

A service for Advent 2 – 4th December, 2022 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 72 verses 18 and 19

Praise the LORD, the God of Israel! He alone does these wonderful things.

Praise his glorious name for ever! May his glory fill the whole world. 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. He is a British worship leader and singer-songwriter. Formerly the Director of Worship at Holy Trinity, Brompton, he has since been ordained as a minister in the Church of England and 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:*

© Tim Hughes

Let us pray

Almighty God, who spoke life into every being throughout the Universe, we have come to worship and praise your holy Name on the second Sunday in Advent. We are amazed that the Lord, 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 once 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, we recognize with thanksgiving how you have blessed us in so many ways throughout our lives. Thank you, too, for experiences and opportunities that have given meaning to our lives and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all, Lord, thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, without whom we are lost, hopeless and helpless.

Merciful God, when we consider ourselves in the light of your holiness, we see how often we let you down when we say and do things that hurt and upset others. There are times, too, when we don't help people we see them in trouble or in need and, even though we try to justify our hard-heartedness we know that we are failing you. 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.

There is room for you and

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 lifestyles, or backgrounds. This Sunday, the theme is The Wise Men, or Magi.

The first reading is Matthew Ch. 2 vs. 1 – 12 from "The Message".

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East.

They asked around,

"Where can we find and pay homage to the new-born King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signalled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked,

"Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" They told him,

"Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly: 'It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land, no longer bringing up the rear. From you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.'" Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said,

"Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship." Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time! They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they knelt and worshiped him.

Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country. Amen.

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

The magi, scholars in "The Message", or wise men, were Gentile astrologers and would have been despised by ordinary Jews, not just because they were foreign, but because astrology was prohibited by the Torah – Deuteronomy chapter 18. Nevertheless, gave them a message in the stars familiar and they answered God's message. They were unfamiliar with the Jewish faith, yet when they reached Jerusalem, they found Herod and his advisers unaware of the birth of the Messiah. Their enquiry about **'one born king of the Jews'** caused a real storm. Far from welcoming a child who scriptures said would grow to re-establish a close relationship between God and his people, Herod and his counsellors saw the infant as a threat to his power. 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, written mainly for a Jewish audience, uses this story to tell them that Jesus came for 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?

This nativity story has room for people of whom society disapproves, because of their race, culture or lifestyle, just like the Magi. Therefore, if strangers come to our church, especially during Advent or Christmastide, let's welcome them, without judging them, for Christ calls us to open our hearts to all-comers and the salvation he offers is for everyone, not just us.

Our second hymn was written by Marty Haugen, a liturgical composer and musical performer from Minnesota. He is composer-in-residence at Mayflower Community Congregational Church in Minneapolis. The house in this hymn is Mother Church, a community, rather than a building. Hymn number 409, 'Let us build a house where love can dwell,'

**1. Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell**

How hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,

Rock of faith and vault of grace;

Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: *Chorus*

All are welcome,

All are welcome,

All are welcome in this place.

2. Let us build a house where prophets speak,

And words are strong and true,

Where all God's children dare to seek

To dream God's reign anew.

Here the cross shall stand as witness

And of symbol of God's grace;

Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: *Chorus*

3. Let us build a house where love is found

In water, wine and wheat:

A banquet hall on holy ground

Where peace and justice meet.

Here the love of God, through Jesus,

Is revealed in time and space;

As we share in Christ the feast that frees us: *Chorus*

4. Let us build a house where hands will reach

Beyond the wood and stone

To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,

And live the Word they've known.

Here the outcast and the stranger

Bear the image of God's face;

Let us bring an end to fear and danger: *Chorus*

5. Let us build a house where all are named,

Their songs and visions heard

And loved and treasured, taught and claimed

As words within the Word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter,

Prayers of faith and songs of grace,

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: *Chorus* © Marty Haugen (born 1950)

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. We pray for 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 force in order to have their own way. Teach them the value of negotiation and compromise when disagreements arise, instead.

