

A service for 11th December, 2022 – Advent 3 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 146 verses 5 to 10

Blessed are they whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them— the LORD, who remains faithful for ever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. The LORD reigns for ever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. 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, who spoke life into every being throughout the Universe, we have come to worship and praise your holy Name on the second Sunday in Advent. We are amazed that the Lord, whose wisdom and might are far beyond our understanding, care so much for flawed, sinful human beings that you sent your Son, Christ Jesus, to reveal your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection. Today, we recall with humble joy how you sent your Son into our world to save us and we look to his coming once again. Help us, therefore, 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 to 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 recognize with thanksgiving how you have blessed us in so many ways throughout our lives. Thank you, too, for experiences and opportunities that have given meaning to our lives and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most

of all, Lord, thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, without whom we are lost, hopeless and helpless.

Merciful God, when we consider ourselves in the light of your holiness, we see how often we let you down when we say and do things that hurt and upset others. There are times, too, when we don't help people we see them in trouble or in need and, even though we try to justify our hard-heartedness we know, deep down, that we are failing you. Lord, 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. Warm our souls with your love, so we may 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, help us to serve both you and our neighbours both 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.

There is room for you and all of nature

During Advent, I am going to use the Methodist Programme, 'There is Room' to show how the Scriptures, especially the Nativity stories invite all-comers to feel part of God's story, irrespective of their lifestyles, or backgrounds. This Sunday, the theme is there is room for all of nature.

Reading: Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 14 ("The Message")

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for.

So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were shepherds camping in the neighbourhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: a Saviour has just been born in David's town, a Saviour who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: "Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him." Amen.

Although the nativity character named in “There is room for...”, The idea for today is to consider the backdrop of the story of Jesus’ birth. We have just heard about the shepherds and their flocks, so it possible that a couple of sheep may have been carried protectively by the shepherds who visited the new-born Christ. Certainly the cattle stall would have held oxen, or cows before it was cleared for Joseph and Mary. It may also have housed an ass which would have been helpful to carry goods about.

The Magi probably travelled to Bethlehem by camels, or possibly on horseback, though they didn’t arrive until the family was living in a house. The reference to animals in Jesus’ nativity is an observation that animals, and for that matter, plants are part of God’s story and their lives are interwoven with ours. Anybody who has watched the “Earthshot Awards”, or any of David Attenborough’s documentaries should be in no doubt of the beauty, but fragility of life on our planet. If you read the opening of Genesis, you will know that God declared his Creation ‘GOOD’: he loves it and the natural world is part of his story.

The video for this week’s theme is about Sprowson Methodist Church, Norwich which has a large site which has been turned into a community garden. We are told that there are bacteria in the soil that act as anti-depressants and that gardening helps us to relax. (I listened to this a day after I’d spent two hours filling a green wheely bin with sycamore leaves in Hannah’s garden, so I’m not entirely convinced!) Seriously, gardening has therapeutic benefits. MHA advocated it for this year’s appeal and I know how valuable sensory gardens are for people living with a dementia. Sprowson Methodists have created a wildflower meadow on part of the site and raised gardens for the community to use. It has a mini-library and refreshment facilities, so user do not have to enter the church unless they want to. Nevertheless, they can socialise, benefit from the exercise of gardening and have the fruit (or vegetables) of their labours. The garden is important for lonely or bereaved people to meet, to develop friendships and find purpose in their lives once more. It is important, too, for it reminds us of God’s power and presence in the whole of life. His love extends to all peoples and all life; it is not just for a select few.

During Advent and Christmas, churches are often visited by non-church-goers or people who haven’t been to church for a long time. Can we give them room and time to enjoy their experience? Can we encourage them to come to any social activity – a tea and chat morning / afternoon – where they can get to know us and we them? What can we do as church – a people more than the building – to ease some of the loneliness that burdens our community, especially after COVID19 inflicted itself upon us? We may not have an expanse of land that can be cultivated, but can we make room for visitors, where they can socialise, ease their loneliness and anxiety, not simply in a worship setting? Can we become a church that campaigns for the environment, if not for our sakes, then for coming generations? Amen.

