

St John's Sunday Worship - 13th December 2020 – Third Sunday of Advent

If you are worshipping with others, you may wish to say the words in bold type together. You may also wish to have a candle ready to light.

Welcome

Welcome to our worship this morning. Today we are thinking about John the Baptist, who announced the arrival of Christ to His people.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you, our God, have come to us before we could even think of coming to you. You came to walk this earth in our form, sharing our humanity; you come to each of our lives and ask us to welcome you. You will come to this world to make all things right – Lord of past, present and future. Today, Lord, as we worship, may we respond to the call to be ready for your coming, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' And may we know that you are with us, at this moment, wherever we are, as we gather in your name. **Amen.**

Lighting of advent candles

Today we light our third candle, for FAITH. (If you have a candle, you may like to light it now.)

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." -Romans 15:13

Lord Jesus, light of the world,
John told the people to prepare,
for you were very near.
As Christmas grows closer day by day,
help us to be ready to welcome you now. **Amen.**

Hymn: Come, thou long-expected Jesus

We continue our worship with an Advent hymn. You may wish to listen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBGx_4PxO3g or simply to read and reflect.

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| 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 forever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring. | 4 | By thine own eternal spirit,
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine own sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne. |

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-end (NIV)

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendour.
⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

⁸ 'For I, the LORD, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the LORD has blessed.'

¹⁰ I delight greatly in the LORD;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the soil makes the young plant come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.

John 1: 6-8, 19-28 (NIV)

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

¹⁹Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'

²¹They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?'

He said, 'I am not.'

'Are you the Prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

²²Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

²³John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."' "

²⁴Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

²⁶'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

²⁸This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

Reflection

A few days ago, like many of you, I watched a news report of the first COVID vaccines being given, and I saw the first lady to be vaccinated being wheeled in her wheelchair between lines of clapping hospital staff. It was good news, and it struck me that there must be many people at present who are longing for good news, and waiting for something good to happen.

The coming of Jesus is good news for those who really need some good news.

In Jesus' day, many people were waiting for something good to happen, too. The nation had had one problem after another, and now it was under the harsh rule of the Romans. It was widely believed that prophecies of Scripture showed that God would send someone to help. A Messiah. Many people believed that this would be a king, from the family of the great King David, and that he would throw out the Romans and establish a restored Israel as a strong nation. All the world would look to Israel, and Israel's God. But it was hundreds of years since those prophets' words were written down.

In our Gospel reading today, we meet John the Baptist. This John was a rather strange and mysterious figure. He lived in remote places, wearing rough clothing, and living off the land. And there, in the wilderness, God spoke to him, and he began to preach, and to warn people that judgement was coming. He told them to repent of their sins and taught them how they should live in the light of that repentance. He's called 'the Baptist' because he baptised those who turned away from their sins. Being dipped in water was a sign that they were now pure. And he told them that someone else – someone greater – was coming. John knew that the person God was sending was about to be revealed.

John's preaching and the crowds that flocked to him attracted attention from the religious

authorities. They sent people to ask, in effect, ‘Who do you think you are? What’s your authority for what you’re doing?’

Was he claiming to be the Messiah, they asked. John said he wasn’t. But Messiah wasn’t the only person that God might send! People believed that the prophet Elijah was going to come back. Elijah was one of the greatest of the prophets, and he hadn’t died in the normal way; he’d been taken up in a fiery chariot. So they asked John, ‘Are you Elijah?’ But no, he wasn’t Elijah. Moses – even greater than Elijah – had told the people of his day that God would send another prophet like himself. So was John that prophet like Moses? Again, no.

John might have had good reason to think he was someone special. After all, it’s not everyone whose birth is foretold by an angel – and that angel said that he was going to be great, and that he’d go “in the Spirit and Power of Elijah ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:14)

But John doesn’t claim to be any of those important figures. And when they say, ‘Who are you, then?’ he quotes another prophet – Isaiah – and says, ‘I’m a voice, crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’. He isn’t anyone in particular, he says, he’s just an unnamed voice. He turns the attention away from himself, and onto the message that he’s bringing, and more importantly, the person that he’s announcing.

There’s a wonderful 16th century painting of the crucifixion by [Matthias Grünewald](#). Jesus on the cross is in the centre, but off to one side is John the Baptist, and the thing you can’t help noticing about him is that he has his hand raised and his finger is pointing at Jesus. (This is artistic licence - John died well before the crucifixion - but it does make a good point.) And that’s the thing that we particularly see about John the Baptist in John’s gospel. He points to Jesus. John doesn’t want to claim to be one of those great figures: Jesus is the important one. John says he’s not fit even to untie Jesus’ shoelaces, which was the sort of lowly task you might expect a slave to do. But he has been given a message. He’s to call the people to repentance and change, to get them ready to receive their Lord, and then he expects to fade into the background.



