

A service for 6th December, 2020 (Advent 2)

Call to Worship: Isaiah chapter 52 verses 7 and 8

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Mark Earey, with each verse aimed to cover one of the Sundays in Advent. Therefore, 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. 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 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, 'Forgive us'.

Merciful God, 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, **Forgive us.**

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

Gracious God, whose redemptive love took Christ to die at Calvary for the world's sinfulness, 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.

Charles Wesley wrote our next hymn 276 years ago and it is as relevant now as it was all those years ago. It is worth noting that was also a hymn that older brother, John, did not alter! 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}

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. We pray for the victims of man's inhumanity to one another. May they be granted comfort, healing and hope. We know that before you rulers will stand in silence. Come, Lord Jesus.

'Come, Lord Jesus'

Come to the world as Lord and Judge and so we pray for the poor, here and abroad, that they will receive practical help from governments and charities, especially as winter tightens its grip. We pray for all who are unemployed and homeless, for people who suffer with alcohol or drug-dependency, as well as mental ill-health, that they will receive help to turn around their lives. Remember, too, young people whose education has been adversely affected and older people, especially in care homes, who have been isolated and lonely because of COVID19, that the future will offer them hope and healing. Help us all 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 neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; for people who live with a dementia and their families and carers, especially in these troubled times. May they find healing, comfort, courage and peace, not only as a result of the treatment they receive, but because of your presence in their time of need. We pray for the NHS and key-workers as they labour 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. Come, Lord Jesus, **'Come, Lord Jesus'**

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.

Guide our leaders and their advisers, that they may devise effective policies that not only shield us from coronavirus, whilst protecting us from economic catastrophe, but take into account our mental and spiritual needs. 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.**

Our next hymn was written by Carl Daw junior, who is the son of a Baptist minister. From 1996 until 2009 he served as the Executive Director of The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. This hymn was written for a Hymn Society of America competition for Advent hymns in 1985. We shall 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)*

Our first reading is Isaiah chapter 40 verses 1 to 11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling:

"In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. Amen.

The Gospel reading is St. Mark chapter 1 verses 1 to 8

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "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." Amen.

Our penultimate hymn was by Charles Coffin, an Eighteenth Century academic and rector of the University of Paris. In 1727 he published some of his Latin poems and in 1736 the bulk of his hymns appeared in the Paris Breviary of that year. In the same year he published them as Hymni Sacri Auctore Carolo. One of these hymns was translated by Revd. John Chandler, vicar of Whitley, in Oxfordshire and included in his hymnal, “The Hymns of the Primitive Church” during 1837. We continue our worship as we sing 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” Mark 1:3

The first prophet Isaiah preached in Judea between 740 and 700BC, a time of spiritual darkness, during which time the Northern Kingdom, Samaria, was reduced from prosperity, to humiliation and disaster. Prophets like Amos had condemned Samaria because the rich cruelly exploited the poor whilst pretending to be pious. They warned the Israelites to repent, or a great disaster would befall them: they hadn’t, and Samaria was defeated by the Assyrians in 721BC. At first, Isaiah deemed the Assyrian empire to be the major threat to Judea, where the national sin was pride, for Judeans believed in their own ability, without God – convinced that Jerusalem could never fall because Solomon’s temple lay within it. Isaiah preached the need to be saved by faith, by putting themselves humbly and completely in the Lord’s hands, trusting in his loving-kindness. As they continued to sin, the first Isaiah predicted that the Judeans would see Jerusalem laid waste, the temple desecrated, plundered and razed to the ground before they were led into captivity in Babylon.

The second Isaiah wrote during the time of exile in Babylon and our reading shows another aspect of God’s nature. If the first was anger and punishment, the second is gracious love which follows. Isaiah spoke God’s words of comfort to his people: his anger against their faithlessness is at an end, so they shall return to their

homeland, which he promised to Moses. However, before that time, they must prepare the way for the Lord's coming, recognising their own infidelity, frailty and fallibility compared with God's faithfulness and might. He shared his vision of the Lord coming with power, yet tending his flock like a shepherd: 'He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.' Here is power tempered by tender love! Part of Isaiah's oracle is used in the opening of Mark's gospel.