We continue our worship with hymn number 125, which was written by a Congregational Minister, Revd. Albert Frederick Bayly. We shall sing ‘Praise and thanksgiving, father we offer’.

- 1. Praise and thanksgiving, Father, we offer
For all things living you have made good;
Harvest of sown fields, fruits of the orchard,
Hay from the mown fields, blossom and wood.**
- 2. Lord, bless the labour we bring to serve you,
That with our neighbour we may be fed.**

**Sowing or tilling, we would work with you;
Harvesting, milling, for daily bread**

**3. Father, providing food for your children,
Your wisdom guiding teaches us share
One with another, so that, rejoicing,
With us our brother may know you care.**

**4. Then will your blessing reach every people;
Each one confessing your gracious hand.
When you are reigning no one will hunger;
Your love sustaining fruitful the land.**

© Albert Bayly (1901 – 1984)

In our prayers of intercession we bring our concerns to God.

Lord of Creation, you came to earth as Christ Jesus to bring healing to this beautiful, but broken world which you spoke into being, and so we turn to you in prayer, asking you to help us to change our ways, so that we always seek the well-being of people whose lives touch ours. Help us to act as your earthly hands by reaching out and offering practical support to neighbours who are in need or distress. Lord, grant us strength, faith, steadfastness and compassion we need to show your love for all-comers.

Teach us to share the earth's resources rather than fighting over them; to care for our environment, so generations that succeed us will inherit an inhabitable planet and to stand up for justice for everybody. Lord, help us play our part in building a better world, even if the part we play is small.

Sovereign Lord, we pray for an end to the wars that rage around the world, resulting in death, injury to combatants, and civilians alike and the destruction of national infrastructure. Grant the leaders of the nations of the world wisdom and compassion so they lead their people with mercy and justice and do not resort to force in order to have their own way. Heavenly Father, we offer our prayer for victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution. Bring an end to their suffering and help them rebuild their lives. Warm our hearts with your compassion, so we ensure that all receive the support they need to have a fresh start and hope for the future.

Generous God, we pray for the victims of recent natural disasters, that they may receive speedy help, as well as people in countries facing severe famines, where droughts and warfare have made the situation worse. We ask a blessing on the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid which are working to provide them with desperately-needed aid. May they succeed in bringing relief to those needy lands.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of food and energy rise and as inflation increases to record levels. We thank you for food banks, warm spaces and for other initiatives which are helping the poor, but May the Government and other agencies find new ways of helping people who are facing the awful choice of heating their homes, or eating to manage during the coming winter.

Lord of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we offer our prayer for neighbours who are ill, or in any kind of need or trouble, but, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear and who 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 find new ways of supporting our communities, as we move from the COVID19 crisis onto the current financial squeeze. May we meet many of our neighbours' needs and offer not only healing but evidence of Christ's love for all-comers. Grant us faith to 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 Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 11 verses 2 to 11

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Amen.

Our worship continues as we sing a hymn by Revd. Jan Berry a URC minister from North West England. She said of this hymn, 'I wanted to include the traditional Advent themes of judgment and justice – but I wanted to take it away from any suggestion of 'Last Judgment'. I wanted to write about judgment and peace now and place the Advent themes in a slightly more contemporary context of social action and justice.' Hymn number 183, 'Praise to the God who clears the way'

1. Praise to the God who clears the way

Preparing room and space:

For power and pride will lose their sway

As peace comes in their place

2. Praise to the God who comes to judge

The truth of word and deed,

Who calls our minds and wills to change,

Rebuking wealth and greed.

3. Praise to the God who waits with us

For hope and joy to reign,

Who shares our suffering and our loss,

Embodied in our pain.

