

A service for Advent 1 (StF) 27th November, 2022

Call to worship: Psalm 122 / StF 831

¹ I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" ² **Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.**

³ Jerusalem – built as a city that is bound firmly together.

⁴ **To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to thanks to the name of the LORD.**

⁵ For there the thrones for judgment were set up, **the thrones of the house of David.**

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "**May they prosper who love you.**" ⁷ **Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."**

⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends, I will say, "**Peace be within you.**" ⁹ **For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good. Amen.**

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a time when we prepare ourselves to receive God's greatest gift, his Son, our Saviour, Jesus. Our opening hymn was written jointly 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)

There is room for you and me

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 backgrounds. This Sunday, the theme is 'There is room for you and me'. Let us begin with a reading from Isaiah:

The Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 2 verses 1 to 5

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days the mountain of the LORD'S temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD. Amen.

The first Isaiah wrote these words before the fall of Judah and exile in Babylon. This is a vision of a time when all nations will turn to the Lord and follow his ways. Notice especially how, as a result, nations learn to live in peace and weapons will be refashioned as gardening tools. You may think it fanciful, a vain hope, yet when the Soviet Union collapsed, many factories that produced tanks were converted to produce tractors and combine harvesters. Just imagine a time when the billions we spend on increasingly sophisticated weapons might be spent instead on combatting global warming, easing poverty and improving health.

Notice, too, how the oracle refers to all people, not a select elite, that is the Jewish people. From its inception Methodism has had a vision of inclusivity. The Wesleys and their followers sought out people who were regarded as hopeless cases, in areas that no 'respectable' people would enter. They didn't just preach good news: they taught the faith, using classes or house-groups that supported and built up one another. Are we as active in our discipleship? Are we as welcoming, especially during Advent and Christmas when people may venture into church for the first time, or following a long absence? Are we as welcoming to people who are different to us: those from different racial and 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? What does section 68 in "A catechism for the use of the people called Methodists" teach us about inclusion?I'll tell you after the sermon.

We shall sing a hymn written by Francesca Leftley eleven 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)*

Let us pray

Almighty God, Creator and sustainer of all life throughout the Universe, we have come to worship and praise your holy Name on the first Sunday in Advent. We are astonished that you, 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 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, thank you for all that you give us, do for us and achieve in us, for we know how you have blessed us from our earliest days. Thank you, too, for people who have guided, inspired and loved us and for experiences and opportunities that have given meaning to our lives. Most of all, Lord, thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, without whom we are lost, hopeless and helpless.

Merciful God, when we consider our lives, we see how we let you down, because we say and do things that hurt and upset others and we sometimes don't help people when we see them in trouble or in need. 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.

The writer of our third hymn, Revd Tim Hughes was born in 1978 the son of an Anglican vicar. He grew up in High Wycombe, before moving to Birmingham as a teenager when his father was appointed vicar of St John's Church, Harborne. Formerly the Director of Worship at Holy Trinity, Brompton, he has since been appointed Vicar of St Luke's, Gas Street, Birmingham. We shall sing, 'Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,' number 175.

1. Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,

Opened my eyes, let me see

Beauty that made this heart adore you,

Hope of a life spent with you. *Chorus:*

So here I am to worship,

Here I am to bow down,

Here I am to say that you're my God,

And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,

Altogether wonderful to me.

2. King of all days, oh so highly exalted,

Glorious in heaven above.

Humbly you came to the earth you created,

All for love's sake became poor. *Chorus:*

3. And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross.

And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross..... *Chorus:*

© Tim Hughes

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

King of Kings and God of all nations, you came 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 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.

Help us to play our part, however small it may be, in building a better, fairer world by encouraging one another to share the earth's resources rather than fighting over them; by caring for our environment, so generations that succeed us will inherit an inhabitable planet; help us to stand up for justice for everybody and let us play our part in supporting the poor and marginalised here and abroad by supporting foodbanks and charities like All We Can and Christian Aid.

Sovereign Lord, we pray for an end to the wars that rage around the world, resulting in death, injury and destruction to combatants, civilians and national infrastructure. Bring an end to conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem, civil strife in Iran and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

Inspire and guide leaders of the nations of the world, granting them wisdom and compassion so they lead their people with mercy and justice and do not resort to violence in order to have their own way. Teach them the value of negotiation and compromise when disagreements arise, compared with the use of force.

Remember, heavenly Father, the victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution: people who have lost loved-ones; widows and orphans; those who have suffered life changing injuries in body, mind and spirit and the many refugees who have been forced to flee their homes to seek safety abroad. Warm our hearts with your compassion, so we ensure that all are given 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. We remember, too, people in countries facing severe famines, where droughts and warfare have made the situation worse. We ask a blessing on organizations like 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. May the Government and other agencies, including the Church, find 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, whether recently or long ago, 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. As we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus into a financial crisis, help us to review our ministries to our communities, so we can meet 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 24 verses 36 to 44

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be

broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” Amen.

Revd. Fred Pratt Green challenges us with three choruses that end, ‘When he comes, / Who will make him welcome?’ but he provides the answer in the last chorus, ‘When he comes, / We will make him welcome!’ Hymn number 178, ‘Long ago, prophets knew’.

**1. Long ago, prophets knew
Christ would come, born a Jew,
Come to make all things new;
Bear his People’s burden,
Freely love and pardon: *Chorus*
Ring bells, ring, ring, ring!
Sing choirs, sing, sing, sing!
When he comes,
When he comes,
*Who will make him welcome?***

**2. God in time, God in man,
This is God’s timeless plan:
He will come, as a man,
Born himself of woman,
God divinely human: *Chorus***

**3. Mary, hail! Though afraid,
She believed, she obeyed.
In her womb God is laid;
Till the time expected,
Nurtured and protected: *Chorus***

**4. Journey ends! Where afar
Bethlem shines, like a star,
Stable door stands ajar.
Unborn Son of Mary,
Saviour, do not tarry! *Chorus*
Ring bells, ring, ring, ring!
Sing choirs, sing, sing, sing!
Jesus comes,
Jesus comes,
*We will make him welcome!***

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Sermon: ‘So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.’ – Mtt 24:44

Forty-four years ago, my wife announced that we were going to have a baby and began immediately to plan for the child’s arrival. At least two months before the due date, Carol had her suitcase packed and we had made two dry runs to the Dorothy Ednam Maternity Unit in Dudley, in order that I would memorise the route and not get lost on the way when she was in labour. As if! At the time, I thought she was being rather obsessive, but I have known many couples whose babies were born prematurely, or in other cases several days after the predicted date, so we can’t

always be sure when the big day will come. Of course, it is even more difficult to predict Christ's Second Coming and Judgment Day.

In our passage from Matthew, Jesus called on his listeners to be ever alert in their discipleship, for the time of the Second Coming was known only to God the Father and there would be no clear signs that Divine judgment was imminent. The Second Coming would be similar to the days of Noah. Before the flood, life went on normally, until the sudden disaster struck while they were unready. Jesus' coming as our judge will have no obvious pointers to alert us to our duties, so we might not be caught slacking. It is like a cartoon I saw recently in which several startled-looking priests were scrambling to their feet as another priest called from the doorway, '**He's coming! Better look busy!**' Discipleship is more than spending an hour in church every week, then going one's own way, ignoring other people's needs and our Lord's call for the remaining **167 hours!** If we choose to be Christ's disciples, we are called to walk in the light of the Lord at all times, not just when it suits us, for Jesus will return when we least expect him – rather like a thief in the night – so it would be a great pity to face an adverse judgment because we were unprepared.

Jesus' words don't mean we have to work ourselves to death, nor to attend all the many meetings in which Methodism revels, or taking on more responsibilities than we can manage. What he means is that we should be found living according to kingdom values at all times, praying and serving in faith, loving God and our neighbours, making love our goal, rather than material success. If you prefer, making room for Jesus in our lives and in our heart.

Today, we enter the season of Advent, when we both celebrate God's great gift of Jesus to an undeserving world and anticipate his Second Coming. During this season, we shall hear of the steadfast courage of John the Baptist, the gracious acceptance of parental responsibility by Mary and Joseph, but most of all the boundless, undying love of God for helpless, hopeless sinners like us, for who else would offer what is most precious to redeem people who had made themselves his enemies? Advent is a time of preparation, not only for Christmas celebrations, but to make ourselves ready to meet Christ if he were to come tomorrow. If that happens, will any of us be prepared? Yet even though Christ has not returned in glory for nearly two thousand years, it could happen at any time, so it is foolish for us to grow complacent.

In order to prepare for Christ's coming, we need to consider our spiritual life: are we too preoccupied by earthly pleasures, or worries, to make time to pray meaningfully? Do we study the Scriptures as we ought, or do we postpone our studies to the distant future? Are any of us putting off answering a call to serve Jesus, as I did for several years when he called me to preach? Is your heart as cluttered with old grievances, unresolved conflicts and failures as that spare room which expectant parents set aside for their new baby? Think what they do with that room. They get rid of the clutter, redecorate, heat and furnish it, so that it is fit for the baby to live in. Over this Advent, let us make an effort to be reconciled to people we have fallen out with, by forgiving or seeking forgiveness, let go of old grievances and failures which we can't do anything about anyway and to put our trust in Christ, who understands our needs fully, since he has shared our mortal frame and knows us intimately. **May we turn to Christ Jesus and walk in the light of his love, so we may guide others to him by letting that holy light shine through our lives. Amen.**

I hope you haven't spent the sermon agonising over what section 68 in "A catechism for the use of the people called Methodists" is all about. Here is the answer. It begins, **"All need to be saved. All may be saved. All may know themselves saved. All may be saved to the uttermost."** It does not say, 'People like us, or people we favour, may be saved. The key-word is **ALL. There is room for each of us in God's kingdom.**

I wonder how many of you remember Kenneth Horne of the radio programme, "Round the Horne"? Well, we are going to conclude our worship by singing a hymn written by his father, Revd. Charles Silvester Horne, Chairman of the Congregational Church of England and Wales and a Member of Parliament for Ipswich at the start of last Century. We shall sing 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, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.