Our reading from Mark is quite breathless. Without a nativity story, Mark gets straight to the point by declaring John the Baptist as God's appointed messenger who was to prepare the ground for the Messiah. John was a second Elijah – the greatest of Israel's prophets. What do we know about John the Baptist? Well, he was connected to Jesus through Mary, who was a relative of John's mother, Elizabeth. He was the only child of elderly parents. John's father, the priest Zechariah, was told by an angel that John would be great, but also that he must never touch alcohol, nor cut his hair. In other words, John was a Nazarite, one given to God by a sacred vow, either a personal commitment or by a parent. Nazarites were pledged to live simply and faithfully for as long as the vow lasted and they were regarded as special by Jews – both Samuel and Sampson are listed in their number. Mark wrote that John the Baptist dressed like Elijah, in a camel hair cloak, with a leather belt: he ate locusts and wild honey, which shows his simple life-style.

It is most likely that John was a member of a priestly sect called the Essenes, who lived at Qumran, by the Dead Sea. They 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. The word John used for repent is '**Shub**', meaning far more than saying sorry. It means turning one hundred and eighty degrees from sin and judgment to God and salvation. Shub means returning to God, making radical changes to one's lifestyle and attitude. John's call for repentance is urgent, for the day of the Lord is imminent. He declared, '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.' John demanded that the Jews who flocked to the Jordan should turn away from sin and back to God the Father. His baptism symbolised a new start with God for those who turned, but water was only a preparation for the baptism that Christ's followers would receive from Jesus, for through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we enter a relationship so close to God that we may call him 'Abba', 'Daddy'.

At Advent we think about the birth of Jesus and also of the Second Coming. Unlike nativity sets that adorn homes and churches at Christmas, when Jesus came into the world, the reality was desperate and ugly. Both of Jesus' parents had travelled a winding, bumpy route for days to register in a census for an occupying power, Rome. Mary was heavily pregnant, so even if Joseph had a donkey to carry her, the constant jolting must have been agonizing. The gospels tell us that Jesus' parents had no time to prepare for his birth. He was born in a stable of an inn which would have been dark, unhygienic, cold and smelly. After all, Joseph and Mary were far from home and had nowhere else to stay, begging a question why Joseph's relatives couldn't or wouldn't offer hospitality. I think Luke provides an answer, for in chapter 2 he wrote that Mary and Joseph were betrothed when Jesus was born, rather than married, so Joseph's relations would have nothing to do with them until the formalities of marriage were over. In human terms, Jesus was little better than a refugee when he was born – yet this was God's plan – through Jesus God wanted to show his love for ordinary, unprivileged folk, including those at the bottom of the social ladder. Clearly, we can prepare for Christmas

by dwelling upon Jesus' nativity and celebrating, subject to coronavirus restrictions, but what about preparing for the Second Coming? What should we be doing for that?

NOW – this Advent – is the time to get rid of the things that clutter up our lives – past failures and grievances, old quarrels, things we regret having done. If there are wrongs we can put right, what better time than now, but issues that cannot be changed, yet which fester, should be offered to Jesus in prayer, for he will bear away any guilt, leaving us free to get on with life.

NOW, especially during a turbulent, soul-destroying year, now is the time to offer ourselves in the Lord's service, by giving practical care and support to our neighbours, even if they are not easy to get along with! So many people have been damaged during this pandemic, not only physically but financially, psychologically and socially. Let us do what we can to help others, however small it seems, for that mustard seed of faith can grow beyond our expectations.

NOW is the time to make sure that anyone we meet finds in us the warmth and welcome that Jesus had for all-comers, for we are called to represent his grace; **NOW** is the time to offer what we can for the poor, both here and abroad – for one of Jesus' principal aims was to bring good news to the poor. Please consider the work being done locally by food-banks and the Salvation Army and charities like Christian Aid that help our Developing World caught up in this pandemic. Let us be like the Magi, offering Jesus our gifts, even if they aren't gold, frankincense or myrrh. Above all else, let us now make time to reflect upon and rejoice in God's gift of Jesus as our Saviour and Friend, for if we do so, we shall make room for Jesus in our hearts not only this Christmas but also for the rest of our days. Amen.

The writer of the closing hymn, Bernadette Farrell, is a Catholic hymn-writer from West Yorkshire, though she now lives in London. Most of her hymns are ecumenical and thought-provoking and this one seems especially relevant today! We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness'.

1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people,

Light for the world to see. Chorus:

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. Chorus:

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed. Chorus:

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others, / Walls made of living stone. Chorus:

**5. Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
Making your kingdom come. *Chorus:***

© *Bernadette Farrell {1957---}*

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.