

A service for Advent 3 – 15<sup>th</sup> December, 2024 (StF)

Advent liturgy: The light of Challenge

O come, O come, Emmanuel.

**Come, Lord Jesus.**

*The third candle is lit.*

We receive the light of challenge, acknowledging much that needs to change,  
In our lives, in our attitudes, our choices and in our world.

In a world of comfort and plenty, where many go hungry,

**Challenge us to change.**

With John the Baptist, and all the uncomfortable voices,

**Challenge us to change.**

We light a candle in the darkness,

**Challenge us to change.**

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

**Call to Worship: Isaiah Ch. 12 vs. 2 – 6**

"I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation."

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. In that day you will say:

"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."

*Our opening hymn, by Mark Earey, explains the significance of each Sunday in Advent and is set to the lovely melody 'Angel voices'. We shall sing the first three verses of hymn number 165, 'Advent candles tell their story'*

**1. Advent candles tell their story**

As we watch and pray,

Longing for the Day of Glory,

'Come, Lord, soon,' we say.

Pain and sorrow, tears and sadness

Changed for gladness

On that day.

**2. Prophet voices loudly crying,**

Making pathways clear,

Glimpsing glory, self-denying,

Calling all to hear.

Through their message – challenged, shaken –

Hearts awaken:

God is near!

**3. John the Baptist, by his preaching**

And by water poured,

Brought to those who heard his teaching

News of hope restored:

'Keep your vision strong and steady,

And be ready

For the Lord.'

### ***Let us pray.***

Heavenly Father, Lord of creation and Saviour of the world, we have come to worship and adore you, for you are the Word who spoke life into being, whose wisdom and might are boundless. We acknowledge that you are the one true God whose power and wisdom are far beyond our understanding, yet who in loving-kindness provides our daily needs. You are the loving heavenly Father, who from the beginning, has tried to draw human beings close to you: first through the prophets and patriarchs, who gave us your law to show us how we ought to live; yet, when we rebelled against you, at the right time, you gave sinners like us the most precious gift of all, your only Son, Jesus.

In Advent, we remember how you took human form and lived among us to show in words and actions how we should live. Come into our hearts, dear Lord, guide and empower us in our discipleship, so both our worship and our service are pleasing to you, proclaiming your glory, through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

### ***In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'Hear our prayer'.***

Merciful God, we know how deep is our need to set ourselves right with you, for often we fail to love and serve you as we ought, through weakness, sinfulness, wilfulness, carelessness or fear. For our disobedience and faithlessness,

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

In shame and sadness, we recall occasions when we have failed to care for neighbours who were lonely, distressed, needy or troubled, through our selfishness, pride, anger, cold-heartedness or indifference. For our failure to share your love with others,

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

Gracious God, whose redemptive love took Christ to die at Calvary for the world's sinfulness, we believe your gracious word that our sins have been forgiven. Renew us in your grace and empower us to serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

### ***We shall say 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.**

*As Advent is a time of newness and renewal, I've chosen a hymn that did not by Clare Stainsby a former English teacher and a Roman Catholic liturgist. Although, strictly-speaking, we ought to sing only the first four verses, I propose we sing the whole hymn. Hymn number 174, 'Light a candle in a darkened place,'*

**1. Light a candle in a darkened place,  
In its flame see hope on every face  
Christ our Saviour will be born,  
Heralding a brand new dawn,  
So let it burn.**

**2. In the darkness, see the coming light,  
Word of God speaks through the darkest night,  
Keep a watch, the time is near,  
Time for hope and not for fear,  
So let it burn.**

3. Stepping through each page of history,  
Prophets contemplate this mystery,  
Celebrate the coming King,  
Words of joy and hope they bring,  
So let it burn.

4. In the desert now the waiting's done,  
Make things ready for your King, says John,  
See, his glory is revealed,  
And the hope for all is sealed,  
So let it burn.

5. Mary found true favour with the Lord,  
Yet she trembled at his strange reward,  
Knew this was the special One,  
Hope for many through God's Son,  
So let it burn.

6. Do not fear, today I bring good cheer,  
Jesus Christ, the Saviour now is here,  
God has lit his flame of love,  
Through his Son from Heaven above.  
So let it burn.

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*We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns for people nearby and far away to our Lord. When I say, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' please say 'Come Lord Jesus'.*

In joyful expectation of his coming to reign, we pray to our Lord Jesus, saying, Come, Lord Jesus. .... **'Come, Lord Jesus.'**

Loving Lord, come to your world as King of the nations, to bring peace, built upon justice and mercy, to all countries. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern in the world, so they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way. We pray for wise and compassionate treatment of the victims of war, terrorism, persecution and of refugees. Help them find both support and courage, so they may find healing and rebuild their lives.

