

Sunday 19th December – St Johns Church Kingston Park

4th Sunday in Advent

Call to Worship:

From places deeply rooted,
we gather to light our advent candles.

From places yet undiscovered,
we gather to sing our advent songs.

From places still hidden in plain sight,
we gather to read our advent texts.
From places tangled with disappointment,
we gather to share our advent prayers.

Hymn: Tell Out My Soul

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy Name, the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay there glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

Lighting the Advent Wreath:

We light these candles to remind us of Mary,
Lord Jesus, the Light of the World –
blessed is Gabriel who brought good news,
blessed is Mary who said yes to God.
Bless your church preparing for Christmas,
and bless us you children who long for your coming.
Amen

Prayers of confession & Assurance

Lord, forgive us our failure to trust you;
a failure we repeat every day of our lives,
a failure we have confessed to you before.
Forgive us the anxieties that cripple our lives
and the words of hopelessness with which we burden ourselves
and our neighbour.
Forgive us that, though we prepare to welcome the Christ child,
we continue to live as though he had never been born.
Forgive us that we seem to find it easier to depend on each other
rather than on you and your sovereign grace and your living presence.
Forgive us that, though we listen to the story of the first Christmas,
and we rejoice to hear again the message of peace on earth
that the angels brought,
we are still not ready to respond to you as Mary did,
with love, faith and obedience.
Forgive us, most of all, whenever our faithlessness acts as a
barrier which prevents someone else finding faith in Christ.
Lord, reclaim us as your own, and make our lives a fanfare
for your glory.
We ask this in the name of Christ our Lord.
Amen.

O God, your heart is full of mercy.
May we hear and trust your words to each of us:
'Your sins are forgiven.'
May we forgive each other
and forgive ourselves.
Thanks be to God.
Amen

Our Father ,
who art in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory
are yours, now and forever.
Amen.

Readings: Psalm 80:1-7

- ¹ Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth ² before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.
- ³ Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
- ⁴ How long, LORD God Almighty,
will your anger smoulder
against the prayers of your people?
- ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
- ⁶ You have made us an object of derision to our neighbours,
and our enemies mock us.
- ⁷ Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

Sermon

Faithful God,
you chose Mary, full of grace,
to be the mother of our Sovereign and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Now fill us with your grace, that with her,
we may understand your ways,
rejoice in your salvation,
and embrace your will;
through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

I wonder if I were to ask you if you are a pessimist or an optimist, which you would choose? I am definitely an optimist, but my husband, Julian, would definitely identify himself more as a pessimist. Let me share with you a Christmas story that might help you decide!

The Martin's had twin boys, Billy and Bobby. They only resembled each other in looks. If Billy felt it was too hot, Bobby thought it was too cold. If Billy said the TV was too loud, Bobby claimed the volume needed to be turned up. Opposite in every way, Bobby Martin was an eternal optimist, while Billy Martin was a doom and gloom pessimist.

Just to see what would happen, at Christmas time their father loaded Billy's the pessimist's room with every imaginable toy and game. For Bobby, the optimist he loaded his room with horse manure.

That night their father passed by the pessimist's room and found Billy sitting amidst his new gifts crying bitterly.

“Why are you crying Billy?” their Father asked.

“Because my friends will be very jealous of all these toys. I'll have to read all these instructions before I can do anything with all this stuff, I'll constantly need new batteries and my toys will eventually get broken.” Answered the pessimist, Billy.

Passing the optimist twin Bobby's room, his dad found him dancing for joy in the pile of horse manure.

“What are you so happy about?” he asked.

To which Bobby, the eternal optimist twin replied,

“There’s got to be a pony in here somewhere!!”

Our readings today could have been written by the Martin twins. Billy could have written the Psalm which speaks of God’s abandonment and Bobby could have written Mary’s song, with its message of hope and deliverance. And it is at this time of year we can find ourselves a bit of a jumble of emotions, struggling to understand whether we are excited, sad, disenchanted, hopeful, impatient and tired of waiting or waiting with eagerness for the big day.

In our reading from Psalm 80 we meet Joseph, but this is not Mary’s Joseph, but the Joseph of technical-coloured dreamcoat fame! This Joseph was brother of Benjamin and father of Ephraim and Manasseh who were also mentioned in the text. In the beginning of the text we hear how God saved and redeemed his people Israel, and how he is like a shepherd bringing them continually back to God.

But the second part of the Psalm is much more a desperate cry for help, the lament of the psalmist speaks of the need for restoration and acknowledgement. They feel that God has abandoned them, he has turned his back on them, and they do not know why. They ask how long this will last and whether God is angry with them.

And it occurred to me that these may very well be the feelings of many of us at this current time. The sense of abandonment by God is very real for so many people who feel lost and alone during this pandemic, for those who have suffered bereavement, a loss of employment, the loss of their homes, their self-worth or those who just don’t know when it is going to end.

The Anglican priest, poet and writer Malcolm Guite found himself turning more and more to the Psalms during lockdown and what he describes in his book *David’s Crown*, as “the experience of crisis and darkness of living through the corona virus pandemic”. And so he has rewritten the 150 psalms as a corona, a crown or coronet of poems where the last line of each one becomes the first line of the next. Here is what he has written for Psalm 80:

*Lord, hear our sighs and bring us swift release
For we have nothing left to us but tears,
No light, no joy, no strength, no health, no peace.*

*Only the strife, the dread, the strain, the fears
Of these dark times. Oh turn to us again,
Show us once more the mercy of those years.*

*When you were forming us. Remember when
You called us out of exile, planted us
As your own vineyard. Was it all in vain*

*The way you tended and nurtured us
That we might bear good fruit in joy and peace?
We have borne bitter fruit, but come to us*

*And help us start again. Come and release
With your right hand the grace we have refused,
Till shadows flee at last, and sorrows cease.*

I think when we hear those words we can easily relate them to the current pandemic and the times we are experiencing.

