

## A service for 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2021 – Advent 1 (StF)

*Before the candle is lit...*

We light this candle to remind us of Zechariah – who doubted God's message of Good News. Lord Jesus you came as our shepherd to walk with us in the midst of our doubt - help us to follow your path as people of faith and hope. *Light the candle.*

### **Congregational Response**

**All weeks – after the candle is lit:** *Please lead the congregation by saying...*

As we light our advent candle

**Light of the world, shine on us.**

As we prepare for Christmas time

**Light of the world, shine on us.**

In this world of pain and darkness,

**Light of the world, shine through us.**

To all the people who don't know you,

**Light of the world, shine through us.**

Jesus you are coming again,

**Light of the world, light the way.**

In our service here today

**Light of the world, light the way.**

### **Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 to 10**

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. It is worth noting that was also a hymn that older brother, John, did not alter! 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 first 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 has its origins in Ninth Century Monasteries when a verse of a Psalm was sung during Advent to celebrate the coming of the Messiah, by using various titles linked to Jesus: Wisdom; Lord of Hosts; Root of Jesse; Key of David; Dayspring from on high; King of the nations, Immanuel and two days before Christmas, Virgin of virgins. We shall sing hymn number 180, 'O come, O come, Immanuel'.*

**1. O Come, O come, Immanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.      *Chorus:***

***Rejoice! rejoice! Immanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel!***

**2. O come, O come, thou Lord of might!  
Who to your tribes, on Sinai's height,  
In ancient times did give the law**

In cloud, and majesty, and awe. *Chorus:*

3. O come, O Rod of Jesse, free  
Your own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell your people save,  
And give them victory o'er the grave. *Chorus:*

4. O come, O key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery. *Chorus:*

5. O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by your advent here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight: *Chorus:*

*C18th Latin tr. John Mason Neale (1818 – 1866)*

***We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns and petitions to our Lord. When I say 'Bearer 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.

'Bearer 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 strife may result in a catastrophic famine.

'Bearer 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.

'Bearer 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. In a time of silence, we bring to mind people who are in special need of your care. As we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them: ..... 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.

‘Bearer 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.

‘Bearer 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.

‘Bearer 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 Luke chapter 1 verses 5 to 23 and 57 to 66**

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him:

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the

hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years." The angel answered,

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people." When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." They said to her, "There is no-one among your relatives who has that name." Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. 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)*

**Sermon: ‘Zechariah doubted’. Luke 1: 5 – 23**

Luke’s birth narratives are fascinating because he made a clear link between the old covenant and the new with the account of the origins of John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet as well as Jesus’ nativity and childhood. Whereas Matthew traced Jesus genealogy to Abraham – the Father of the Jews, Luke, who wrote for Gentile converts, traced the line to Adam, to show that Jesus came for all humankind. It is interesting, therefore, that he began with an account of John the Baptist unique in the gospels, but significant nonetheless, irrespective whether or not you regard the story as historical or as a rabbinic-style teaching story. Moreover, though Luke was a Greek convert, his birth narratives have a Semitic style and language, suggesting that he used a Hebrew or Aramaic source and the accounts were not simply an invention.

Our reading began in the Temple in Jerusalem where Zechariah, an elderly priest from the hill country in Judea, was performing his duties. At the time there were many priests, in twenty-four divisions and each division served in the Temple for a week twice every year. Lots were cast for each kind of duty to be performed, but the offering of incense was a particular honour, for a priest could only make it once in his lifetime. Luke said that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, both came from priestly families and had lived good, faithful lives. We can imagine their disappointment that they were childless at a stage of their lives when they were considered too old to produce a son or daughter. After all, at this time couples who had no children were deemed to be punished by God which would have added to their misery.

Zechariah entered the Priests’ Court where the altar stood, but when he offered the incense, the other priests withdrew to an outer court and prayed whilst Zechariah made the offering. Suddenly, an angel appeared on the right side of the altar and said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." Before you think that Zechariah had been praying for a son which would have been a forlorn hope, it is almost certain that he had prayed for the redemption of Israel and that is what the angel meant when he said ‘your prayer has been heard’. The angel continued, "He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The prohibition of alcohol implies that John the Baptist was to be a Nazarite, pledged to serve the Lord for as long as the vow directed. Samuel and Sampson were numbered amongst Nazarites, who were highly-regarded by Jews. The declaration that he would be filled with the Holy

Spirit from birth so he could prepare the way for the Lord probably overwhelmed Zechariah, whose mind must have been reeling from the promise of a son at his age. He knew about Abram and Sarai bearing Isaac in their old age, but he probably thought, 'That was then; this is now'.

The promise that he and Elizabeth would have a son who would introduce the longed-for Messiah, seemed impossible and he asked, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years." Clearly, he doubted, but the word used to express doubt is **Ginosko**, which means to realise, recognize, learn, understand and know with confidence, showing that his doubting was both emotional and intellectual. It wasn't the bitter laughing of Sarai when Abram was told she would bear a son. Here we have an experienced, faithful priest who could not reconcile what the angel was saying with his life's experience and who wanted to understand. Gabriel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news." He wasn't going to restate the case, but made doubt powerfully and directly a matter of faith. In effect Gabriel was telling Zechariah to believe instead of asking for a sign – which is what the Jews demanded of Jesus thirty years later. Zechariah had a sign, but not the one he expected; he became dumb and remained so throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy! Zechariah's redemption came at the circumcision of his son when relatives and neighbours were intent on naming the child Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth declared that he was to be called John. When they gave a wax tablet for Zechariah to settle matters – they would not accept a woman's word – he amazed them by writing 'His name is John', after which his speech was restored and he began to praise God.

It is evident that God did not judge Zechariah for doubting, but used him, not rejecting him for somebody else. God is big enough to accommodate our doubts and hear them without spurning us like a faithless lover. Doubt is a legitimate and common response to Christ in our culture where relativism and scepticism flourish like dandelion in a wheat field. Indeed, blind faith often leads to bigotry and fundamentalism, where groups of Christians alienate themselves from neighbours with their own narrow definitions of faith, allowing no questioning. Remember this: God is beyond our definitions; scripture can be understood in different ways, so we oughtn't try to dispel doubts by statements of faith alone, but by putting our faith into action.

As Black Friday dawns upon us, we should recall the adage, 'if a bargain seems too good to be true, it probably is!' In such circumstances it's wise to doubt what is offered, but what God offers is wonderful, amazing, but certainly not too good to be true. The wonder of Christmas is God revealing himself through the life, death and resurrection of a baby born in a nondescript town to humble, yet trusting parents. It's of God's willingness to become one perfect sacrifice to break the power of sin and draw us close to him; of God's redemptive love for all. In an age of fake news, conspiracy theories & rumours, our faith may well be challenged and doubts arise, but when it happens, ask whether what we're told builds up, or is destructive and opposes Jesus' command for us to love one another. **If the news or rumour lacks love, then oppose such falsehood and trust in Jesus, who emptied himself of all but love and bled for Adam's helpless race. Amen**

*How many of you remember the radio series, “Round the Horne”? Well, it may interest you to know that our closing hymn was written in 1909 by Revd. Charles Silvester Horne, the father of Kenneth Horne! We conclude our worship as we 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, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.