

A service for 10th December, 2023 (Advent 2) (StF)

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.

Charles Wesley wrote our opening hymn 279 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 81, '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, you are the Living Word, who spoke and brought our universe into being, casting away darkness and chaos. We have come to worship you in awe, for Your power and wisdom are far beyond our understanding. Heavenly Father, whose loving-kindness provides our daily 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.

Lord of life, 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 'Merciful Lord', please respond with, 'Restore and forgive us'.

Heavenly Father, 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, merciful Lord,

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, merciful Lord,

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.

Our next hymn was written by Carl Daw junior, who is the son of a Baptist minister. He taught English from 1970 to 1979 in Virginia, before becoming an Episcopal priest in 1981. 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)

We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns for people nearby and far away to our Lord. When I say, ‘Come, Lord Jesus,’ please say ‘Come Lord Jesus’.

In joyful expectation of his coming to reign, we pray to our Lord Jesus, saying, Come, Lord Jesus.

‘Come, Lord Jesus.’

Loving Lord, come to your world as King of the nations, to bring peace for all, built upon justice and mercy. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern the

countries of the world, or who head opposition groups, so they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way. We pray for wise and compassionate treatment of the victims of war, terrorism, persecution and of refugees. Help them find both refuge and support, so they may rebuild their lives.

We pray for lasting resolutions to the war in Ukraine and the bitter conflict between Hamas and the Israeli Defence Force in Gaza. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost as a result of the attack by Hamas on 7th October in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting in Gaza, most of whose population are non-combatants, the elderly, women and children with nowhere to flee, caught between the warring sides, deprived of food, water, fuel and medicines and facing constant danger. We remember, too, the hostages taken by Hamas and their families and, whilst we appreciate its fury, may the Knesset constrain its response and observe International Law.

Come Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus.

Lord, before you rulers will stand in silence. Guide the leaders of the wealthy nations and the World Bank to show mercy to the people of the Developing Nations, where indescribable poverty exists. Inspire them to offer practical support to break the chains of poverty once and for all, thereby granting our poorer brothers and sisters both security and dignity.

Hear our prayer for those in our own country who are unemployed, homeless, or who need to use food banks to survive. Bless all who provide food for and all who run food banks, and other organizations which serve the poor. Create in our politicians and business leaders a vision for a fairer society in which the poor and disfranchised are given hope and grant that we, too, may contribute to such a great work.

Come Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus.

Lord of shalom, come to your people as healer and bearer of pain. We pray for people from this church, for families and friends, for people from work, or from our community who are ill, recovering from injuries or operations, or who face surgery in the near future. We remember also everybody who is lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In your grace, enfold us all in your love, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord of creation, for we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather. Merciful God, as we pray for victims of disasters and famines may you bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, Christian Aid and All We Can.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come Father God, for as Christmas nears, we pray for ourselves. We don't know what others will ask of us so we pray for the Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us and our families. Keep us safe and fill us with the love and grace of Christ Jesus, so that our thoughts, words and deeds offer peace and love to people around us, bringing you glory in his holy name. Amen.

The Gospel reading is 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 the bulk of his hymns appeared in the Paris Breviary in 1736. 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 84, ‘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

For centuries the Jewish people had looked for the coming of the Messiah who prophets had foretold. Many were looking for God’s Anointed to free them from oppression by neighbouring powers, for the Northern Kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians in 721BC, then the Southern Kingdom, Judah fell to Nebuchadnezzar

thirty-four years later. Prophets like Amos and Isaiah attributed the humiliations and disasters to national apostasy because the rich cruelly exploited the poor whilst pretending to be pious. In the case of Judah, 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. The prophets called on the people to repent, to return to the Lord's ways, but they didn't. Despite the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah prophets of the return from exile, the Hebrews remained obstinate, so apostasy and corruption in high places continued and the Southern kingdom, Judah, was occupied first by the Seleucid Greeks, then by the Roman Empire. It was natural for Jews to want their freedom from oppression, but they did not see that they needed to change their ways.

The opening of Mark's Gospel 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, 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.**' 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, 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, 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 such turbulent times, here and abroad, 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 as a result of the COVID 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 disadvantaged and rejected. Please consider supporting the work being done locally by food-banks and organizations like the Salvation Army and, further afield, charities like Christian Aid and All We Can that help our Developing World. Let us be like the Magi, offering Jesus our finest gifts, even if they aren't gold, frankincense or myrrh. In the carol, "In the bleak Midwinter" Christina Rossetti asked, 'What can I give him' and concluded, 'Give my heart'. That is what Jesus really wants. 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.