

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed are those who will come from east and west, from north and south, to feast in the kingdom of God.

Today we continue our journey through Advent - through this season of hope - and the words of the song Light of the world express the great depth of love God has for us that gives us the hope of a life spent with him.

Song

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

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

So here I am to worship

Here I am to bow down

Here I am to say that you're my God

You're altogether lovely

Altogether worthy

Altogether wonderful to me

And I'll never know how much it cost

to see my sin upon that cross

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Prayer: Father God, we praise you today for the power of your word, the way you have spoken to so many people throughout history. You called the universe into being – heaven and earth, night and day, the sea and the dry land, life in so many forms. You spoke and it was done. You came in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, identifying yourself with our humanity, sharing our joy and sadness, experiencing our life and death. You came in fulfilment of your promises, showing the extent of your love and giving us the sure and certain hope of everlasting life. We thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit, guiding us and opening our hearts and minds to hear your word.

Forgive us that we are sometimes slow to listen. We do not take time to read the Scriptures as we should, we neglect the opportunity for fellowship and we grow deaf to your voice in creation. We believe we have listened and responded, but our focus is on the written word rather than the Word made flesh, our time spent preparing to celebrate your birth with food and festivities rather than preparing a place for you in our hearts. Forgive us heavenly father and speak clearly to us this Advent. Teach us, when your voice seems silent, to listen again more carefully, and to rediscover your word. We hear again the words of grace – your sins are forgiven. Amen, thanks be to God. You are our hope, Lord Jesus and we offer ourselves to you today as we worship you and look forward to your coming in glory. **Amen**

Readings

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as 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 wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, 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 comes the one more powerful than I, the straps 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.”

Sermon

I hope it doesn’t rain later, what are you hoping, that the preacher doesn’t go on for too long! What sorts of things *do* we hope for?

We hope for fine weather for a day out – we hope the queues won’t be too bad in the shops – we hope that an effective covid vaccine will be available to everyone very soon – we all hope that the world will be a more peaceful place – we hope that the washing machine will not break down – we hope that the cake will rise - we hope that we will be able to meet up with a friend – we hope that by God’s grace we might be a friend. The list is endless – I wonder how many times we say I hope, in a day.

There is a Hebrew word for hope, *gawah*, whose root means to twist, to twine, and it is a word that seems to fit our brand of hoping well. The possibility that this good thing will happen and that that bad thing will not happen, a hundred little strands of hope that we twist together to make a cable of hope strong enough to pull ourselves along through our lives. But we tend to hope only for what seems reasonable out of the various human possibilities before us. If we were to say what we hope for most in all the world, I suspect that our most extravagant answers would really not be very far reaching at all. To hope for too much would be to risk being disappointed, to risk looking foolish, to risk waiting for ever. Even with our conservative hopes we are soon disheartened if we don’t see results straight away.

Is that why we find it so hard to keep on hoping that Jesus will return? Is that why so often we replace that amazing and wonderful hope with lots of smaller, saner hopes that the worst possibilities will never happen and that a few of the better possibilities might. You might be thinking what’s she on about, I do hope that Jesus will return – but what do we hope? when do we hope he will come? Do we really have any hope that he could come right now, while we are engaging with this service today? Do we really hang on to that amazing hope of holiness coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for us?

This is a strange time. We recognise God’s love and care for us and for all of his creation, and we are thankful for his promise of eternal joy, made possible for us through Jesus. But what of this time now – when we look around us and see violence and pain and despair – when the pandemic has snatched away the hopes of so many - when we watch the news and can’t even work out what is the truth. We can’t see a way forward for ourselves, for our world, and that is why it is so important to use this time of Advent to take another look at God’s faithfulness throughout the centuries, to look again at his eternal purpose and to put our hope once again in him.

People say – I don't know what this world is coming to – things are just getting worse, but we can go back 4000 years and see that Abraham also lived in an age of great insecurity and turmoil, an age of a thousand gods when every nation and every part of creation had its own. But in a vision Abraham was given an insight into the holiness of the one almighty universal God whose glory fills the whole earth – and he had hope. Hope that one day all nations would worship the God of his ancestors. We surely can draw inspiration from this people who, even though they lived before that amazing event in Bethlehem, even though they did not have the benefit of the full revelation of God in Jesus, kept their faith in the one true God alive against all the odds. They had hope.

And God kept on speaking through his prophets, reminding, encouraging, trying to show his people what he planned for them, pointing them to the Great Day of the Lord when things would finally be as he intended. Malachi was one of those prophets – he warned the people that after all the years of waiting and longing and hoping, the Lord would suddenly come 'and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple'. He warned them that there would be a time of judgement but that the faithful would be rewarded – 4:2 'for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings'. The good news was that the Lord would not arrive unannounced – 'I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me' – God promised another prophet to prepare the way of the Lord, but then ... nothing for the next 400 hundred years!

But then, true to his word God sent the new Elijah, John the Baptist, who, just as the prophet Isaiah predicted appeared in the wilderness, crying 'prepare the way of the Lord ... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God'. God would fulfil his promise made long ago.