By quoting from Isaiah, though, John brings to mind that Scripture and its images. It’s about the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon, after Jerusalem had been conquered; in fact it’s about the end of that exile. They’ve had a long period of captivity, and they know now that it was the result of their disobedience to God, but now they are to be restored.

A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,

and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” --Isaiah 40:3-5 (NIV)

The image here is of making ready a road for God to travel in a huge procession, as he leads his exiled people home. If the Queen takes part in a state event, then her route is prepared: traffic's cleared, obstacles removed, barriers are put up to stop anyone getting in her way, everything's checked for security, and police cars drive ahead of her car or carriage. It's the same sort of idea here, but on the grand scale, with everything made straight and level for the Lord's return with his people.

John picks up this idea to describe his own mission. He's telling people to prepare a way for the Lord. But how are they to do that? By getting rid of the obstacles in their own lives; in other words, by turning away from their sins, and turning to God, and living in the way that God wanted his people to live.

Advent is a time when we, too, can 'prepare the way of the Lord'. As a season of reflection, it gives us, too, the opportunity to look at our own lives and make changes, and turn from anything that's wrong, and give Jesus his rightful place as Lord. When we treat others fairly, or work for justice, or share with those in need, we're spreading the values of his kingdom in our society. And when we take the opportunities this season gives to share the real message of Christmas – the good news that the baby in the manger is God, come to be with us – that He came to be the Saviour who would die on the cross to deal with all our sin and allow us to become children of God – then like John the Baptist, we're pointing others to Jesus.

But I suspect that John, were he here, would be saying, 'Don't talk about me! Tell them about Jesus!' Our reading from Isaiah 61 is another passage where a prophet speaks about being given a message for a people in distress.

“The LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners.”

When Jesus began his ministry, he applied those words to himself. He told the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21) He takes this as a description of his own work, his own ministry. He too has come to an oppressed people with good news of God's deliverance. That is the Lord whose way we are to prepare – a God who sets captives free, who comforts those who mourn, and heals broken hearts.

Prayers

God our Father, we have heard the promise in your Word of good news for the poor, freedom for captives, and comfort for mourners and the broken-hearted.

We pray for those who don't have the necessities of life – for those who don't know where the next meal will come from, and those who will sleep outside tonight, or don't have a place to call home. Lord, we ask that you will provide for their needs, and that you will change situations that allow these things to happen. Please give us the eyes to see injustice and the will to do something about it. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those for whom everyday life and responsibilities are a struggle – for teachers trying to reach the end of term; for healthcare staff and care workers, perhaps doing long

hours in difficult circumstances; for those caring at home, for all those whose work or responsibilities don't allow them enough rest, and for those whose lives are made more difficult by the current situation. Lord, give them strength and refreshment, and support where it's needed. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord, we pray for those who are ill at this time, and for those who are distressed or grieving. We pray for those who are fearful – afraid of illness, perhaps afraid of treatment, afraid of the future, and what may happen. We think of those whose activities have been restricted by the pandemic and the need to stay away from people; those who are lonely; and all those for whom the prospect of Christmas is distressing. In a moment of silence we think of people known to us who need your comfort and healing, and bring their needs to you. ...

Lord, enfold them in your loving arms, and meet their needs in the way you know is best. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We thank you for Operation Christmas Child, and for everyone who has filled a shoebox. We ask your blessing on the boxes sent from this church: may they travel and arrive safely, and may each one of those boxes be exactly right for the child who receives it. We pray that many children will be blessed and given hope through the boxes that they receive – may they understand that you love them. And we pray for all those involved in the work of collecting the boxes, sending them to the countries that receive them, and distributing them to the children; please give them strength, and joy in doing your work.

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

Finally, we pray for ourselves, as we prepare to celebrate your birth, and as we listen for your call to us. However often we hear the story of your coming, may we never close our minds to its wonder, or feel we know it all – may we always be open to your word and your Spirit.

We bring you all our prayers, knowing that we bring them to a Father who loves us and those for whom we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

You may like to continue in prayer as you listen to some music. A suggested song is 'Wonderful Counsellor' by Andy Irons, which you will find on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixoeH-1SRJU>.

Wonderful Counsellor,
Mighty God, Prince of Peace.
Awesome and wonderful, Jesus our Counsellor,
you are Almighty God, Prince of Peace.
Jesus Christ, God with us,
Immanuel, Prince of Peace.

Blessing

May we know the guidance of the Wonderful Counsellor, the power of our Mighty God, the love of the everlasting Father and the peace of the Prince of Peace, today and every day. And may the blessing of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us and remain with us always.

Amen.

Service prepared by Julie Horton

'Wonderful Counsellor' is © Andy Irons / Resound Worship, Administered by Jubilate Hymns Ltd.