

Circuit Service 11th December 2022

Prepared by Rev. David Shaw

Welcome to this service for the 3rd Sunday in Advent. If you are lighting candles now would be a good time to do it. I love watching the candles being lit and have sense that the journey towards Bethlehem is making progress. You might wish to pause for a moment and reflect on the two previous Sundays – what has God been saying to you/us?

All the hymns for this service are from the Advent section. Advent hymns quite often get squeezed out in favour of Christmas carols. When that happens, we miss out on some beautiful hymnody and some of the wonderful Christian truths associated with Advent.

Hymn Singing the Faith 178 (H&P 83) Long ago prophets knew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeLA1LhqFA4>

<p>1 Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come, born a Jew, come to make all things new ; bear his people's burden, freely love and pardon :</p> <p><i>Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring ! Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing ! When he comes, when he comes, who will make him welcome ?</i></p> <p>2 God in time, God in man, this is God's timeless plan : he will come, as a man, born himself of woman, God divinely human :</p>	<p>3 Mary, hail ! Though afraid, she believed, she obeyed. In her womb, God is laid ; till the time expected, nurtured and protected :</p> <p>4 Journey ends ! Where afar Bethlem shines, like a star, stable door stands ajar. Unborn Son of Mary, Saviour, do not tarry ! <i>Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring ! Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing ! Jesus comes ! Jesus comes ! We will make him welcome !</i></p> <p>Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000)</p>
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Prayer

God of time and God of eternity, we worship you. God of outer space and God closer than we can imagine, we worship you. God of the beginning and God of the end, we praise you. Holy, generous and gracious God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit we worship you.

In this season of Advent you invite us to see how you hold past, future and present together. We celebrate your coming to us as a baby in Bethlehem and all Jesus did and won for us. We anticipate with joy the promised coming of the Christ. And in the present, sandwiched between these great moments in history and time, you are present with us. Advent God receive our praise, gratitude and love.

In the name of Christ

Amen

Activity

At Mortimer on the first Sunday in Advent the congregation in groups wrote a prayer where each line began with A D V E N T. You are invited to write a prayer. Below is one of the prayers written. It is offered by way of example and for you to use as a prayer. With thanks to Chris and Allan.

Awaiting our King
Delivering us from darkness
Vision of holiness
Emmanuel, God with us

Not yet arrived, but here

Thank you, Lord

Amen

Hymn Singing the Faith 169 (H&P 81) Come Thou long expected Jesus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEEduWnDGs>

<p>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.</p> <p>2 Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art, dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>4 By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone ; by thine all-sufficient merit raise us to thy glorious throne.</p> <p>Charles Wesley (1707–1788)</p>
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Readings Isaiah 35 v 1 – 10
 Matthew 11 v 2 – 10

Sermon

One of the joys of my first sabbatical was the opportunity to read bedtime stories to my children. I remember reading 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' by C.S. Lewis. The children in the story, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy access the land of Narnia through a wardrobe. The land when they first arrive is gripped by permanent winter. It is under power of the witch. The land and all the trees are covered in thick snow, the water is frozen. Everything is white, icy and cold. During the book the rumour circulates 'Aslan is on the move'. Aslan is a lion. Aslan is the rightful king of Narnia and C.S. Lewis' intention is that we should see him as the Christ figure. The rumour abounds because there are signs that winter is losing its grip. Each of our two readings Isaiah 35 v 1 – 10 and Matthew 11 v 2 – 11 speak of signs which should prompt the rumour 'God is on the move'. These signs show that the kingdom is breaking through. These signs speak of what places and lives will look like when the rightful king reigns.

Sin, which causes the winter, impacts not just humanity but the whole world order. In C.S. Lewis' book the thawing of the snow on the trees and the water beginning to flow in the streams was a sign of restoration, of sin being overcome by the arrival of the rightful king. So, in Isaiah's vision in chapter 35 we are told when God's kingship is accepted there is an impact on the whole created order as well as on human lives:

The desert, parched lands and wilderness will blossom and bloom. And those who see it will see the splendour and glory of our God

Water flows where the ground was thirsty and dead. Plants will grow. Animals can feed and be watered.

