

15th December 2024 – Morning Service

Gaudete or Rejoicing Sunday

Rev Andrew Roberts

Advent Candle Liturgy

Presents get wrapped with tape and glue, tidy parcels neatly wrapped,
Names on labels with “love from”, O hush the noise, **Let’s hear the angels sing.**

We’ve sorted gifts and who needs what, what will they like, what will be good?
But are there more we need to include? O hush the noise, **Let’s hear the angels sing.**

What of those alone, adrift, forgotten and neglected? What of those whose life’s been hard?
What gift of help needs wrapping too? O hush the noise, **Let’s hear the angels sing.**

A Gathering Prayer

Lord Jesus, we pray that you would come to us by your Spirit and fill us afresh with your joy. Take away our fear, lift up our hearts and grant us a fresh vision of your glory. Come Lord Jesus we pray, Amen.

StF 170 – Darkness like a shroud

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| 1) Darkness like a shroud covers the earth;
Evil like a cloud covers the people.
But the Lord will rise upon you,
And His glory will appear on you--
Nations will come to your light. | 3) Here among us now, Christ the light
Kindles brighter flames in our trembling hearts!
Living Word, our Lamp, come guide our feet
As we walk as one in light and peace,
'Till justice and truth shine like the sun. |
| Ch) <i>Arise, shine, your light has come,
The glory of the Lord has risen on you!
Arise, shine, your light has come,
Jesus the Light of the world has come.</i> | 4) Like a city bright so let us blaze;
Lights in every street turning night to day.
And the darkness shall not overcome
Till the fullness of Christ's kingdom comes,
Dawning to God's eternal day. |
| 2) Children of the light, be clean and pure.
Rise, you sleepers, Christ will shine on you.
Take the Spirit's flashing two-edged sword
And with faith declare God's mighty word;
Stand up and in His strength be strong. | |

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A Prayer for Joy¹

Psalm 51:12 says, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

Lord, would you restore the joy of our salvation? Help us to be willing to follow you with all we have. Your word reminds us of who you are and the ways you love us. Forgive us when we neglect your word and the means of grace. Forgive us too when our words and actions bring anything but joy to you and to others. Renew a right spirit within us we pray and ignite in us a sense of joy that overflows out of our hearts! Let this holy joy be contagious and spill over onto the lives of those around us.

May your peace that surpasses all understanding be upon us...especially as we're wrapping up a year that has at times felt very scary and uncertain. Encourage our hearts with the knowledge that with you we can live in your perfect peace, no matter our circumstances. We thank you for the joy and peace you give!

Amen.

StF 171 – Hark the glad sound!

- 1) Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
The Saviour promised long;
Let every heart prepare a throne,
And every voice a song.
- 2) He comes the prisoners to release,
In Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before him burst,
The iron fetters yield.
- 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.
- 4) Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim;
And heaven's eternal arches ring
With your beloved name.

Philip Doddridge

Introduction to Old Testament Reading

Isaiah 35 was addressed to God's people in exile – longing for home. It is a prophecy of hope and joy. To a people in despair, it is a stunning and shameless vision of a glorious homecoming and a renewed world. It is a word for our world today.

Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

StF 706 – Longing for light

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 4) Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
Walls made of living stone.
- 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.

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Reading: Luke 1:39-45

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

Sermon

I wonder when Christmas really begins for you. A friend of mine says Christmas begins for him when he watches Carols from King's College Cambridge and hears a choir boy soloist sing the first verse of Once in Royal David's City. He is clearly much more holy than me for Christmas can begin for me when I hear Chris Rea's Driving Home for Christmas being played in the car.

From Simon and Garfunkel's Homeward Bound to Ed Sheeran's Castle on the Hill songs about longing for home are powerfully poignant and deeply emotive. A sense of homecoming when you have been away can be very powerful. Just imagine how many Syrian exiles are feeling at the moment about the prospect of going home. And how many Ukrainians, Palestinians and people in Northern Israel yearn for that day.

As we noted earlier, Isaiah 35 was addressed to God's people in exile – longing for home. It is a prophecy of hope and joy. A vision of rejoicing and singing; of sorrow and sighing fleeing away. To a people in despair, it is a stunning and shameless vision of a glorious homecoming and a renewed world. There is hope here for humanity. Hope for the weak. Hope for the fearful. Hope for those seeking healing and release. Hope too for travellers. There is also hope for the rest of the created order (or most of it, the lions and other ravenous beasts do not do so well). Hope for a world full of the glory and the majesty of God. Again, it is very much a vision for the times we are living in.

The biblical scholar Rhiannon Johnson points out that there are so many references in Isaiah that have been taken as referring to Jesus that it has been called 'a fifth gospel'. In Advent of course we look forward to the coming of Jesus – the one who fills us with real joy. The cry of the season is Come Lord Jesus. The imagery of Isaiah 35 and the season of Advent invite us to imagine a world remade, full of the glory and majesty of God.

