

A service for Advent 1, 29th November, 2020 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 80 verses 17 to 19

Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O LORD God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved. Amen.

The writer of our opening 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 Tim Hughes' Advent hymn, '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:*

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Let us pray.

Holy Word, who spoke and brought our universe into being, casting away darkness and chaos, we come to worship you in awe, for your might and wisdom are far beyond our understanding. Heavenly Father, whose loving-kindness provides our needs, we come to worship you in humility, for your grace and goodness are immeasurable. Lord Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection saves us from the bonds of sin and death we come to offer our adoration. Amazing God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours now and evermore.

As we enter 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 and empower us in our discipleship, so both our worship and our service are pleasing to you and proclaims your glory, through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

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

The Great Commandment says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength". We know how 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,

restore and forgive us.

The Commandment also says, "You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself". In grief we reflect upon occasions when we have broken that commandment through selfishness, pride, anger, cold-heartedness or indifference. For our failure to share your love with others, Lord, in your mercy,

restore and forgive us.

Gracious God, whose redemptive love led Christ to die at Calvary for the sins of the world, we believe your gracious word: 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.

On this first Sunday in Advent, we shall sing hymn number 168, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come' which was written in 1986 by English Roman Catholic teacher and liturgical musician Francesca Leftley.

1. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Come, Lord Jesus, come,

To this world of ours.

2. Lord, we need you now; (X3)

In this world of ours.

3. Fill us with your peace; (X3)

In this world of ours.

4. Touch us with your love; (X3)

In this world of ours.

5. May we see your light; (X3)

In this world of ours.

© Francesca Leftley (b1955)

We turn to God again in our Prayers of Intercession. When I say, 'Come, Lord Jesus', please repeat, 'Come, Lord Jesus'. Let us pray.

In joyful expectation of Christ's coming to reign, we pray 'Come, Lord Jesus'.

'Come, Lord Jesus'

Come to the world as King of the nations. We pray for rulers of countries afflicted by warfare, persecution and terrorism, asking that they may turn and seek mercy and justice for their peoples. Before you rulers will stand in silence..... Come, Lord Jesus.

'Come, Lord Jesus'

Come to the world as Lord and Judge. We pray for the poor, here and abroad, that they will receive practical help to relieve their plight from governments and charities, especially as winter tightens its grip. We pray for the unemployed and homeless, for people who suffer with alcohol or drug-dependency, that they receive help to turn around their lives. Remember, too young people whose education has been adversely affected and older people who have been isolated and lonely because of COVID19, that the future will offer them hope and healing. Help us to live in the light of your coming, give us a longing to do your will and enable us to be part of the healing our community needs. Come, Lord Jesus,

‘Come, Lord Jesus’

Come to your people as Saviour and bearer of pain. Lord, we pray for people we know who are sick in body, mind or spirit; for those who live with a dementia, their families and carers, especially in these troubled times, that they may find healing, comfort, courage and peace, not only because of the treatment they receive, but because of your presence in their need. We pray for the NHS and key-workers as they struggle to contain coronavirus, that they are given the practical and spiritual resources to succeed in their vital work. Enfold them with your love and keep them safe.

Lord, we don’t know what we should pray for during this pandemic: we feel helpless, fearful, dispirited and distraught – almost a sense of abandonment, but we know that you love us enough to have come as Jesus Christ and that his life, death and resurrection are your assurance of his redemptive grace. Grant us the spirit of steadfastness, so we may bear what has to be borne with courage grounded in faith in your unfailing loving-kindness.

Enfold us all in your love and mercy. Wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress and free us to serve you for ever. Come, Lord Jesus.

‘Come, Lord Jesus’

Come to us from heaven with power and great glory and lift us up to meet you where, with all your saints and angels, we will live with you for ever. Come, Lord Jesus.

‘Come, Lord Jesus’. Amen.

The first reading is Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 1 verses 3 to 9

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 13 verses 24 to 37

“But in those days, following that distress, ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore, keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" Amen.

Sermon: *'Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.'* Mark 13:33

In his book, "God and the Pandemic", Bishop Tom Wright warns us against trying to interpret the coronavirus pandemic as a sign from God: whether it be a portent of eschatological or End-Times, or a call to repentance, or else God's judgement on a sinful, broken world. If the Lord has sent this plague upon us to make us repent, or to punish us, then I would find it impossible to worship him, let alone to preach, for where is good news in such a God? I remain convinced that God sees us as individuals and will not, therefore, act in such a brutal and indiscriminate way. With regard to coronavirus being a sign of End-Times, Jesus himself said that no more signs will be given to call us to repentance and as he, the Son of God, was not privy to when the Day of Judgement would come, it is not up to us to speak without knowledge.

