

**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, Creator of all life throughout the Universe, we have come to worship and praise your holy Name on the Third 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.**

**Our first Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 to 12**

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."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Amen.

**Address 1**

In Matthew's nativity story, we read of the Magi's visit to Jesus. Notice, in this account, Jesus' parents were living in a house, not a stable, so it's likely the Magi arrived more than a year after Lord's birth. To be fair to them, scholars think they came from Persia or modern-day Iran, or even what's now Yemen, so they may have travelled at least 1500 miles. However, that's not an important detail to distract us from story's inclusive nature.

The Magi or wise men were Gentile astrologers and would have been doubly despised by ordinary Jews, not just because they were foreign, but because astrology is prohibited by Torah – in Deuteronomy chapter 18. Nevertheless, they saw a message of a royal birth in the cosmos and answered it. No one, not even the high priests, asked to accompany the Magi, so they could see and worship the baby, yet in Matthew's words, the wise men **'saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.'**

Matthew's gospel, which was written mainly for a Jewish audience, uses the story to tell them Jesus came for all people, not a select elite, that is, the Jewish people. I hope we're as welcoming as the Magi, especially during Advent and Christmas when people may venture into church for the first time, or following a long absence. I hope we'll be welcoming to people who're different to us: from different racial & cultural backgrounds; people with learning difficulties, or physical challenges; people whose lifestyles challenge us, or those who simply have no idea what to do in church. Jesus calls us to open our hearts to all-comers and the salvation he offers is for everyone, not just us.

The gifts they brought have different meanings and we offer presents for a variety of reasons. Kings are offered gifts as a sign of respect. Presents are given to celebrate important times, such as birthdays, anniversaries, festivals etcetera. They may be given as sign of friendship or love. King Wenceslas offered the poor man gifts out of compassion. The greatest of all gifts is love, for it represents God's love for all and his compassion for the needy. We are called to love both friend and stranger – even those we find it hard to like – not only at Christmastide, but always. 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 saw the brokenness of the world you created and so came to earth as Jesus to bring healing and hope. We recognize that you have loved blessed us and so we turn to you, asking you to help us to be a blessing to 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 any kind of need, trouble or distress. Lord, grant us the resources 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 not a select few. Let us play our part in supporting the poor and marginalised here and abroad as generously as we can. May we learn to care for the environment by making changes to our daily lives, so we waste less, recycle more and try to make this planet a fit place to live for future generations.

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. May we do all we can to care for our environment, to reduce the harm that global warming is causing, here and abroad. 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 and recover from the disasters.

Sovereign Lord, we pray for a just peace to be established in countries where wars are being waged, resulting in the 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, Cambodia, Thailand, 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.

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 enfold them all with your love which offers healing, comfort, hope, encouragement and enduring peace.

Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our district and, indeed, the World Church. Fill us with your love and, in the might of the Holy Spirit enable us to share it in practical ways with both friends and strangers alike. Grant us faith to bravely bear good news of hope and joy to our suffering, increasingly secular world that desperately needs it.

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 second 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.

*We continue with a hymn 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)

**Address 2: "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 spent in prison for speaking out against the king. Although he 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 prophesy 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.

As we prepare for Christmas, don't just consider the Christmas cards we have to write, the presents, decorations and food we must buy and where and how we are going to spend the celebration. Advent is a good time to consider our relationship with the Lord and our neighbours: time to heal old grievances and quarrels; time to look out for neighbours who are lonely or needy; time to revisit the nativity accounts which point out God's care for all and time when we ought to seek Christ's will – and then do it.

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: including despised, unclean shepherds, who

represent people whose lifestyles and opinions are challenging, as well as the homeless and needy. God's love includes the Magi, foreigners and people of different faiths whom the Jews considered beyond God's grace, representing asylum-seekers, refugees and, in a period of antisemitism and islamophobia, both Jews and Moslems. The Nativity has a young mother who was unmarried when she conceived, but who has blessed us all because of her obedience to God's call. 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.

*We conclude our worship with 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)

***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.**