The third Sunday in Advent is Gaudete Sunday (in Latin Gaudete means rejoice). Those of us of a certain age will remember the folk group Steeleye Span singing their song Gaudete on Top of the Pops. Traditionally this Sunday is a day dedicated to rejoicing in the Lord. And you know what, I think many of us and many in our world could do with a bit of that this year with all the challenges we face personally, in our Churches and in our world. Sometimes joy is a defiant thing saying 'you know what, it may be cold and dark and difficult but I'm going to choose the way of joy'. The third Sunday in Advent is also the day when the Church remembers John the Baptist. John rejoices several times at the coming of Christ. In our gospel reading we heard of John leaping for joy in Elizabeth's womb when he senses the Christ child in Mary's womb – Luke 1:41. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry John declares that he is full of joy at the news - John 3:22-30.

I wonder what you are looking forward to at this time? Not just for Christmas but for the year and the years to come. What do you long for personally? What do you long for the world of which you are part? And how do you long for God's glory to be revealed? When Jesus began his public ministry, he did so by sharing what is often called the Nazareth manifesto, quoting verses from Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4:18-19) and laying out his vision of good news.

As we have just noticed John rejoiced at the conception of Jesus and the commencement of his public ministry. Later on he was understandably despondent in prison and sent some of his disciples to ask if Jesus really is the one that he and God's people had been longing for.

Jesus replies by pointing out that he has done exactly what he promised to do bringing healing and good news. We are not told how John receives this reply but we can hope it brought him reassurance and peace. Some of the joy and gladness in place of sorrow and sighing of which Isaiah speaks (35:10).

I wonder to whom might we send a message of hope and joy at this time? Someone in prison perhaps or someone struggling with doubts or debts or someone longing for a place called or to call home. Or someone who is lonely or grieving. Many of our local Churches seek to do just this. Kingswinford for example have a few mission projects for Christmas this year and one is to send gifts to all the residents at Saltbrook Place, Lye. It is a scheme run by Midland Heart for men and women from 18 - 70 who are waiting to find more permanent accommodation. Longing for home if you like. Kingswinford sends gift bags to the residents there containing at least 6 things including a hot drink, chocolate and other treats, some clothing a hat, gloves or socks (some of which have been knitted by members of the church), toiletries, a gift and a card from the church. Debbie, a member at Kingswinford says *'It's a real way of showing the message of hope and joy at Christmas to people who might have nothing else and feel that no one cares for them. We did this for the first time last year and sent 66 gifts bags off. It was really appreciated by both the staff and the residents who couldn't believe the generosity from the church'*.

On Gaudete – rejoicing -- Sunday may we know again the joy that Isaiah spoke of and that Jesus brings. And may we share that joy we those nearby and further away in our world who need something to smile about this year. Come Lord Jesus, Come.

StF 405 – Great is the darkness

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| 1) Great is the darkness that covers the earth,
Oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
Though many have come in Your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
Touched by the madness and lies. | 2) May now Your church rise with power and love,
This glorious gospel proclaim,
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name.
Help us bring light to this world,
That we might speed Your return. |
| Ch) <i>Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit we pray.
Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit on us today.</i> | 3) Great celebrations on that final day,
When out of the heavens You come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrows will end,
And rulers will bow at Your throne.
Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we shall meet. |

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Prayers of Intercession

God of all, we ask for Your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven this day.

We think now of places that need Your light and goodness and joy and of people that need Your peace and assurance. *[In the silence lift up to God all those that come to your mind.]*

God, we ask that Your kingdom will come and Your light will shine into the dark places of our world today. Where there is war will You bring peace. Where there is hunger will You bring provision. Where there is sickness, healing. Help us Lord, to remain patient in our praying and in our waiting for Your kingdom reign. We thank You God, that You call us again and again in Scripture not to be afraid. Help us to understand what it means to trust in You more deeply each day. **Amen**

Holy God, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of Christ our Saviour we ask that You will answer our prayers and make us a holy people, fit to greet Him with eager hearts *[Silence...]*

Creator God, help the leaders of nations to seek justice and peace which come from the Word of God, may there be good news for the poor and the broken hearted; end conflicts throughout the world which lead to so much grief and mourning. We pray too for all those who strive to rebuild in places which have been ravaged by war or natural disaster. [*Silence...*]

Merciful God, may Your blessing be upon all those who are in pain or sickness, those who are anxious or troubled. We know that You are always present with us, even when sometimes You seem far away. Help us to feel Your presence when we pass through dark places, and sustain us and all who suffer through our pains and sorrows. [*Bring to mind those you know who have requested prayer.....Silence*]

Faithful God, as we continue this Advent journey, teach us to turn to You in times of joy and pleasure, as well as when faced with fear and sorrow. Help us to put our differences behind us and to unite behind the great commission of Jesus to make disciples of all nations and all people. Merciful God: accept these prayers for the sake of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 330 – Joy to the world

- 1) Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.
- 2) Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

- 3) He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness
And wonders of his love,
And wonders of his love,
And wonders, wonders of his love.

Isaac Watts

Closing Prayer

Lord God, as we go now may we go: with joy and singing, strong and without fear to walk your highway with joy and gladness and without sorrow and sighing, for Jesus's sake we pray. **Amen**

¹ Adapted from <https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/third-sunday-advent.html#prayers-for-joy>

² Adapted from <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/worship/weekly-worship/monthly/2024-december/sunday-15-december-2024-third-sunday-of-advent-year-c>