the utmost west,
Lands of the setting sun,
Welcome the heavenly guest
In whom the dawn has come:
He brings a never-ending light,
Who triumphed o'er our darkest night. |
| 2) Isles of the southern seas,
Sing to the listening earth;
Carry on every breeze
Hope of a world's new birth:
In Christ shall all be made anew;
His word is sure, his promise true. | 5) Shout, as you journey on;
Songs be in every mouth!
Lo, from the north they come,
From east and west and south:
In Jesus all shall find their rest,
In him the universe be blest. |
| 3) Lands of the east, arise!
He is your brightest morn;
Greet him with joyous eyes,
Let praise his path adorn:
Your seers have longed to know their Lord;
To you he comes, the final Word. | |

Charles Ernest Oakley & Editors of English Praise

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

Almighty and everlasting God, we pray that Your presence be with us this morning, for our desire is to treasure each moment with our Lord, therefore help us to leave behind the worries and concerns of daily life that we may instead focus our thoughts and worship wholly and fully on You, the one and only true God, creator of heaven and earth and all that lies within.

Almighty and everlasting God, we worship You who set the stars in space, who created the boundaries for the mighty oceans, who instigated the seasons and forged the soaring mountains and gorged out the valleys below, we praise Your Holy name, for You alone are worthy to be honoured and adored. You are the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. You existed before time itself, all power and wisdom belong to You, and yet Lord God You are mindful of us, mere mortals for whom You care and love. We thank You for Your greatest gift to us, the gift of Your Son, the Lord Jesus, through whom You have made it possible for us to become Your children. Help us never to forget the cost of our Salvation, but be eternally grateful of Your wonderful love for each and everyone of us. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession & Repentance

You are the giver of life, most merciful God. You know our hidden thoughts and deeds. And so dear Lord and Heavenly Father, we come before You now, confessing that in our actions and in-actions we have failed You, in our loving and forgiving we have fallen short, in our believing and trusting we have denied Your grace and power. So make us aware of any falseness in us, and purify our hearts; for we believe if we now confess our sins You are willing and able to forgive us those sins cleansing us of those faults which cloud our relationship with You. So renew a right heart within us, free our minds of any deceit, that we may live our lives as those who know they are forgiven. Forgiven because of what has been made possible through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who paid the price of our sin as He faced the horrors of the cross because He loved us so much.

God, our loving Father, God, our refuge and strength, God, the giver of all good gifts we praise You forever for Jesus, who taught us when to pray to say:-

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.**

StF 171 – Hark the glad sound

- 1) Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
The Saviour promised long;
Let every heart prepare a throne,
And every voice a song.
- 2) He comes the prisoners to release,
In Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before him burst,
The iron fetters yield.
- 3) He comes the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of his grace
To enrich the humble poor.
- 4) Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim;
And heaven's eternal arches ring
With your beloved name.

Philip Doddridge

Reading: Matthew 3 v 1-12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."' John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt round his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

Ballad of John the Baptist (Sung to the tune of Wishbone Ash 'Ballad of the Mountain')

1) My name is John the Baptist
I am not a prophet or king
I tell of one who is greater
Listen to the song that I sing

2) You generation of vipers
Listen to the words that I say
You claim Abraham is your father
But that will not save you this day

Ch) *I am the voice of the wilderness
As told by the prophet Isaiah
I merely baptise you with water
But there's one who'll baptise you with fire*

E) *I am the voice of the wilderness
As told by the prophet Isaiah
I merely baptise you with water
But there's one who'll baptise you with fire
My name is John the Baptist
But there's one who'll baptise you with fire!*

Sermon

Can you picture the scene? The Pharisee speaking to the temple crowds. It probably went something like this:-

"Now look here you lot. There have been rumours that one or two of you have been sneaking off into the wilderness to see if you can catch a glimpse of this bloke John. Now we Pharisees are the ones that do the teaching round here! We're the ones with the know-how, so why you would want to go wandering off into desert places is a mystery to me. I've no idea what's got to you to give you such strange desires. So I suggest you leave things to us Pharisees. We'll find out who he is, whether he claims to be a prophet or whether he thinks he's a king; we'll get to the bottom of it all and put a stop to such nonsense. After all, we are men of God, descendants of Abraham himself. We have authority and are the righteous people of Israel, scholars of the law, and we have a very important role to play in all this – so why you people think God would send you some hippy instead is beyond me! Don't forget that this hermit is asking people to confess their sins, then he's dunking them in the river! Well let me tell you this – he'll have no need to ask us Pharisees to repent because we are good and upright citizens who have no need of such nonsense. So I can tell you now, that we are joining forces with some Sadducees to investigate this further. And let me remind you that this unkempt looking chap eats locusts for breakfast and wants the mountains levelled off and the valleys filled in – so good luck to you all on that one!"

