

A service for 9th January, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Isaiah Ch. 9 vs. 2

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God's love to guide us throughout our lives. It was written by the long-lived and prolific Methodist minister Revd. Fred Pratt Green. We shall sing hymn number 455, 'Christ is the world's Light, he and none other,'

**1. Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high.**

**2. Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
No one can serve him and despise another.
Who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.**

**3. Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother –
He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
Glory to God on high.**

**4. Give God the glory, God and none other;
Give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;
Give God the glory, God in us, my Brother:
Glory to God on high.**

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Let us pray

Almighty God, we come to worship you at the beginning of a New Year, with its opportunities and challenges ahead of us. Some of these challenges fill us with joyful anticipation, or make us excited, but others threaten us and fill us with trepidation. Help us to remember that you are always here with us as we face the future, for we remember that you entered our world as a helpless child, born in the stable of an inn, in an unimportant town to ordinary parents. Jesus left the treasures of heaven and his divine powers to grow up among people like us, sharing our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, our trials and temptations, yet doing so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. He is Emmanuel, God with us and within us. His death and resurrection broke the hold of sin and death over us and we have the promise of eternal life through faith in him.

Amazing heavenly Father, we come to pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, for you are the Lord of creation, the sustainer of life and our Saviour. You are our strength and stay in both good and bad times, so we offer you all honour, glory power and praise. Take away all anxiety that may distract us from our worship. Amen.

Let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving and confession to the Lord. When I say 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with 'hear our prayer'.

Heavenly Father, we offer thanks for the many blessings we receive from you, day by day: for this beautiful, self-sustaining, yet fragile world; for the many good things we enjoy; for people who have blessed us by their example and loving-care, but most of all that you love us even at our worst, when we are loveless and unlovable.

'Lord, in your mercy' **'hear our prayer'**.

Merciful Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves, for our words and actions that hurt others and grieve you and for times when we see neighbours in need or distress and don't help them. Forgive us, too, for our failure commit ourselves to you and your call to us to serve you. Help us to change our ways, so that our lives become Christ-centred, not self-centred.

'Lord, in your mercy' **'hear our prayer'**.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us, but you call us to follow you once more, unburdened by guilt. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in the blessed name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord 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.

Reginald Heber, the author of our second hymn, was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. However, his duties were not confined to that one city, as his title implies, but instead to much of the South Pacific, including Ceylon and Australia, for he was the only Anglican Bishop in that hemisphere. Bishop Heber's sense of duty drove him to travel tirelessly during his three years as Bishop and he died aged only forty-two, on 3rd April, 1826. He had just preached a sermon at Trichinopoly, in which he denounced the caste system before a large congregation; he decided to cool off in the swimming pool of the house where he was a guest; soon afterwards he suffered a stroke whilst swimming there and he drowned before anyone realised what had happened. Despite his short life, Bishop Heber wrote several good hymns, of which this one is equalled only by "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!" We sing hymn number 227, 'Brightest and best of the suns of the morning'.

**1. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

**2. Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;
Low lies his head, with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all.**

**3. Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,
Odours of Edom, and offerings divine?
Gems of the mountain, and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?**

**4. Vainly we offer each ample oblation;
Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration; /
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.**

**5. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

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We come to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Sovereign God, we turn to you, asking for your wisdom, courage, guidance and help as we seek to act as your earthly hands in this corner of your kingdom. Although the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us at times, for we know how limited our powers are, we ask you to reach out and inspire people with the power and influence to heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord, at a time when most of the world is rejoicing at Christ's birth and the New Year, hear our prayer for people who are facing undue pressures in these troubled times: those who have been deeply affected by the pandemic: those who are suffering from long COVID, or who have lost loved-ones because of it; others who have lost employment, or who are burdened by debt as a result of COVID lockdowns or restrictions; neighbours who are lonely and afraid, or who feel abandoned; people whose relationships have broken down; children whose lives have been constricted and whose education has been damaged; everybody whose spiritual and mental health has been severely challenged during the past two years. In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them:

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Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but embrace everybody for whom we pray with your love, so they receive healing, courage, comfort and peace.

