

A service for 12th December, 2021 Advent 3 (StF)

We light this candle to remind us of the terrible response of Herod, who in fear of losing his power caused pain and death. Lord Jesus you came to show a new way - to serve and not be served - help us to love our neighbour as ourselves as you have called us to do. Amen.

Call to Worship: Psalm 19 verses 7 to 11

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD.

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1744 and reminds us that Christmas is not just a celebration of Jesus' birth, but we are also waiting for his Second Coming, so let us be ready to receive him when he comes. We shall sing 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}

Let us pray.

Almighty God, author of all life throughout the universe, we come to worship you on this third Sunday in Advent, as we seek a greater understanding and appreciation of both your saving grace and purpose for us. Your faithful love sustains us, day by day and the beauty, power and complexity of our world remind us of your mighty wisdom and holiness.

We rejoice that, despite our failings and faithlessness, you love us so much that after we failed to respond to the patriarchs and prophets, instead of rejecting or punishing us, you took human form, coming as Christ Jesus, to reveal your true nature through his healings, miracles and teaching. We believe his crucifixion and resurrection have redeemed us from enslavement to sin and death, so we come into your presence with awe and joy, in Jesus' name. Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving and confession. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for all that you do for us, give us and accomplish in us, for people who have loved and guided us and for loving us not only at our best, but at our worst when we are loveless and unlovable. Merciful Lord, your grace and goodness humble us, for we know we fail to live as you call us to. In grief we confess we don't love others as we love ourselves and we are sometimes full of doubts, or half-hearted in our service to you. Gracious God, help us to change our ways and in Jesus' name forgive us both for the sins we have committed and for the opportunities to do good that we have spurned.

Gracious God, we believe you hear and answer our prayers. Confident that you have forgiven us, send us forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, so we can take Good News to the world in our words and deeds in the glorious name of Jesus, our Saviour and friend. Amen.

We shall say the prayer that Jesus gave us:

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 next hymn was translated from a Fifteenth Latin text from Trier in Germany by Revd. Percy Dearmer. Revd. Dearmer was co-author of "Songs of Praise" in 1925 and "The Oxford Book of Carols", in which this carol first appeared in 1928. We shall sing number 218, 'Unto us a boy is born!'

1. Unto us a boy is born!

King of all creation;

Came he to a world forlorn,

The Lord of ev'ry nation,

The Lord of ev'ry nation.

2. Cradled in a stall was he,

Watched by cows and asses;

But the very beasts could see

That he the world surpasses,

That he the world surpasses.

3. Then the fearful Herod cried,

'Pow'r is mine in Jewry!'

So the blameless children died –

The victims of his fury,

The victims of his fury.

4. Now may Mary's Son, who came

Long ago to love us,

Lead us all with hearts aflame

Unto the joys above us,

Unto the joys above us!

5. Omega and alpha he!

Let the organ thunder,

While the choir with peals of glee

Shall rend the air asunder,

Shall rend the air asunder.

We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns and petitions to our Lord. When I say 'Bringer of shalom', please respond with 'Come, Lord Jesus, come'.

Lord of all, we recognize your faithfulness in meeting our daily needs and for loving us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus, to show us how to live as you want us to. Therefore, in response to your overwhelming love, we pray that you will grant us the faith and compassion we need to act as your earthly hands. However, there are many issues that concern us but which we can do little to nothing to change, so we ask you to intervene, for nothing is impossible to you.

'Bringer of shalom,'

'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Lord of all, Jesus came to bring your shalom to this broken world: its first meaning is peace, so we pray for an end to conflicts that rage across the planet, causing deaths, destruction and injuries, besides swelling the number of refugees. Teach leaders of the nations to seek justice and to deal mercifully, for only when justice and mercy are present will peace prevail. Hear our prayer for the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, that they may receive the support and care to rebuild their broken lives. Remember in your mercy the people of Afghanistan under Taliban rule once more and facing food shortages and Sudan and neighbouring countries where fighting may result in a catastrophic famine.