Remember the story of John's birth? How Zachariah his father was struck dumb because he doubted the word of God? His voice was not heard again until he announced the name chosen by God for his new offspring - the family were going to call him Zachariah after his father - but God had said "you shall call him John" meaning 'graced by Yahweh'. Remember also, when both were pregnant, the Virgin Mary had visited her cousin Elizabeth and the baby John had leapt in her womb? He was aware of Christ even before his own birth, because John was empowered by the Holy Spirit. We then hear nothing more about him until he began to preach some 30 years later. But everything was in God's time, and so his ministry began, and he found himself preaching in the desert of Judea. What a place to start preaching - in the desert!

The people of Israel had waited 700 years between Isaiah's prophecies and the arrival of the Messiah. And here was John, that voice in the wilderness that Isaiah had spoken of, preparing the way for the long awaited messiah. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him" (Matt 3 v 3 quoting from Isaiah 40 v 3). And so it was that John's task was one of preparation for better to come. People needed to be sorry, be humble, and be repentant. Not just going through the motions, but being genuinely sorry for their wrong doings. "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins they were baptised by him in the River Jordan" (Matt 3 v 5&6)

A baptism - not as infants having no knowledge of what was happening to them, but as consenting adults going through this humbling experience of being dunked under water as a symbol of being cleansed and washed from their sins which would have been a great witness to others who followed their example of confession, repentance and cleansing. And I hope all of us understand and explain as necessary that infant baptism does not make the child a Christian in any shape or form of the word, but symbolises a promise made by parents and family to give the child a Christian upbringing that they may eventually understand and make their own mind up to follow Christ. And of course, that is true for all of us, whether we were baptised as an infant or not, does not save us! We have to confess and repent and be cleansed by the blood of the Lord Jesus who has paid the price for all of our sins.

The song 'Mary did you know' sung by Aled Jones and others, has these words:- "Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters. Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new, and this child that you delivered, will soon deliver you?" And so these people who were baptised by John, following his teaching of confession and repentance, were now ready to receive the coming Messiah.

John 1 v 17 says this "the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" And GRACE spells out what was happening through the coming of Jesus, for we receive 'God's Riches At Christ's Expense', for Jesus paid the price of our sin that we might be delivered from death, and enter the Heavenly Kingdom. John was making the crooked straight as his ministry prepared the way for the coming Messiah.

And as we approach Christmas time, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, I wonder how we are preparing the way today? We may be making lists of presents we have to get, we may have purchased Christmas cards ready to write and send. We may be worrying if we'll manage to get hold of a Turkey due to the bird flu outbreak and the shortages that will follow. But have we prepared for the celebration of Christ's birth by showing our friends and family what it means to us? By asking people who don't know Him to come and share in the Christmas services?

Only this week on the main news, new figures were released that show how far our nation has fallen, for there are now only 40% of people who consider themselves to be Christian (if only they were practicing Christians our churches would be full) but almost the same number are of no religious persuasion. Just goes to show how much work there is to be done!

And John in our reading recognises the fact that people need to become humble and change their ways, for he says in Matt 3 v 8 “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance”. But it’s who he is talking to here that is a sobering thought. For he is speaking to the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees and Sadducees! But John, full of the Holy Spirit knew there was no repentance in them, for they considered themselves to be righteous.

And we are the religious examples of our day – does our behaviour and attitude outside these church walls reflect the love of Jesus in all we say and do? Is our fruit in keeping with humility, confession and repentance I wonder? Or do we consider ourselves to be righteous?

There are 4 separate parts to the Methodist advent.

That of looking forward to the birth of Jesus.

That of looking forward to the beginning of Jesus’s ministry.

That of looking forward to the Salvation Jesus brings through His death and resurrection.