Heavenly Father, we offer our prayer for victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution: for those who have lost loved-ones, especially 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 receive 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 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 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. Help us to find new ways of supporting our communities, as we move from the COVID19 crisis onto the current financial squeeze, 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 3 verses 1 to 12

At that time John the Baptist came to the desert of Judea and started preaching. "Turn away from your sins," he said, "because the Kingdom of heaven is near!" John was the man the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said: "Someone is shouting in the desert, 'Prepare a road for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel!'"

John's clothes were made of camel's hair; he wore a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. People came to him from Jerusalem, from the whole province of Judea, and from all the country near the River Jordan. They confessed their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan. When John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him to be baptized, he said to them, "You snakes—who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send? Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins. And don't think you can escape punishment by saying that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these stones and make descendants for Abraham! The axe is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire. I baptize you with water to show that you have repented, but the one who will come after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. He is much greater than I am; and I am not good enough even to carry his sandals. He has his winnowing shovel with him to thresh out all the grain. He will gather his wheat into his barn, but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out." 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}

Sermon: "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." Matt 3:3

Several years ago, some friends went to see a well-known singer perform at the NIA in Birmingham. After the show, I asked them if they had enjoyed it and was amazed to hear them say that, although the main act had lived up to expectations, they were more impressed by the warm-up group, who had raised the audience's expectations to fever pitch before the singer came on stage. It is certain that many performers rely upon less prestigious acts to create the right atmosphere for their show. In some ways, John the

Baptist was the warm up act for Jesus, preparing the people to receive Jesus' Good News. But who was John the Baptist and what was his message?

John was the son of an old priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, who was related to Jesus' mother, Mary. He was pledged to serve God as a Nazarite by his parents, so he did not cut his hair, ate wild bees' honey and locust, food usually eaten by the poor, and dressed as simply as he lived, in a camel-hair habit secured with a leather belt. John joined the priestly sect, the Essenes who lived like hermits at **Qumran**. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, John began to preach and baptise Jews in the River Jordan. His message was as stark as his appearance: **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."** He was a fiery speaker, but must have seasoned his message with humour or brilliant illustrations to explain his message, otherwise he would not have attracted huge crowds of Jews to hear him preach. He offered baptism to the crowds who came to hear him, for although it was not part of Jewish religious practice, baptism symbolised the washing away of sins and the offering of a new beginning to our relationship with the Lord.

Despite his uncompromising, urgent message and Elijah – like dress, some Jews wondered whether or not he was the Messiah, so he made it clear that he was the forerunner of God's anointed, not the Messiah himself: **"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."**

When John the Baptist called the Pharisees and Sadducees a **brood of snakes, fleeing from God's judgement**, he told them to produce evidence that they had changed their hearts and lives, for otherwise they would not be saved. Their claim, **'We are children of Abraham'**, was no defence for paying lip-service to the Lord, not loving others as they loved themselves, therefore not honouring the covenant with God. Repentance means more than saying sorry: it means turning right away from sin, back towards God.

So, let us take John's message on board when we are anticipating the coming of Christ: **"Change your hearts and lives because the kingdom of heaven is near."** **Remember**, Christmas is not just a celebration of God's greatest gift to the world two thousand years ago; it is a reminder that Jesus has promised to come again and therefore we should ready ourselves to greet him when he comes.

Are we living as Jesus wants us to? Is our prayer-life as good as it ought to be? Are we answering our call to serve Jesus, either in the church, or in supporting members of our community, or are we guilty of putting it off until it is more convenient for us? If people come to our church during Advent or Christmas-tide, perhaps for the first time, or following a long absence, will we make them welcome, supporting them through the service and taking a polite interest in them? Will we do so if their appearance, culture or lifestyles are markedly different from ours, or will we be like the Pharisees whom John the Baptist criticised and regard them with contempt? Do we let the joy of our faith in Christ shine through our lives, or do we cast a cloud of self-righteous gloom wherever we go, as those Pharisees did? **During this Advent, especially, but not exclusively, let us share his love with our neighbours in words and actions, for although God's love came down to us at Christmas, Jesus is for life – the whole of our life – not just one day each year. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was 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)

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.