As we remember how our Saviour came into the world, homeless and in need, we pray for the poor, disfranchised and marginalised in the world, particularly people from the Developing world whose lives are often brutal, bitter and short. Loving heavenly Father, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by seeking justice for all, by campaigning 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 and even celebrating our differences, rather than allowing them to divide us.

Heavenly Father, the Christ-child came as Prince of Peace, but his parents were forced to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's wrath, so in his infancy he experienced what it is to be a refugee. Therefore, we pray for the victims of wars, terrorism, prejudice and persecution. Teach those who govern the nations to find better ways of resolving differences with neighbours, rather than resorting to force. Inspire them to rule with justice and mercy, so true peace may prevail. Hear our prayer for the victims of war and terrorism: those who have lost loved ones; for people who have suffered life-changing injuries to body, mind or spirit and for refugees, who have not only been driven far from their homes, but who face exploitation and danger in order to find security and a new beginning. Compassionate God, may they receive the support and courage required to rebuild their broken lives.

Holy God, may your Church, both local and worldwide, learn to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by proclaiming Good News with one voice and serving him with united hearts, so all who do not yet know Christ as their Saviour and Friend will turn to him.

As Jesus came as Lord of healing and wellbeing, look with compassion on all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. May they find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them and for whom the pandemic has been a living nightmare. Comfort them in their distress and ease their brokenness, Lord.

Abba, Father God, look upon us, our families and our friends with compassion. Keep us safe and guide us in your holy ways throughout this year, so we bear the light of the gospel message into the darkest corners of your kingdom, in the glorious name of the Christ-child, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 3 verses 15 to 22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Amen.

"He came to share repentance / With all who mourn their sins, / To speak the vital sentence / With which good news begins". Our next hymn was also written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green. Hymn number 233, 'When Jesus came to Jordan,'

1. When Jesus came to Jordan

**To be baptised by John,
He did not come for pardon,
But as his Father's Son.
He came to share repentance
With all who mourn their sins,
To speak the vital sentence
With which Good News begins.**

**2. He came to share temptation,
Our utmost woe and loss,
For us and our salvation
To die upon the cross.
So when the Dove descended
On him, the Son of Man,
The hidden years had ended,
The age of grace began.**

**3. Come, Holy Spirit, aid us
To keep the vows we make;**

**This very day invade us,
And every bondage break.
Come, give our lives direction,
The gift we covet most:
To share the resurrection
That leads to Pentecost.**

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Sermon: *John the Baptist* – Luke 3: 15 – 22

I have always intended to project the image of a serious-minded preacher and chaplain, but the Lord clearly had other ideas when he called me. A few years ago, a resident at Waterside House, which is a MHA dementia care home, declared that she loved my services. I was delighted until she added, 'You're funny, because something goes wrong every week!' I had to smile, even though things don't go wrong every week. There again, when I thought I'd brighten the atmosphere at the Bridge Court Christmas meal by wearing a black Santa hat, inscribed with "Bah Humbug", as I helped to serve, several tenants quipped that it seemed appropriate, after I had taken the wrong cd with me for the Christmas service and we had to sing several carols acapella!

I'm sure John the Baptist never reduced listeners to laughter by having things go wrong, but equally, I don't believe that he was as fearsome and humourless as he is sometimes portrayed. I know his message was fierce and insistent, but had his preaching been no more than 'fire and brimstone', I doubt if many Jews would have flocked to the Jordan to hear him. Certainly, Jesus used humour in his teaching – think of the visual of a blind man leading other blind men and falling into a ditch! Those of us who have read John Wesley's sermons recognize that they are notes and the delivery would have been seasoned with humour and witty illustrations.

Luke's gospel was written essentially for Gentile converts to Christianity and in our reading Luke compared John's ministry with Christ's. He declared John the Baptist as God's appointed messenger who was sent to prepare the Messiah's ground by preaching 'a baptism for the forgiveness of sins'. In effect, John was a second Elijah, the greatest of Israel's prophets. However, he made it clear that John was not the Messiah that some Jews believed him to be, even after Jesus' resurrection.