The passage in Matthew starts with John the Baptist in prison. He hears rumours that Aslan maybe on the move. Obviously, he can't just leave prison and check out the rumours for himself. So, at visiting time or through a prison window he instructs one of his disciples to find out if this Jesus is the Christ, the rightful king. They go and ask. Jesus, in effect, says let me tell you what is happening and John will work out the answer to his own question.

Tell him winter is losing its grip, lives are thawing, frozen people are now freed to live as God intends. We're not told of the smile which covers John's face when he hears back from his disciples. We're not told of the hallelujah which sprang from his mouth. We are told though of Jesus' praise of John. Those of us who've been around a while in the church will know the phrase 'now and not yet'. It is applied particularly to our understanding of the kingdom, places where the king reigns. We can see signs where

the kingdom has broken through already (now) – relationships which were fractured now reconciled, sickness healed, peace where there was anxiety, a realisation that I am not worthless, but am a precious child of God. Bryn Rees’ hymn, which I might have chosen if I didn’t want to fill this service with Advent hymns, speaks of

‘The kingdom of God
is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores
what sin would destroy;

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The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcasts are welcomed
God’s banquet to share,
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

These glimpses of God’s kingdom are not universal YET. Like the communion they are a ‘foretaste’ of life for all under God’s reign.

Why are these readings chosen as we move through Advent towards Christmas? In short, I can’t say for certain, but perhaps, just perhaps, it’s because the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem tells us God has been moving and still is on the move. There is a clever image designed like a road sign which has a silhouette of a manger with the words ‘God at work’. The rightful king is here. The kingdom of God is near and is with us now. Like the non-recorded response of John to the news his disciples brought back we smile and proclaim ‘Hallelujah’. Unlike John we are free to join in with God wherever God is at work.

Hymn Singing the Faith 171 (H&P 82) Hark the glad sound

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYTslvbwETY>

<p>1 Hark the glad sound ! The Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long ; let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song.</p> <p>2 He comes the prisoners to release, in Satan's bondage held ; the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.</p>	<p>3 He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure, and with the treasures of his grace to enrich the humble poor.</p> <p>4 Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, your welcome shall proclaim, and heaven's eternal arches ring with your beloved name.</p> <p>Philip Doddridge (1702–1751)</p>
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Prayers – based on a prayer from Nicaragua

May it come soon
to the hungry and thirsty,
to those whose crops have failed.
Your kingdom come.

May it come soon
to those who live under oppression,
to those who fight for justice

Your kingdom come.

May it come soon
to those who live in places of violence
to those who live in fear
Your kingdom come.

May it come soon
to those who are sick,
to those who wait by the bed of another
to those weighed down by burdens which are too big to carry
Your kingdom come.

Silence for personal prayer

Grant us the vision to see the signs of your kingdom and to smooth its way.
Grant us hope, patience and courage
that we may not weary
in proclaiming and working for it.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Singing the Faith 172 (H&P 237) Hills of the north rejoice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FMQLLbPh4>

<p>1 Hills of the north, rejoice, river and mountain-spring, hark to the advent voice ; valley and lowland, sing. Christ comes in righteousness and love, he brings salvation from above.</p> <p>2 Isles of the southern seas, sing to the listening earth ; carry on every breeze hope of a world's new birth : in Christ shall all be made anew ; his word is sure, his promise true.</p> <p>3 Lands of the east, arise ! He is your brightest morn ; greet him with joyous eyes, let praise his path adorn : your seers have longed to know their Lord ; to you he comes, the final Word.</p>	<p>4 Shores of the utmost west, lands of the setting sun, welcome the heavenly guest in whom the dawn has come : he brings a never-ending light, who triumphed o'er our darkest night.</p> <p>5 Shout, as you journey on ; songs be in every mouth ! Lo, from the north they come, from east and west and south : in Jesus all shall find their rest, in him the universe be blest.</p> <p>Charles Ernest Oakley (1832–1865) and Editors of <i>English Praise</i>, 1975</p>
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Blessing

The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace