

## A service for 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2024 – Advent 2 (StF)

Advent Liturgy: **Advent 2**

The Light of promise

O come, O come, Emmanuel.  
**Come, Lord Jesus.**

*The second candle is lit.*

We come to light a light of promise,  
To remember we are not alone,  
Not abandoned, not lost,  
But held in the promise of God's love.

In a world that sometimes forgets God-with-us,

**We cling to your promise.**

With the patriarchs of every age,

**We cling to your promise.**

We light a candle in the darkness,

**We cling to your promise.**

**Call to worship: Malachi chapter 3 verses 1 to 4**

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have people who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written in 2001 by Revd. Tim Hughes, who, with his wife Rachel, are senior pastors at Gas Street Church in the centre of Birmingham and have founded Worship Central, a worship training and resources centre. Tim was born in High Wycombe, but moved to Harborne as a teenager when his father became vicar of St. John's church. We shall sing hymn number 175, 'Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness'.*

1. 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. *Chorus:*

*So here I am to worship,*

*Here I am to bow down,*

*Here I am to say that you're my God,*

*And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,*

*Altogether wonderful to me.*

2. 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. *Chorus:*

**3. And I'll never know how much it cost  
To see my sin upon that cross.  
And I'll never know how much it cost  
To see my sin upon that cross..... Chorus:**

© Tim Hughes

***Let us pray to the Lord our God.***

Lord our Redeemer, we come to worship you this morning filled with awe and joy that you care for sinful humankind so much that you made an unshakeable covenant with us through your dear Son, Jesus Christ. God of power and might whose Word fashioned our universe and all that lives within it, you gave Christ to the world, knowing that he must suffer and die, for only by becoming the one perfect sacrifice could Jesus redeem us from the power of sin. In your boundless love for us, unworthy though we are, you raised Jesus from the dead, thereby offering us everlasting life through your grace, not through anything we might earn or deserve. Lord of faithful goodness, we sing your praises with joy, pray to you in faith and listen to your holy word with reverence, for you alone are worthy of our worship.

Heavenly Father, thank you for all the good things we enjoy, for people who have loved cared for and inspired us, for your guiding hand in both good and bad times, for the spiritual food that builds us up in love, faith and truth and for the gospel message that guides our discipleship. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we remember his promise to return in glory, so we prepare our hearts to receive him and welcome him into our lives.

Merciful God, help us to amend our sinful ways, so we live Christ-centred, not self-centred lives. In Jesus' dear name, forgive us for the thoughts, words and deeds that have hurt other people and grieved you, but also pardon us for failing to take the opportunities to do good that have come our way, either from pride, or fear, or meanness, or sheer indifference.

Lord, we believe you hear and answer our prayers so, trusting that we have been forgiven and restored, let us serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, answering your call by sharing the love you give us in such abundance with our neighbours, both friends and strangers, in Jesus' glorious name. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer that Jesus gave us:***

**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.**

***Charles Wesley wrote our next hymn 280 years ago and it is as relevant now as it was all those years ago. It is worth noting that was also a hymn that older brother, John, did not alter! Hymn number 169, 'Come, thou long-expected Jesus,'***

**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 for ever,  
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.**

**4. By thine own eternal Spirit  
Rule in all our hearts alone:  
By thine all-sufficient merit  
Raise us to thy glorious throne.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

***In our intercessions, we remember neighbours nearby and far away.***

God of glory, we recognize your faithfulness in meeting our daily needs and for loving us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus, as the Servant King, who is the model for our discipleship. We pray for our neighbours, nearby or far away, asking you to grant us the faith and compassion to act as your earthly hands, as we seek to support people who are in need or distress, but where the best we can offer is inadequate, we ask you to intervene, for all is possible to you.

Lord of all, we pray for the leaders of the world's nations. Grant them wisdom and compassion to care for the well-being of the people they govern. Teach them to seek justice and to deal mercifully, for justice and mercy are essential for real peace to be established. Indeed, we pray for peace in this troubled world, especially for a just and swift end to fighting in the Holy Land and between Ukraine and Russia, and end to the conflict in Syria, besides Sudan and Somalia where their populations are threatened with famines as a result of the fighting. May the truce between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon be maintained and may tensions between Israel and Iran not escalate into open warfare. Lord, bless everyone who is working for peace: for negotiators, aid-workers and medics, particularly those who are putting themselves at risk by serving on the front line. Remember in your mercy, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression. May they receive the support they need to rebuild their lives and find healing.