'Bringer of shalom,'

'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Shalom also means to prosper, so Lord of grace, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by striving to end poverty here and abroad, by sharing the earth's resources instead of fighting over them and by learning to co-operate with one another, accepting our differences, even rejoicing in diversity, rather than being divided by it.

'Bringer of shalom,'

'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

A third meaning of shalom is healing and wellbeing, so we pray that you will look with compassion on people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. May they receive the care and support they need to be healed, to be granted new strength and to be given fresh hope by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. We remember, too, people who have been deeply marked by this pandemic: those living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers, for whom the last twenty months have been nightmarish. Also, we pray for neighbours who feel lonely, afraid and unloved; for others who are now unemployed or in debt because of the effects of COVID19 on society and everyone who has lost loved ones in these awful times. Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, so they find healing, courage, comfort and a transcending peace.

'Bringer of shalom,'

'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Shalom can also mean harmony, so God of creation, recent terrible floods and wildfires on several continents remind us about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We pray that the declarations at the COP26 conference will encourage all of us to begin the necessary changes to our lifestyles before it is too late, so that we learn to live in harmony with the earth, so future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

We pray for your Church, both local and worldwide: heal our differences, unite us in love, service and outreach, so everybody may believe that Jesus is indeed, the Lord and Saviour of the world. Open our mouths that we boldly proclaim good news. Open our hearts, so we practise what we preach.

‘Bringer of shalom,’

‘Come, Lord Jesus, come.’

A final meaning is your blessing, so we ask you to bless people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: the NHS, carers, scientists and key-workers throughout the country. May they remain successful and safe in their work, dear Lord.

‘Bringer of shalom,’

‘Come, Lord Jesus, come.’

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us live Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers, thereby glorifying your holy Name, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Our gospel reading is Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 to 8 and 16 to 18

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked,

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said,

"Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." Amen.

We continue our worship with jointly written by Noel Richards and Gerald Coates, who founded Pioneer, a network of churches and groups whose aim is to "develop new churches across the UK and engage in mission globally. Noel Richards was inspired to write hymns and worship songs after he attended a concert at the Colston Hall in Bristol at which twenty-one year old Graham Kendrick performed. We shall sing hymn number 405, 'Great is the darkness that covers the earth'.

1. Great is the darkness that covers the earth,

Oppression, injustice and pain

Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,

Though many have come in your name.

Watching while sanity dies,

Touched by the madness and lies. Chorus:

*Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,
Pour out your spirit we pray.*

*Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,
Pour out your spirit on us today.*

**2. May now your church rise with power and love,
This glorious gospel proclaim.**

**In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in your name.**

**Help us bring light to this world
That we might speed your return. *Chorus:***

**3. Great celebrations on that final day
When out of the heavens you come
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end
And rulers will bow at your throne.**

**Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we shall meet. *Chorus: Gerald Coates (b. 1944) & Noel Richards (b. 1955)***

Address: Herod feared – *Matthew 2:1 – 8*

It is ironic that Herod the Great was King of the Jews, yet he wasn't a Jew. He was an Idumean, appointed by Caesar Augustus to rule Judea on behalf of the Roman Empire, which had conquered the territory. Herod's family had converted to Judaism for political reasons, rather than a matter of faith, so he and his family were barely tolerated by the Jews, so to win them over he began to develop the Second Temple, built by Ezra and Nehemiah on the return from Exile, to a place of wonder, like Solomon's original. He also indulged in a number of expensive building projects that provided employment and brought prestige to Judea.

Nevertheless, Herod made enemies among Pharisees and Sadducees because of his lifestyle which certainly paid little heed to the faith he professed. On at least two occasions, he was recalled to Rome, following accusations of cruel treatment of opponents and an allegation by his mother-in-law that he had been involved in the assassination of his brother-in-law, who he considered a rival for his kingdom. As a result, Herod became so paranoid and ruthless that he had his wife, Mariamne, and their two sons executed, because of an alleged plot against him. Nothing and nobody was allowed to threaten his position of power. Indeed, he had a personal bodyguard of two thousand and a network of secret police around the kingdom. Despite his wealth and power, Herod the Great was full of fear.

