

A service for Advent 3 – 17th December, 2023 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 150

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD. Amen.

Our opening hymn, by Mark Earey, explains the significance of each Sunday in Advent and is set to the lovely melody 'Angel voices'. We shall sing the first three verses of hymn number 165, 'Advent candles tell their story'

1. Advent candles tell their story

As we watch and pray,
Longing for the Day of Glory,
'Come, Lord, soon,' we say.
Pain and sorrow, tears and sadness
Changed for gladness
On that day.

2. Prophet voices loudly crying,
Making pathways clear,
Glimpsing glory, self-denying,
Calling all to hear.
Through their message – challenged, shaken –
Hearts awaken:
God is near!

3. John the Baptist, by his preaching
And by water poured,
Brought to those who heard his teaching
News of hope restored:
'Keep your vision strong and steady,
And be ready
For the Lord.'

© Mark Earey (Born 1965)

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, Lord of creation and Saviour of the world, we have come to worship and adore you, for you are the Word who spoke life into being, whose wisdom and might are boundless. We acknowledge that you are the one true God whose power and wisdom are far beyond our understanding, yet who in loving-kindness provides our daily needs. You are the loving heavenly Father, who from the beginning, has tried to draw human beings close to you: first through the prophets and patriarchs, who gave us your law to show us how we ought to live; yet, when we rebelled against you, at the right time, you gave sinners like us the most precious gift of all, your only Son, Jesus.

In Advent, we remember how you took human form and lived among us to show in words and actions how we should live. Come into our hearts, dear Lord, guide and empower us in our discipleship, so both our worship and our service are pleasing to you, proclaiming your glory, through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'Please forgive us'.

Merciful God, we know how deep is our need to set ourselves right with you, for often we fail to love and serve you as we ought, through weakness, sinfulness, wilfulness, carelessness or fear. For our disobedience and faithlessness, Lord, in your mercy, **Please, forgive us.**

In shame and sadness, we recall occasions when we have failed to care for neighbours who were lonely, distressed, needy or troubled, through our selfishness, pride, anger, cold-heartedness or indifference. For our failure to share your love with others, Lord, in your mercy, **Please, forgive us.**

Gracious God, whose redemptive love took Christ to die at Calvary for the world's sinfulness, we believe your gracious word that our sins have been forgiven. Renew us in your grace and empower us to serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

We shall 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.

As Advent is a time of newness and renewal, I've chosen a hymn that did not appear in 'Hymns and Psalms', but has fine words by Clare Stainsby. Although, strictly-speaking, we ought to sing only the first four verses, I propose we sing the whole hymn. 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.**

**5. Mary found true favour with the Lord,
Yet she trembled at his strange reward,
Knew this was the special One,
Hope for many through God's Son,
So let it burn.**

6. Do not fear, today I bring good cheer,
Jesus Christ, the Saviour now is here,
God has lit his flame of love,
Through his Son from Heaven above.
So let it burn.

© Clare Stainsby (born 1959)

We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns for people nearby and far away to our Lord. When I say, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' please say 'Come Lord Jesus'.

In joyful expectation of his coming to reign, we pray to our Lord Jesus, saying, Come, Lord Jesus. **'Come, Lord Jesus.'**

Loving Lord, come to your world as King of the nations, to bring peace for all, built upon justice and mercy. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern the countries of the world, or who head opposition groups, so they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way. We pray for wise and compassionate treatment of the victims of war, terrorism, persecution and of refugees. Help them find both refuge and support, so they may rebuild their lives.

We pray for lasting resolutions to the war in Ukraine and the bitter conflict between Hamas and the Israeli Defence Force in Gaza. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost as a result of the attack by Hamas on 7th October in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting in Gaza, most of whose population are non-combatants, the elderly, women and children with nowhere to flee, caught between the warring sides, deprived of food, water, fuel and medicines and facing constant danger. We remember, too, the hostages taken by Hamas and their families and, whilst we appreciate its fury, may the Knesset constrain its response and observe International Law.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord, before you rulers will stand in silence. Guide the leaders of the wealthy nations and the World Bank to show mercy to the people of the Developing Nations, where indescribable poverty exists. Inspire them to offer practical support to break the chains of poverty once and for all, thereby granting our poorer brothers and sisters both security and dignity.