We pray for the churches in our Circuit, in neighbouring circuits and, indeed, the World Church. Help us speak of the grace of Christ Jesus with one voice and to serve him in unity of mission, so we build up our community in his name. Let us bear the gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world.

We remember people who are sick in body, mind or spirit; for people living with a dementia and their carers; for all who are lonely, afraid, or in any kind of need or trouble. We pray in particular for everybody who is mourning the loss of somebody dear and finds bereavement unbearable. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned. ....

Lord, while we ask you to help us provide them with both practical support and friendship, enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they may be comforted, find healing, courage, hope and enduring peace.

Lord of life, recent terrible floods in Europe and the USA and wildfires on several continents, are salutary reminders about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We offer our prayer for all disaster-stricken people and pray for them to receive swift, practical aid. Most of all, we pray that all humankind comes to recognize the need for change before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

Abba, heavenly Father bless us our families and our friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us share the abundance of your love, day by day, with everybody we meet, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

**Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 3 verses 1 to 6**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Amen.

*Our penultimate hymn was by Charles Coffin, an Eighteenth Century academic and rector of the University of Paris. In 1727 he published some of his Latin poems and the bulk of his hymns appeared in the Paris Breviary in 1736. In the same year he published them as Hymni Sacri Auctore Carolo. One of these hymns was translated by Revd. John Chandler, vicar of Whitley, in Oxfordshire and included in his hymnal, "The Hymns of the Primitive Church" during 1837. We continue our worship as we sing hymn number 182, 'On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry'*

**1. On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry**

**Announces that the Lord is nigh;  
Awake and hearken, for he brings  
Glad tidings of the King of kings!**

**2. Then cleansed be every Christian breast,  
And furnished for so great a guest!  
Yea, let us each our heart prepare  
For Christ to come and enter there.**

**3. For thou art our salvation, Lord,  
Our refuge, and our great reward;  
Without thy grace we waste away  
Like flowers that wither and decay.**

**4. To heal the sick stretch out thy hand,  
And bid the fallen sinner stand;  
Shine forth, and let thy light restore  
Earth's own true loveliness once more.**

**5. All praise, eternal Son, to thee  
Whose advent sets thy people free;  
Whom, with the Father, we adore,  
And Holy Spirit evermore.**

© Charles Coffin {1676 – 1749} Tr. John Chandler {1806 – 1876}

*Sermon: John the Baptist*

Half a century ago, I was an officer in Alexandra High School's ATC Squadron. Harry, the Squadron Adjutant was a senior member of the school staff, so he was often behind

in the paperwork delivered to him weekly from Group Headquarters. We had three files, nicknamed 'Bibles': AP1919 which contained all Air Force rules and regulations and had to be kept up to date by military law; ACP 20A and 20B which dealt with policies, proformas, procedural and financial matters all of which were supposed to be amended regularly. Harry was more concerned that the cadets were engaged in practical activities they enjoyed than in administration, much of which was petty and time-consuming. For example, if one word, or a number was altered in the ACP folders, rather than amend the original sheet, or sheets, with a pen, the whole page had to be replaced. (The ATC didn't worry about the wastage of paper in those days). He devised a cunning plan, whereby he made few amendments until we were due for our annual inspection and the plan worked remarkably well until we had a new Squadron Leader who made an unannounced visit one Tuesday evening.

Fortunately, the cadets were smartly-dressed and the instruction was of a decent standard, but when the Squadron Leader asked to see our ACP 20s, he was less than impressed. Harry didn't help himself by saying the missing papers were being stored for inclusion 'in the near future', for the Squadron Leader remarked, 'I suppose that means they've been stored in the waste bin?' I'm glad he didn't look and that he had a sense of humour. He said he was going to request updated ACPs, adding that they'd better be kept up to date – just in case he arrived without warning!

Advent isn't just preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth two thousand years ago, it is a time when we should be preparing for his second coming, too. Luke's gospel proclaimed John the Baptist as God's appointed messenger who was sent to prepare the Jews for the coming of the Messiah by preaching '**a baptism for the forgiveness of sins**'. In effect, **John was a second Elijah, the greatest of Israel's prophets**. John began to call Jews to repent and baptised them in the River Jordan to symbolise the washing away of sins and the granting of a fresh start by God. John's wasn't a comfortable ministry: indeed, his message was often as stark and uncomfortable as his lifestyle and clothing, for he was uncompromising in his criticism of those Pharisees and Sadducees who came seeking baptism, describing them as '**vipers**' and demanding to see the **fruits of repentance** rather than a public pretence of piety.

Incidentally, repentance means much more than saying '**sorry**' – like some of my former pupils if they were caught misbehaving, but said '**Sorry, Sir**', only to repeat the offence shortly afterwards. Such an apology is clearly insincere – indeed, it displays contempt for the teacher, thinking he would be fobbed off with empty words. Few of my pupils made the same mistake again! Prophets used '**Shub**', rather than '**Naham**', for '**Repent**', because **shub** also means to turn 180 degrees from the way of sin, back to the path leading to God. **Shub means returning to God and to righteous living, so repentance involves changing our ways, not just paying the Lord lip service**. A real change in our behaviour is required when we repent.

John's call for repentance was urgent, for he declared the Day of the Lord was imminent. He made it clear that he wasn't the Messiah, declaring, '**After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs 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.**' Baptism symbolised a new start with God for those who turned, but water was only the preparation for the kind of baptism Christ's followers would receive, for through faith and God's gift of the Holy Spirit we enter a relationship so close to God we may call him '**Abba**'. Sadly, many of those whom John baptised still failed to recognize the Messiah, even though Jews had waited for his coming for seven centuries or more.

At Advent we think about both Jesus' birth two thousand years ago and of his Second Coming. **When Jesus entered our world, he had no privileges as God's Son, nor did his parents have time to prepare for his birth.** He was born in the stable of an inn which would have been dark, unhygienic, cold & smelly. After all, Joseph and Mary were far from home and had nowhere to stay – **shunned by Joseph's relations. In human terms, Jesus was little better than a refugee when he was born – yet this was God's plan, because through Jesus, God wanted to show his love for ordinary, unprivileged folk, including those at the bottom of the social ladder.** Forget sentimental Christmas cards and carols, our Saviour's birth was full of stress and deprivation. **We can, of course, prepare for Christmas by dwelling upon Jesus' nativity story, but what about preparing for his coming again in glory?** What should we be doing for that eventuality?

Let's not be caught out like my Squadron was when the Squadron Leader visited unannounced. If Jesus walks in here today, would we be confident that our affairs are in order? Jesus may not be concerned about our paperwork, but he will take an interest in how we are living and in our spiritual state. Are we answering his call to care for our neighbours – both friends and strangers? Are we supporting church outreach and activities? Is our prayer life all it should be? Do we study the scriptures as we ought and are we taking our responsibilities as disciples seriously? Advent is the ideal time to amend our lives by addressing past failures and grievances, old quarrels, or things we regret having done. If there are wrongs we can rectify, or relationships we can restore, what better time than now? However, there may be issues that can't be changed, yet which fester. Offer them to Jesus in prayer, for he'll bear away any grief or guilt, leaving us free to get on with life.

**NOW** is time to ensure seasonal visitors to our church find in us the warmth and welcome in Jesus' name that will encourage them to return more often; **NOW** is the time to provide for poor people, both here and abroad – perhaps by supporting **FOODBANKS** or Christian Aid – as one of Jesus' principal aims was to bring good news to the poor. Above all else, **NOW is the** time to reflect upon God's amazing gift of Jesus as our Saviour and Friend, for whereas John the Baptist came to turn Jews from sin by threats of God's wrath, **Christ** came for everybody with Good News of his Father's **AGAPE**. **May each of us be ready to receive Christ Jesus into our hearts and lives, not just this Christmas but whenever he returns!** Amen.

*We close our service with a hymn by Philip Doddridge, Congregational minister in Northampton, who threw himself into helping the community, especially amongst the poor and disadvantaged in the town. Despite a heavy workload, Revd.*

*Doddridge found time to write at least three hundred and seventy hymns. 'Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,' was his attempt to highlight his Advent Sermon of 1735, so it is 289 years old. We shall sing hymn number 171.*

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 thy beloved name.

© *Philip Doddridge {1702 – 1751}*

***Benediction***

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