Preparation for the coming of Christ has been going on since the beginning of time. In Advent we look back to the coming of Jesus Christ, not just his birth in Bethlehem, but the promises of God made long before to Abraham and his people across the centuries. We are reminded that Jesus is the Logos the eternal word who was there at the beginning of time – he is not just a last ditch attempt to make the best of a bad job, to try and salvage something from the mess that humanity had become - but part of God's plan from the very beginning, part of his eternal purpose. And I think his timing was amazing too. Just think if Jesus was born now, the news would be on the TV and all over the internet within minutes – the whole world would know the good news. So perhaps now would have been an excellent time for him to be born – but it seems as though God just couldn't wait that long – it had always been his plan to live as one of us, to make it possible for us to be reconciled to him – and he just couldn't wait. If he had come any sooner the news would probably have remained within a tiny community and perhaps fizzled out, but the establishment of the Roman empire meant that there was a reasonable road network, people could travel substantial distances by boat, and people were able to write down what they had seen and heard – it might not have been ideal by today's standards but it would do, he couldn't wait any longer. We do not always understand God's plans, but the evidence we have here (Bible) shows that we can trust him, we are safe to put our hope in him.

All those hopes we considered earlier, hopes about the weather, hopes for those we love, hopes about controlling the coronavirus, even though we might twist them all together, we cannot rely on them to sustain us, to keep us going when things get tough. People will let us down, plans will not work out as we hope. It only takes one or two of our dreams to be dashed for our cable of hope to start getting very frayed and fragile. I know that only too well, as I'm sure many of you do too. Here's just one example... I had just started college, and had great and exciting hopes for a future in ministry in the Methodist church. This was made even more exciting because my brother was at the same time exploring a call to ordained ministry within the Anglican church. Without warning my brother died at the age of 42 and my world of human hopes was in danger of collapsing all together. But God is faithful and trustworthy – in the words of the hymn, Great is thy faithfulness, which cropped up often in the weeks that followed, he promised me 'Strength for today and bright

hope for tomorrow' – and that wasn't a hope that things would feel better soon, or that I'd have all the answers straight away, but hope in the wonderful everlasting tomorrow when there will be no more crying and no more sickness and pain, when God will reign victorious, his creation will be made perfect and we can all spend eternity with him. That is the hope that will not let us down, that is the hope that nothing can destroy.

We hope in Christ, and we know that in some way we cannot imagine holiness will return to our world. Jesus will come. At the end of book of Revelation we hear the promise, 'Surely I am coming soon' – on that promise is our hope and we say, 'Amen, come Lord Jesus'.

(Prayer) Heavenly father we have a sure and certain hope in Jesus. We thank you for all those who have proclaimed your promises to us. We thank you that we know for certain that whatever happens in this life, you reign victorious and that your kingdom of peace and joy will have no end. And so with hope in our hearts we pray – come Lord Jesus. **Amen**

Prayers

As we wait with hope and anticipation for the coming of our Lord, we ask for peace and mercy for ourselves and the world. Come Lord Jesus.

We pray for the church, that during this time of Advent it will help everyone to prepare spiritually for the coming of our Saviour, and that it will be a source of light and hope for those who do not yet know him. Come Lord Jesus.

We pray for nations in crisis, those at war, those suffering political turmoil or economic recession, that all may be able to find something of the peace and happiness at the heart of the coming season. Come Lord Jesus.

We pray for those who find it hard to prepare a way for the Lord in their lives, those whose life's circumstances and experiences have smothered their joy and destroyed their trust. Loving God bring them healing and hope. Come Lord Jesus.

Lord Jesus, you come to your people as saviour and bearer of pain. We pray for those who are unwell, thinking especially of those we know and who we name before you now...
Come Lord Jesus.

We pray for those who are anxious and depressed, those for whom this season, rather than being one of joy, brings its own worries and fears. Bring light into their darkness, we pray. Come Lord Jesus.

We pray that you would come, Lord Jesus and rid the world of the coronavirus. As we wait, we lift to you those who are affected by it in so many ways, asking that you would bring healing, comfort, provision and protection. As we come through this time would you guide us into a future that is more loving, just and peaceful for all people. Come Lord Jesus.

Loving Lord you know that this season can bring pain and sadness as memories are awakened of those we have loved and lost and so we pray that you would bring comfort and healing and peace to all those who need it. Come Lord Jesus.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you came into this world with all its pain and sadness, its love and joy and that you embrace it all. Help us to know your presence with us in the coming days, whatever we may face, and to share the good news of your love with those around us.
Come Lord Jesus, come. Amen

This prayer is echoed in the words of the song, Into the darkness ... Come Lord Jesus come.

Song

Into the darkness of this world,
Into the shadows of the night;
Into this loveless place you came,
Lightened our burdens, eased our pain,
And made these hearts your home.
Into the darkness once again -
O come, Lord Jesus, come.
*Come with your love to make us whole,
Come with your light to lead us on,
Driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Into the longing of our souls,
Into these heavy hearts of stone,
Shine on us now your piercing light,
Order our lives and souls aright,
By grace and love unknown,

Until in you our hearts unite -
O Come, Lord Jesus, come.
Come with your love...

O Holy child, Emmanuel,
Hope of the ages, God with us,
Visit again this broken place,
Till all the earth declares your praise
And your great mercies own.
Now let your love be born in us,
O Come, Lord Jesus, come.
*Come in your glory, take your place,
Jesus, the name above all names,
We long to see you face to face,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

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Blessing

May the God of peace make you holy and keep you free from every fault as you wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And may the blessing of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always. **Amen**