In our Gospel reading Jesus was talking about the Second Coming and judgement of all peoples. Mark was addressing the oft-asked question about the end of the age, which early Christians anticipated would occur very soon: certainly within a generation, which partly explains why many early Christians sold all their possessions and shared so generously – of what use would property or possessions be if the world was coming to an end? It is far better to store up treasures in heaven than here on earth. Certainly, When Mark wrote his gospel in Rome between 65 and 70 AD, Christians had already been persecuted by the Roman State under Nero and, having been expelled from worshipping in synagogues after the Council of Jamnia, were no longer under the protection of Judaism, which meant they were expected to worship the Roman's gods, or face the consequences. This bleak outlook and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., around the time the gospel was written, convinced some Christians that Christ would soon return to earth, destroy the Roman Empire and establish God's rule over all peoples.

Mark wrote that Jesus had anticipated that followers would speculate about the time of his return and had warned against it, declaring, 'No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.' He added the warning, 'Be on guard! Be alert!' In other words, he tells us to remain faithful and committed to our discipleship however long it may be for his second coming; not to yield to disbelief, or idleness as time passed. The image of the watch-keeper needing to be ready for his master's return applies to each of us, especially as we enter Advent, when we not only celebrate the coming of Christ into our world in historical terms, but look forward to his coming again – even if we don't know exactly when that will be.

In our communion service, we have the words, 'Therefore, Father, we do as Christ your Son commanded; we remember his passion and death, we celebrate his resurrection and ascension, and we look for the coming of his kingdom', but do we really look forward to his coming again? Are we really ready for Jesus if he comes today? Are our lives all they ought to be? Are we answering Christ's call as well as we ought – indeed, are we answering his call at all? I am certain that some Christians have grown complacent because two thousand years have passed without our Lord's return

in glory, so they feel he won't come again in their lifetime – and he may not, who knows? Nevertheless, there is no guarantee he won't come soon, so we must live in anticipation, lest we are caught unprepared. Just imagine how we would feel if Jesus were to come today or tomorrow. Are our lives, our relationships with our neighbours and God all they should be? Are we the faithful stewards who used our talents or the one who buried his?

In some ways we can draw an analogy between Advent and preparations for the birth of a baby, for if a couple discover that the woman is pregnant, they would be very unwise to say to themselves, "We've nine months to get everything ready for the baby, so we've plenty of time to prepare!" Although the baby may be full term, the prospective parents need to make adjustments to be ready for their baby. Apart from preparing a room, buying bedding, baby equipment, clothing and buggies, they will need to attend ante-natal classes, consider their diet and lifestyles, particularly if they smoke or drink, budget for their changed circumstances and, most importantly, learn to adjust their use of time to make room for the baby. Any sensible person will make plans well before the birth is due and we need to use Advent to review our discipleship, so we are not found wanting as Christians.

We should adjust our lifestyles to the example of Christ we see in the Gospels – seeking to love and serve anybody in distress or need, irrespective of gender, race, colour or creed: living out the Good News as well as telling it. As we begin Advent, we need to honestly assess whether or not we are making room for Jesus in our life, or whether we are allowing worldly matters – including anxiety about COVID19 – to crowd him out. Advent is an opportunity to review our prayer life, our willingness to support one another during the pandemic and to find ways to celebrate what is likely to be a very different Christmas in ways that offer meaning and hope to those around us. Let us ensure that our lives allow the light of Jesus' love to shine through our words and deeds, rather than becoming the miserable parodies of Christians so often seen on television soaps or plays? It is too easy to be swept up by the material side of Christmas and, as a result, lose sight of its real meaning: God loves us so much that he not only took our mortal form, but entered our world as the most vulnerable of beings; a baby born to poor parents in a space used to keep livestock – not as a prince tended by midwives and guarded by elite soldiers. Christmas teaches us that God isn't remote; he is Immanuel – **God is with us.**

If, as seems likely, this Christmas will see our celebrations confined by COVID regulations, let's be prepared, using our imaginations to meet the needs of neighbours, both in church and beyond. Look around: see people's brokenness and, instead of blaming China, Government failures, weaknesses in test and trace, or anything else, let's try to find practical ways to meet those needs. Let us use Advent to prepare to respond to Christ's challenge to be vigilant by continuing to work for his Father's kingdom, so when he returns we'll be ready for him. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Charles Silvester Horne, father of Kenneth Horne of 'Around the Horne' fame! Its melody is known as "The Glory Song" – with good reason! 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

May the LORD bless you and keep you. May the LORD show you his kindness and have mercy on you. May the LORD watch over you and give you peace. Amen.