4. Praise to the God who comes to bring

**Comfort to all who mourn.
The whole creation 'Glory' sings
As Christ the light is born.**

© Jan Berry (born 1953)

Sermon: *"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Mt. 11: 3*
Our reading deals with John during his imprisonment. He must have realised that his days were numbered, or at best, were likely to be spent in prison for speaking out against King Herod's adulterous relationship with his niece, **Herodias**, who was already married to his half-brother, **Philip**. Although John was a man of immense faith, he felt the need for Jesus to confirm whether or not he was the real Messiah – that he hadn't preached in vain. As a result, he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus directly to confirm who he was. Jesus replied, **"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."** In other words, Jesus referred to the prophecy of Isaiah about God's anointed, who would restore sight to the blind, heal the disabled deaf and diseased and preach Good News to humble people who put their trust in God and not material riches. **"Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me"**, essentially means 'Trust me and don't judge me by your own concept of who the Messiah is'.

John would not have seen or heard Jesus preach or heal, though he would have received reports from his own disciples, including reports of his miracles. Miracles on their own were signs that Jesus was the Messiah, but were not part of the traditional Jewish expectation of what God's anointed would do. John, like most contemporaries, would have expected the Messiah to be another King David or Judas Maccabeus, a warrior who would succeed in ridding Judea of the Roman occupiers, establishing the nation as the prime economic and political power in the known world, before, reuniting the northern and southern kingdoms in a new, enforced covenant with the Almighty.

However, John would have received reports of Jesus challenging the religious establishment, not fasting as he and his followers did, ignoring some of the Hebrew customs, such as ritual cleanliness rules, talking to a Samaritan woman and rigid Sabbath observance. Most of all, he would have been disturbed when John heard that Jesus mixed with tax-collectors, fallen women, people who were diseased, but most of all with Gentiles, who Jews believed to stand condemned by the Almighty and with both Romans and Samaritans, both of whom Jews hated with passion. He must have wondered how the Chosen One could indulge in such behaviour.

Jesus' reply was that he ought to be judged by his fulfilment of Isaiah's Messianic vision, not by his own prejudices. Christ was going to lead a revolution; the greatest revolution in history, but it would not be a conquest by force. His healing restored people to their community, offered reconciliation and hope. God's plan for our redemption was not solely for Jews, but for everybody: people on the margins of society as well as the privileged; the despised and lowly; foreigners – everybody who accepted the Good News and turned from their sinful, selfish ways back to the path God calls us to walk. We are called to love our neighbours as ourselves, to be kind-hearted, generous and forgiving – as Jesus was.

Loving does not mean we have to like, or approve of our neighbours' lifestyle, nor agree with their politics or beliefs. We can differ profoundly, yet if a neighbour is in trouble, need, or distress, we show our love by seeking to help however we can. This reading is a firm reminder that we should not judge either by outward appearance nor

by the reports from other people, for none of us is free from prejudice: all of us can judge unfairly as a result.

There is a story of a monastery that fell on hard times. People stopped calling to buy the goods produced by the monks and nobody had come forward to join the monastery for several years, so it looked as though the monastery would have to close.

In desperation, the abbot visited the Bishop for advice. When he returned, the monks crowded round him anxiously.

“Brother abbot,” they asked, “what did the Bishop say?” The abbot looked gravely at them and replied,

“Christ is among you.” Then he retired to his study. The monks looked at one another in astonishment. If Christ was among them, who could it be?

Next day, every monk went out of his way to treat the other monks with loving respect, just in case the one they met was indeed, Jesus. The atmosphere in the monastery was quickly transformed: arguments ceased; old grievances were forgiven; everyone co-operated with one another, lest they displeased the Christ among them. Soon, people began to visit the monastery to trade and worship and before long new recruits joined them.

The wise Bishop brought about the change by getting the monks to treat one another as if they were dealing with Jesus. As we journey through Advent, let us treat others as if we are dealing with Jesus and watch how things get better. More than that, let us learn not to judge others by their appearance, lifestyles, or by anything that makes them different to us. The nativity stories make room for all kinds of people: the shepherds who were considered dishonest, unclean outsiders; the wise men who were foreign astrologers when telling fortunes by the stars was prohibited to Jews; a young mother who was unmarried when she conceived; the inn-keeper who found room for the homeless couple. Remember, God’s arms are open wide to embrace us all, whoever we are and however broken we are. Now is a good time to embrace the Lord. 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. 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) (to "Aberystwyth" StF189ii)

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.