I don't know what makes you afraid, but I mastered my fear of tarantulas and snakes ended thirty or more years ago, when my children volunteered me to handle them at a wildlife centre near Wombourne. Many of these fears can make us figures of fun to some, whereas fears of poverty, illness, old age, loss and death are legitimate and should not be brushed away lightly. Herod's fear lay in losing power, wealth and prestige, as our Bible reading showed. The third verse is the key to his feeling: '**When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him**', for the Greek word used for '**disturbed**' in the New International and English Standard Bibles is '**tarasso**', which also means **frightened** (NRSV), **terrified**(Message) and '**upset**' (GNB). Why, then, was Herod and the Establishment in Jerusalem so afraid when a

band of Magi from the east – possibly Western Iran, or Ethiopia – enquired about a new-born king, whose birth had been indicated by an exceptionally bright star in the western sky?

Magi were students of heavenly bodies, not astronomers, though, but astrologers – they told fortunes based upon the position of stars in the sky. Fortune-telling in any form was prohibited by Torah, the Law given to Moses, so astrologers would be considered egregious sinners and the Magi were Gentiles, despised by orthodox Jews, despite which Herod didn't reject their assertion about a new-born king, but instead called the religious experts to determine where this birth was expected to occur. Such was his fear that he met the Magi secretly, directed them to search diligently for this new king and added that, when they had found the child they should return and let him know, so that he could worship the new-born king. I don't think the Magi needed to be warned in a dream before they suspected Herod's motives, for he neither accompanied them, nor dispatched a priest or attendant to accompany the Gentiles. Even though they knew little about Judaism – or Herod's reputation – I'm sure they realized why Herod wanted to know the child's whereabouts.

Herod and the upper classes of Jerusalem were disturbed by news of a new king, a true king from the lineage of David. Herod had already faced challenges to his reign and only held power because he was useful to Rome, collecting taxes and keeping the trade routes open with his army. He was not a true Jew and he feared that a descendant of King David would naturally be more popular to the Jewish people than he was. He stood to lose power, respect and control – possibly his life if this new king prevailed.

The Jewish political and religious establishment were also upset, because many of them collaborated with Rome in order to flourish in an occupied land. The religious leaders were corrupt, engaging in nepotism and power-grabbing, rather than seeking righteousness. It was illustrated thirty years later, when, after Jesus raised Lazarus, the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. **"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."** These leading religious figures were terrified that the new King would expose their corruption and unite the people against them. They were terrified that the light of truth would expose their hypocrisy, that they, like Herod, would lose their positions, reputations and control which is why they became such powerful opponents of Christ's ministry.

How does fear affect our discipleship? Some of us may be afraid to be known as Christians, in case other people, especially family or friends reject us. At Brierley Hill Methodist Church, we had an Iranian asylum-seeker who became a Christian and whose family turned on her and wanted her killed. Are some afraid that past events make them unfit to follow Jesus and that others will judge them? If so, remember that none of us is perfect and Jesus came to give us a new start. It is not what we have

done wrong in the past that is important: it is what we do today and in the future that counts.

Many people are fearful of committing themselves to Jesus and his good news, because it means losing some control of our lives, so we can answer our call to follow Christ. If so, remember Jesus left the glories of heaven to live among ordinary people just like us to save us from our sins by dying on a cross. Are we willing to make changes to our lives, possibly big ones, to change careers, or to risk our reputation and friendships to answer a call from God? I've known a number of people who have given up well-paid, prestigious jobs to serve Christ in humbler ways and I haven't found one who laments that he or she could have been wealthy or powerful, because serving Christ is reward in itself for them. **May we have the vision of John the Baptist, the trust of Mary and the steadfastness of Joseph, so we can conquer our fears and follow our Saviour. Amen.**

We conclude our worship as we sing a hymn by Francesca Leftley, 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.**

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Benediction

Come, Lord Jesus: fill us with your love and guide us by your truth. Come, drive away the gloom that is over the earth. Let your love shine brightly upon us. And the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us now and remain with us evermore. Amen.