That of looking forward to the 2nd coming of Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

As Christians we are looking forward to a Jesus who is already with us if we have accepted Him into our hearts through confession and repentance in His name. Alleluia! Just as John, we need the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit to be bearing the fruit of the kingdom. John was chosen before he was conceived. He fulfilled his mission and paved the way for the coming Messiah. And shouldn’t that be our mission too? To prepare the way for those who don’t yet know Jesus as their Lord and saviour. We may not have been called to evangelise in the same way as John. We may not be called to go into desert places. But perhaps we are called to care for those in need. To encourage others in their walk of faith. To work quietly behind the scenes in the kingdom without recognition. For I am sure that God has many tasks He asks us to perform so that the love of Christ may be seen in us, and others may see a glimpse of Jesus in who we are and what we do.

We reminded ourselves that John recognised Jesus before he was born and leapt for joy. That’s amazing isn’t it? But it reminds us that all things are possible with God. And God, through His holy Spirit, enables each and everyone of us to recognise Jesus in a full and wholesome way - if we only place our trust and belief in Him, we can know the true joy of Christmas, when Jesus entered our world. There is only one present that everyone needs this Christmas – and that’s the presence of Jesus. And with God’s help I wonder if you might be called to lead someone to Him this Christmas, that they might leap for joy too! Amen.

StF 319 – Christ triumphant

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| 1) Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King!
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
Hear us as we sing: | 3) Suffering servant, scorned, ill-treated,
Victim crucified!
Death is through the cross defeated,
Sinners justified: |
| <i>Ch) Yours the glory and the crown,
The high renown,
The eternal name!</i> | 4) Priestly king, enthroned for ever
High in heaven above!
Sin and death and hell shall never
Stifle hymns of love: |
| 2) Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty concealing
By Your humble birth: | 5) So, our hearts and voices raising
Through the ages long,
Ceaselessly upon You gazing,
This shall be our song: |

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God we pray now for the nations of the world, for governments and leaders. May all who hold positions of authority be moved to seek justice and peace and to serve those they lead with integrity and care. Loving God, we continue to pray for the people of Ukraine, and all the countries of the world ravaged by war. Give to our world and its peoples the peace that comes from above, that they may find Christ's way of freedom and life. May all who are in positions of leadership be courageous enough to seek peaceful and just solutions. We remember all who suffer as a result of restrictions in China, and pray for justice and human rights to be preserved in such places of the world.

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

We pray, as always, for persecuted Christians everywhere, who are courageous in the faith, standing firm in their beliefs and suffering as a result. We ask that you draw very near to them in their times of trouble, and bring them peace.

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

We pray for our own country and government, that party politics and individual ambition would never be an excuse for failing to serve the good of society. We pray for our own local community, and pray for the work of the churches in each area to be centres of hope and healing in a broken world.

We pray for our own circuit that you will lead the work within it and bless those who give of their time and resources to further the kingdom. May we all know your guidance as we respond to your call.

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Loving Father God, we pray people who are sick, bereaved, lonely and those worried for the future and how they will cope. We long for them to know the comfort of your love and care in their time of need and distress as we think particularly of those known to us, in our families, churches and neighbourhood. We bring them before you now, asking that you will touch those sick in body, mind or spirit, the sorrowful and the anxious, the guilt ridden and the depressed, soothe their pain, cleanse and restore them, and all this we ask in Jesu's name. Amen.

StF 177 – Lo, He comes with clouds descending

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| 1) Lo, he comes with clouds descending,
Once for favoured sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
God appears on earth to reign. | 3) Those dear tokens of his passion
Still his dazzling body bears;
Cause of endless exultation
To his ransomed worshippers:
With what rapture, With what rapture,
With what rapture
Gaze we on those glorious scars. |
| 2) Every eye shall now behold him
Robed in glorious majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him,
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, Deeply wailing, Deeply wailing,
Shall the true Messiah see. | 4) Sing, amen, let all adore thee,
High on thine eternal throne;
Saviour, take the power and glory,
Claim the kingdom for thine own:
Come, Lord Jesus! Come, Lord Jesus!
Come, Lord Jesus!
Everlasting God, come down! |

Charles Wesley

The Grace

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now, and forever more, **Amen.**