Hear our prayer for those in our own country who are unemployed, homeless, or who need to use food banks to survive. Bless all who provide food for and all who run food banks, and other organizations which serve the poor. Create in our politicians and business leaders a vision for a fairer society in which the poor and disfranchised are given hope and grant that we, too, may contribute to such a great work.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord of shalom, come to your people as healer and bearer of pain. We pray for people from this church, for families and friends, for people from work, or from our community who are ill, lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In a time of silence we offer name of people for whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will know their needs.
Loving Lord, in your grace, enfold us all in your love, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come, Lord of creation, for we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather. Merciful God, as

we pray for victims of disasters and famines may you bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, Christian Aid and All We Can.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come Father God, as Christmas nears, we pray for ourselves. We don't know what others will ask of us so we pray for the Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us and our families. Keep us safe and fill us with the love and grace of Christ Jesus, so that our thoughts, words and deeds offer peace and love to people around us, bringing you glory in his holy name. Amen.

We continue our worship with a translation of a hymn by Charles Coffin, an Eighteenth Century rector of the University of Paris. It was translated by Revd. John Chandler, vicar of Whitley, in Oxfordshire and included in his hymnal, "The Hymns of the Primitive Church" during 1837. Hymn number 182, 'On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry'

1. On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

Announces that the Lord is nigh;

Awake and hearken, for he brings

Glad tidings of the King of kings!

2. Then cleansed be every Christian breast,

And furnished for so great a guest!

Yea, let us each our heart prepare

For Christ to come and enter there.

3. For thou art our salvation, Lord,

Our refuge, and our great reward;

Without thy grace we waste away

Like flowers that wither and decay.

4. To heal the sick stretch out thy hand,

And bid the fallen sinner stand;

Shine forth, and let thy light restore

Earth's own true loveliness once more.

5. All praise, eternal Son, to thee

Whose advent sets thy people free;

Whom, with the Father, we adore,

And Holy Spirit evermore.

© Charles Coffin {1676 – 1749} Tr. John Chandler {1806 – 1876}

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 1 verses 6 to 8 & 19 to 28

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely,

"I am not the Christ." They asked him,

"Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said,

"I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?" He answered,

"No."

Finally, they said,

"Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet,

"I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "

Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him,

"Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

"I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising. Amen.

Philip Doddridge was a Congregational minister in Northampton, who threw himself into helping the community, especially the poor and disadvantaged in the town. In 1730, he inaugurated an Academy in Northampton and in 1738 he started a charity school. Despite a heavy workload, Revd. Doddridge found time to write at least three hundred and seventy hymns. 'Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,' was his attempt to highlight his Advent Sermon of 1735, so it is 285 years old. We shall sing hymn number 171.

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 thy beloved name.

© Philip Doddridge {1702 – 1751}

Sermon: "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John 1:25

John's gospel was the last to be written and reflects upon Jesus' ministry and puts the story of God's saving grace in perspective. When he was writing his gospel, John was aware that there were some who still argued that John the Baptist was the Messiah, despite the Baptist's own denials. We ought to remember that John the Baptist had a number of followers, for despite his tough message, he was clearly respected, because his influence was such that many people began to question whether or not he was the longed-for Messiah, God's anointed. It wasn't fanciful reasoning, for Simon Peter and Andrew had followed John, before he pointed out Jesus as the 'Lamb of God'.

It is most likely John was a member of the priestly sect called Essenes, who lived at Qumran, by the Dead Sea. Essenes devoted themselves to God in monastic communities. John, however, began to call Jews to repent and baptised them in the

River Jordan to symbolise the washing away of sins and the granting of a fresh start by God. John's wasn't a comfortable ministry: indeed, his message was often as stark and uncomfortable as his lifestyle and clothing, for he was uncompromising in his criticism of those Pharisees and Sadducees who came seeking baptism, describing them as 'vipers' and demanding to see the fruits of repentance rather than a public pretence of piety.