It is most likely John was a member of the priestly sect called Essenes, who lived at Qumran, by the Dead Sea. Essenes 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 by God. Baptism was not part of Jewish religious practice, but its symbolism attracted many Jews to John. His wasn't a comfortable ministry: indeed, his message was frequently as stark and uncomfortable as his lifestyle and clothing, for he was uncompromising in his criticism of those Pharisees and Sadducees who came seeking baptism, describing them as 'vipers' and demanding to see the fruits of repentance rather than a public pretence of piety. A real change in our behaviour is required when we repent. He always spoke out against evil, including against the adulterous and incestuous relationship between King Herod Antipas and Herodias, his niece, even though he knew he would suffer for speaking the truth to people in power.

John's call for repentance was urgent, for he declared the Day of the Lord was imminent. He made it clear that he wasn't the Messiah, declaring, '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 River Jordan for baptism should turn away from sin, returning to God the Father in words and deeds. Baptism symbolised a new

start with God for those who turned, but water was only the preparation for the kind of baptism Christ's followers would receive, for through faith and God's gift of the Holy Spirit we enter a relationship so close to God we may call him 'Abba'.

At the end of our gospel reading, Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptised, but as he had never sinned, why did he insist on being baptised? Jesus was not fulfilling the demands of Torah, for baptism was not a requirement for repentance. Instead, Jesus was identifying himself with flawed humanity, who needed to change their ways and to be baptized into new life. In other words, Jesus was showing that he is not just God, but Immanuel, God with us, God alongside us, both fully human and fully divine.

Part of the significance of his baptism lies in Jesus' authentication from heaven: the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, giving him the power and wisdom to fulfil God's plan for our salvation and God's declaration, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." verified for John the Baptist that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. The other significant feature of the baptism is Christ's humility. He was not too proud to identify himself with sinners; instead, he did his Father's will. In that respect Jesus challenges us, his disciples, to answer his call, whether or not our calling seems beyond our abilities, or does not suit our own desires, or is inconvenient.

At the Brierley Hill Christmas Eve service, Revd. Michael Payne referred to the R number, firstly as the rate at which COVID19 infections spreads – which is a bad thing – and then as a rate in which people accept the gospel message and join our churches – which is a good thing! If the R number is greater than 1, then the number of infected people increases, but if it below 1, then the disease will eventually stop spreading.

In the United Kingdom most denominations have congregations whose R number is below 1, so, unless something is done, churches will die for lack of members. Revd. Michael observed that if every member of a church was to persuade just one person to join during the year, then the size of the congregation would be doubled. Even if only half a church accomplished this, the congregation would rise by 50%, so here is a New Year challenge for all with ears to hear. Do you know people who have fallen away from regular worship, or who say that they don't feel 'good enough' to come to church? Do you have family-members, friends, or work-colleagues who you could invite to come to church with you? Are there church members willing to post flyers in their neighbourhood inviting people to come and worship – perhaps for a special service. Remember, our commission is to take good news to the world and it is just as urgent today as it was in the times of John the Baptist. If we raise the gospel R number above 1, we can extend our mission with more people to share the load, offer the light of good news to a people living in the darkness of COVID19 and materialism and fulfil what Christ is calling us to do. Trust in the Lord to give you both judgement and words to invite somebody to worship with you: remember this verse from **Revd. James Seddon's hymn, 'Go forth and tell!':**

Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all:

He will in grace respond to all who call.

How shall they call if they have never heard

The gracious invitation of his word? Amen

Our closing hymn was written by Canon Edward Burns in 1968, as his response to the diocese of Blackburn's 'Call to Mission' challenge to write a suitable hymn for its call – and what a response it is! We certainly do have a gospel to proclaim. Hymn number 418, 'We have a gospel to proclaim.'

**1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.**

**2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**

**3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.**

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.**

**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

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Benediction

May the faithfulness and obedience of Mary and Joseph, the wonder felt by the shepherds, the steadfastness of the Magi, the rapture of the angel host and the love given to the world in the form of the Christ Child, keep and sustain us all now and forevermore and may the blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us now and evermore. Amen.