

A service for 7th December, 2025 – Advent 2 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 72 verses 18 and 19

Praise the LORD, the God of Israel! He alone does these wonderful things.

Praise his glorious name forever! May his glory fill the whole world. Amen.

As Advent is a time of newness and renewal, I've chosen a hymn that has a catchy setting and fine words by Clare Stainsby. We shall sing the first four verses only.

Hymn number 174, 'Light a candle in a darkened place,'

1. Light a candle in a darkened place,

In its flame see hope on every face

Christ our Saviour will be born,

Heralding a brand new dawn,

So let it burn.

2. In the darkness, see the coming light,

Word of God speaks through the darkest night,

Keep a watch, the time is near,

Time for hope and not for fear,

So let it burn.

3. Stepping through each page of history,

Prophets contemplate this mystery,

Celebrate the coming King,

Words of joy and hope they bring,

So let it burn.

4. In the desert now the waiting's done,

Make things ready for your King, says John,

See, his glory is revealed,

And the hope for all is sealed,

So let it burn.

© Clare Stainsby (born 1959)

Let us pray

Almighty God, Creator of all life throughout the Universe, we have come to worship and praise your holy Name on the second Sunday in Advent. As we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas, we are astonished that you, who spoke life into being and founded ecosystems to maintain your creation, should care so much for flawed, sinful human beings that you sent your Son, Christ Jesus, into our world to share our humanity. He came to reveal your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection.

Today, we recall with humble joy how Jesus emptied himself of all divine powers, except for love and died for the sins of all. As we look to his coming again, help us to pray to you in faith, to sing our hymns joyfully and to both hear and respond to your holy word, so we may make a place in our hearts and lives to receive Christ and serve him always. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy' please respond with, 'Hear our prayer'. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we offer praise and thanksgiving for the many blessings you have showered upon us, for experiences and opportunities that have given meaning to our lives, for people who have loved, cared for, inspired and guided us, but most of all thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, without whom we are lost, hopeless and helpless.

Merciful God, as we confess your holiness, might and glory we know how we let you down, because of what we say and do that hurt and upset others and we think of

occasions when we haven't helped people who were in trouble or in need, even though we know we ought to have done. Lord, warm our hearts, help us to change our ways and forgive us.

'Lord, in your mercy' 'Hear our prayer'.

Heavenly Father, forgive us for our unwillingness to see our neighbours as Jesus sees them, especially those whose lifestyles, attitudes and beliefs differ markedly from ours. May we look out for the wellbeing of vulnerable people around us, people of all ages and backgrounds. Teach us to serve you with Christ at the heart of all we do and say.

'Lord, in your mercy' 'Hear our prayer'.

Faithful, gracious God, we believe you have heard and answered our prayer, offering us your pardon for our wrongdoing. Therefore, Lord, may we serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and warm-heartedly from now onwards, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

We shall say the prayer Jesus taught his disciples:

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.

We shall sing a hymn written by Francesca Leftley, fourteen years ago. Hymn number 168, 'Come. Lord Jesus, come'.

1. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Come, Lord Jesus, come,

To this world of ours.

2. Lord, we need you now;

Lord, we need you now;

Lord, we need you now

In this world of ours.

3. Fill us with your peace;

Fill us with your peace;

Fill us with your peace;

In this world of ours.

4. Touch us with your love;

Touch us with your love;

Touch us with your love

In this world of ours.

5. May we see your light;

May we see your light;

May we see your light;

In this world of ours.

© Francesca Leftley (b1955)

In our prayers of intercession we bring our concerns for neighbours nearby and far away to the Lord. Let us pray.

Lord of all, you came to earth as Jesus to bring healing to this beautiful, but broken world and so we turn to you in prayer, asking you to help us to always seek the well-being of people whose lives touch ours. Help us act as your earthly hands, ears, eyes, voice and

feet as we seek to offer practical support to neighbours who are in need or distress. Lord, grant us the strength, faith, steadfastness and compassion we need to show your love for all-comers.

Help us to play our part, however small it may be, in building a better, fairer world by standing up for justice for everybody and let us play our part in supporting the poor and marginalised here and abroad as generously as we can.

Sovereign Lord, we pray for a just peace to be established in countries where wars are being waged, with the resulting deaths, injuries, destruction and displacement of so many people. We pray especially for an end to fighting in Ukraine, the Holy Land, in Congo, Myanmar, Sudan and Somalia. Lord, inspire and guide leaders of the nations of the world, granting them wisdom and compassion so they learn the value of negotiation and compromise when disagreements arise, compared with the use of force.

Generous God, you ordained that we should be stewards of this planet, yet we have signally failed you, as increasingly severe storms, droughts and floods bear witness. Help us do all we can to care for our environment, so generations that succeed us will inherit an inhabitable planet. We pray for the victims of recent major storms in the Caribbean and the Philippines and victims of floods and landslides in Asia, that they may receive speedy help.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy and rise in inflation increases once more. Thank you for food banks and for other organisations which are helping the poor. May they and the Government and Church find ways of helping people who are facing the awful choice between heating their homes, or eating during the coming winter.

Lord of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we offer our prayer for neighbours who are ill, anxious, lonely or in any kind of need or trouble, but, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear and find it difficult to come to terms with their grief. In a time of quiet reflection, we offer names of those for whom we are particularly concerned – confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know and meet their needs..... Heavenly Father, help us to support them in whatever way we can, but embrace them all with your love, so they may be healed, comforted, given hope, encouraged and blessed with enduring peace.

Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our district and, indeed, for the World Church. Help us to seek to meet our neighbours' needs and offer not only healing but evidence of Christ's love for all-comers. Grant us faith to bravely bear the gospel light of hope and joy to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with all-comers, thereby glorifying your name, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1744 and reminds us that Jews had been waiting for the Messiah for centuries and many failed to recognize him when he came. We also wait for his Second Coming, so let us be ready to receive him when he comes. Hymn number 169, 'Come thou long-expected Jesus,'

**1. Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.**

**2. Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;**

Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

3. Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child, and yet a king,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.

4. By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone:
By thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne.

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 3 verses 1 to 12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, '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 Jordan River. 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 is already at 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 will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with 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." Amen.

Address: *“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.” Matt 3:3*

Many shows by famous performers and groups rely upon warm-up artists to raise the audience's expectations to fever pitch before they go on stage. It is certain that many less prestigious acts create the right atmosphere for the stars and in some ways, John the Baptist was the warm up act for Jesus, preparing the people to receive Jesus' Good News. But who was John the Baptist and what was his message?

John was the son of an old priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, who was related to Jesus' mother, Mary. He was pledged to serve God as a Nazarite by his parents, so he did not cut his hair, ate wild bees' honey and locust, food usually eaten by the poor, and dressed as simply as he lived, in a camel-hair habit secured with a leather belt. John joined the priestly sect, the Essenes who lived like hermits at **Qumran**. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, John began to preach and baptise Jews in the River Jordan. His message was as stark as his appearance: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”**

He is often portrayed as a fiery speaker, but must have seasoned his message with humour or brilliant illustrations to explain his message, for otherwise he would not have attracted huge crowds of Jews to hear him preach. He offered baptism to the crowds who came to hear him, for although it was not part of Jewish religious practice,

baptism symbolised the washing away of sins and the offering of a new beginning to our relationship with the Lord.

Despite his uncompromising, urgent message and Elijah – like dress, some Jews wondered whether or not he was the Messiah, so he made it clear that he was the forerunner of God's anointed, not the Messiah himself: **"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."**

After John the Baptist called the Pharisees and Sadducees a **brood of snakes, fleeing from God's judgement**, he told them to produce evidence that they had changed their hearts and lives, for otherwise they would not be saved. Repentance means more than saying sorry: it means turning right away from sin, back towards God, so their claim, **'We are children of Abraham'**, was no defence for paying lip-service to the Lord, not loving others as they loved themselves, therefore not honouring the Covenant.

So, let us take John's message on board when we are anticipating the coming of Christ: **"Change your hearts and lives because the kingdom of heaven is near."** Remember, Christmas is not just a celebration of God's greatest gift to the world two thousand years ago; it is a reminder that Jesus has promised to come again and therefore we should ready ourselves to greet him when he comes.

Are we living as Jesus wants us to? Are we as faithful in prayer and studying the scriptures as we ought to be? Are we answering our call to serve Jesus, either in the church, or in supporting members of our community, or are we guilty of putting it off until it is more convenient for us? Could we as individuals or church find new ways of serving our community, rather than risking becoming complacent – as were many of those Pharisees criticised by John?

If people come to our church during Advent or Christmas-tide, perhaps for the first time, or following a long absence, will we make them welcome, supporting them through the service and taking a polite interest in them? Will we be as willing to do so if their appearance, culture or lifestyles are markedly different from ours, or will we be like the Pharisees regard them with contempt? I have a nagging fear that we Christians sometimes project the same kind of prickly rectitude as those Pharisees. Lord Revd. Dr. Leslie Griffiths of Burry Port, a Methodist theologian once, on "Thought for the Day", described the chapel-goers in the village where he lived as a boy as **'vinegar-faced'**. If people consider us so inflexible and unapproachably correct that they feel unwelcome in church what a disservice we do to Christ, for he not only mixed with the unclean, the sinful, despised outsiders of society, but ate with them, talked with them and offered them healing and hope. Do we let the joy of our faith in Christ shine through our lives, or do we cast a cloud of self-righteous gloom wherever we go? **During this Advent, especially, but not exclusively, let us share his love with our neighbours in words and actions, for although God's love came down to us at Christmas, Jesus is for life – the whole of our life – not just one day each year. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by Revd. Carl Daw, an American Episcopal priest and Curator of Hymnological Collections and Adjunct Professor of Hymnology at Boston University School of Theology. I have asked that we sing it to the tune "Aberystwyth" which ought to be familiar and so let you concentrate upon the words. With no more ado, let us sing hymn number 189, 'Wild and lone the prophet's voice'.

1. Wild and lone the Prophet's voice
Echoes through the desert still,
Calling us to make a choice,
Bidding us to do God's will:
"Turn from sin and be baptized;
Cleanse your heart and mind and soul.
Quitting all the sin you prized,
Yield your life to God's control."

2. "Bear the fruit repentance sows:
Lives of justice, truth and love.
Trust no other claim than those;
Set your heart on things above.
Soon the Lord will come in power,
Burning clean the threshing-floor;
Then will flames the chaff devour;
Wheat alone shall fill God's store."

3. With such preaching stark and bold
John proclaimed salvation near,
And his timeless warnings hold
Words of hope to all who hear.
So we dare to journey on,
Led by faith through ways untrod,
Till we come at last like John
To behold the Lamb of God.

© Carl P. Daw Jr. (Born 1944)

Benediction

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