Since the return from exile in Babylon, Judea had suffered conquest and oppression by the Seleucid Greeks and Romans, so most Jews were looking for God to send his Messiah and the Sanhedrin were both intrigued and excited by John the Baptist and his stark message. His appearance, lifestyle and fearlessness made them think that he might be Elijah or the Christ which is why in our reading from John, priests and experts of Torah came from Jerusalem to demand whether he was a prophet, Elijah, the greatest of prophets, the Prophet – an allusion to a second Moses – or the Messiah. The Baptist made it clear that he was neither Elijah nor the Messiah, declaring, in Isaiah's words, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' " In other words, the Baptist declared that he was the forerunner of Christ, telling the world to prepare for his imminent coming.

Clearly, the questioners were irritated by John's reply, for they demanded, "Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" The Baptist made his calling clear: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' In other words, he could symbolically wash away their sins, but only Jesus can cleanse us completely through the Holy Spirit. John's interrogators wanted certainty and security, but although the Baptist's words indicated that the Messiah would be divine, the Jewish Establishment failed to recognize the 'signs' they craved in Jesus' ministry, mainly because of their prejudices.

This Advent, we are in a period of insecurity and the future remains uncertain, even threatening. 2023 has been a dreadful year with clear evidence of global warming, the continuing war between Ukraine and Russia and the horrors of the conflict in Gaza, following the terror attack by Hamas on 7th October. There are severe arguments in Parliament about how to deal with immigrants who sail to our shore on barely seaworthy inflatable dinghies, rather than how to eliminate the vile people smuggler gangs, who prey on the desperate. Then we face the financial crisis which is making the lives of many fellow citizens so difficult. It would be easy to throw up our hands in despair and postpone our celebrations because of the past twelve months, but don't give up, for we have come through many situations that have seemed just as heart-breaking and threatening. God is still in control, despite the worst of human pride, selfishness and evil that try to extinguish the light of his love and plunge us into a new Dark Age. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, beside us and within us as the Holy Spirit. Through him we can and will overcome.

Remember, too, that when John the Baptist began his ministry, Judea and the whole of Palestine was occupied by Rome, the second occupation that followed the return from Exile in Babylon. Jews wanted freedom, but weren't prepared to turn back to God. Instead Herod the Great maintained power ruthlessly, the wealthy Herodians and many religious leaders were corrupt and exploited the poor and marginalised. Others, including Pharisees were too self-satisfied and complacent with their lifestyles which is why John the Baptist was so critical of them. Think about it: how many similarities are there between then and now? They needed Christ then; so do we, now!

We can and should rejoice about many people who go far beyond the call of duty to support neighbours both here and abroad, particularly the lonely and isolated: workers

in and supporters of foodbanks and clothes banks; campaigners who have persuaded the Government to support deprived children throughout school holidays and everybody who small random acts of kindness have brought cheer in these trying times. Last but not least of these are people in health and social care who will be working throughout the Christmas period.

At Advent we await God's salvation, so let us do so patiently. We can, of course, prepare ourselves for Christmas by dwelling upon Jesus' nativity story, reflecting upon God's amazing love for us and his assurance that he is Immanuel, God with us and beside us in all things, but what about preparing for his coming again in glory? If Christ should come back today, would any of us be ready to face him? What should we be doing for such an eventuality? The answer is to copy the example of previous generations of Christians: to stand alongside the broken and grieving; to offer what help we can for as long as we can, but above all else to remain a loving presence in our community. Come, Lord Jesus, fill us with your love and help us share it always. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Revd. Charles Silvester Horne in 1909. He was Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales and MP for Ipswich from 1910 until his sudden death following a lecture on preaching at Niagara Falls in 1914. You may be surprised that Revd. Horne had a son, Kenneth, who achieved fame with his radio programme, "Around the Horne"! Hymn number 185, 'Sing we the King who is coming to reign;'

**1. Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King: Chorus**

***Come, let us sing: Praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:
This is our song, who to Jesus belong:
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.***

**2. All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
Justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King: Chorus**

**3. Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
Doubt shall not darken his witness within;
Hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
Love is victorious when Jesus is King: Chorus**

**4. Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray;
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
When this new song thy creation shall sing:**

Satan is vanquished, and Jesus is King: Chorus © Charles Silvester Horne (1865 – 1914)

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.