But for us, the story does not end there. We also heard from Luke the story of 'The Visitation' and heard again the wonderful words of Mary in what is known as The Magnificat.

We are not told in the reading why Mary went to visit Elizabeth, but we can probably guess it was not a very easy time for Mary to be an unmarried, pregnant teenager. And it is at this meeting of the cousins that Mary speaks her revolutionary words, that speak of an end to oppression, the mighty being brought down from their thrones, and the humble lifted high.

Mary lives like the rest of Israel in an occupied land and sees how the mighty get stronger as the weak get weaker. There is no dispensation for her when an order is given for all to be registered in the town of their birth. She cannot just stay where she is because she is heavily pregnant, she must do as has been commanded. She sees how broken her world is and yet she trusts in God's promise of something different. And so she sings her song that speaks of a time when the rich and mighty will lose their power and their privilege and the world will be restored in equality and justice.

Mary's song is one of restoration in contrast to the psalm writer's lament of abandonment. Both were living in a time of exile and oppression, but with Mary we can see hope for a time when things will be different, when Christ shall come and wipe every tear from our eyes. But we mustn't disregard the psalmist, or feel that we shouldn't lament at this time for the things we have lost, or recognise the sense of abandonment that we may be feeling. We should however, also look forward, through Mary's magnifying glass, to a time when the Kingdom of God will be here on earth. When the oppressors will be brought down and the oppressed will be lifted up. Until that time comes we have to ask ourselves what part we can play in making this happen. What is the uncomfortable call God is making on our lives right now?

When we see situations of injustice or inequality, let us not rest in our own comfort, feeling we cannot possibly make a difference. It's not always the easy thing to do, to speak out against injustice, but if no-one does then it continues unchallenged. When we raise our voices as a united front we are heard and are harder to ignore. Every little thing we can do to help those who haven't got a voice is something worth doing, for collectively we will, and we are, making a difference. Whether it's giving of our time, our money or other resources, every little bit adds up to making life more bearable for those who suffer and bringing an end to injustice and inequality in our world.

So whether you identify as a pessimist or an optimist, we can all use this time of waiting and watching to reflect on what we have lost as a result of the pandemic. But let us not stop there, let us also consider how God might be calling us, just as he called Mary, the most unlikely of revolutionaries, to bring about his Kingdom, here on earth, here and now.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession – written by Jackie Collins

Dear Lord Jesus

We have come to worship you in this glad season of Advent, a season of expectation, of celebration, and above all, of preparation. We come now because we want to be ready – ready to give thanks for your coming, to recognise the ways you come to us now and to welcome you when you come again. Open our hearts as we worship you, so that all we share may give us a deeper understanding of this season and a fuller experience of your love.

Help us to reflect on what your coming means to us, for others, for all. Speak to us through readings, through music, through prayers, through your spirit at work in us. Help us to find the true meaning of Christmas and the joy we can share in knowing you.

Help us to pray that we will persevere in waiting eagerly for the realisation of all that you have promised. Let us remember Mary's words after she learned that she would be having a child, the Messiah, "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled". We pray, like Mary, that we will be able to complete whatever task you give to us, however daunted we may feel.

We ask for your blessing for us here at St Johns over the next few weeks as we prepare for the various Christmas services to take place, for those preaching, leading worship and carrying out all manner of duties during this busy season. Guide us Lord Jesus. We ask for your blessing on those who come through the doors, maybe for the first time and may your love guide us in our conversations.

We think of those who find this time of year really hard, made harder still for all of us in the current situation, be it the pandemic or other worries. We pray for those who worry about their finances, those who are unwell and those who are caring for loved ones who are either ill or struggling in general. Be with them we pray and give strength to those who are feeling weak and encouragement to those feeling let down. Let us now take a moment to think of those known to us who would value prayers at this time.

Pause

May those in authority look to you in the decisions they have to make and that they will hold the best interests of the country to heart. We pray too for our local communities and the world in which we live. Help us to be good stewards for all that you have provided.

May this season of Advent be one of peace and goodwill and the hope that is in you. During

the dark days of winter, may your light shine for all to see.

We ask these things in your name.

Amen

Hymn: When Out of Poverty is Born

When out of poverty is born
a dream that will not die,
and landless, weary folk find strength
to stand with heads held high,
it's then we learn from those who wait
to greet the promised day,
'The Lord is coming; don't lose heart.
Be blest; prepare the way!'

When people wander far from God,
Forget to share the bread,
They find their wealth an empty thing,
Their spirits are not fed.
For only just and tender love
the hungry soul will stay.
And so God's prophets echo still
'Be blest; prepare the way!'

When God took flesh and came to earth,
the world turned upside down,
And in the strength of woman's faith
The Word of Life was born.
She knew that God would raise the low,
it pleased her to obey.
Rejoice with Mary in the call,
'Be blest; prepare the way!'

Words by Kathryn Galloway

Blessing:

Go into the world
with your eyes open to the needs of others
and your ears alert to hear their cry;
with your lips ready to speak the name of Jesus
and your heart longing to share his love.
Amen.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, evermore.
Amen