We pray for just and lasting resolutions to the wars in Ukraine the Holy Land, Syria, Sudan and Somalia. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many victims of conflicts: the lost lives; those injured in body, mind and spirit, widows and orphans and not least the many refugees who face exploitation and vilification.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord, before you rulers will stand in silence. Guide the leaders of the wealthy nations and the World Bank to show mercy to the people of Developing Nations, where indescribable poverty exists. Inspire them to offer practical support to break the chains of poverty once and for all, thereby granting our poorer brothers and sisters both security and dignity.

Hear our prayer, too, for those in our own country who are unemployed, homeless, or who need to use food banks to survive. Bless all who provide food for and all who run food banks, and other organizations which serve the poor. Create in our politicians and business leaders a vision for a fairer society in which the poor and disfranchised are given hope and grant that we, too, may contribute to such a great work.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord of shalom, come to your people as healer and bearer of pain. We pray for people from this church, for families and friends, for people from work, or from our community who are ill, lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In a time of silence, we bring you names of people for whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will know their needs. ....  
Loving Lord, in your grace, enfold us all in your love, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come, Lord of creation, for we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come Father God, as Christmas nears, we pray for ourselves. We don't know what others will ask of us so we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us and our families. Keep us safe and fill us with the love and grace of Christ Jesus, so that our thoughts, words and deeds offer peace and love to people around us, bringing you glory in his holy name. Amen.

*We continue our worship with hymn, number 189, written by Revd. Carl Daw Jr, for the Hymn Society of America competition for Advent hymns in 1985. We sing, 'Wild and lone the prophet's voice'*

**1. Wild and lone the Prophet's voice**

Echoes through the desert still,  
Calling us to make a choice,  
Bidding us to do God's will:  
"Turn from sin and be baptized;  
Cleanse your heart and mind and soul.  
Quitting all the sin you prized,  
Yield your life to God's control."

**2. "Bear the fruit repentance sows:**

Lives of justice, truth and love.  
Trust no other claim than those;  
Set your heart on things above.  
Soon the Lord will come in power,  
Burning clean the threshing-floor;  
Then will flames the chaff devour;  
Wheat alone shall fill God's store."

**3. With such preaching stark and bold**

John proclaimed salvation near,  
And his timeless warnings hold  
Words of hope to all who hear.  
So we dare to journey on,  
Led by faith through ways untrod,  
Till we come at last like John

**Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 3 verses 7 to 18**

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him,

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’

For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

John answered,

“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized.

“Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. Then some soldiers asked him,

“And what should we do?”

He replied,

“Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ.

John answered them all,

“I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. Amen.

**Sermon:** *“Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”*

I like John the Baptist for his honesty and courage, so it is good that he appears for the second time in our Advent Lectionary. He was born to parents who were considered too old to bear a child. His father, Zechariah, was a priest and his mother, Elizabeth, came from a priestly family. She was related to Mary, who was Jesus’ mother and she and her husband bound John to God with a Nazarite oath, meaning he would not touch alcohol, nor cut his hair, that he’d live simply and devote himself to God in service. He is believed to have lived among the hermit-like Essenes, near Qumran by the River Jordan. Shortly before Jesus began his ministry, John began to preach and baptize Jews in the Jordan as a sign of repentance, for he proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, for whom Jews had longed for nearly eight hundred years. His appearance was striking, for his hair and beard were untrimmed and he dressed in a camel-hair habit secured with a leather belt. He demanded that repentance ought to be real and was savage towards those who came for baptism with only a pretence of piety. He called them ‘vipers’ and demanded the produce **fruits of repentance:** deeds, not words.

This Advent, we are in a period of insecurity and the future remains uncertain, even threatening. 2024 has been a troubled year with clear evidence of global warming, the continuing war between Ukraine and Russia and the horrors of the conflict in the Holy Land following the terror attack by Hamas on 7<sup>th</sup> October last year. Although the Assad regime in Syria has ended, we are waiting to see how the victors react to the power they now wield. There are strong arguments in this country about how to deal with

immigrants who sail to our shore on barely seaworthy inflatable dinghies, rather than how to eliminate the vile people smuggler gangs, who prey on the desperate. Then we face the financial crisis which is making the lives of many fellow citizens so difficult. It would be easy to throw up our hands in despair and postpone our celebrations because of the events of the past twelve months, but don't give up, for we have come through many situations that have seemed just as heart-breaking and threatening. God is still in control, despite the worst of human pride, selfishness and evil that try to extinguish the light of his love and plunge us into a new Dark Age. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, beside us and within us as the Holy Spirit. Through him we can and will overcome.

Remember, that when John the Baptist began his ministry, Judea and the whole of Palestine was occupied by Rome, the second occupation that followed the return from Exile in Babylon. Jews wanted freedom, but weren't prepared to turn back to God. Instead Herod Antipas maintained power ruthlessly, the wealthy Herodians and many religious leaders were corrupt and exploited the poor and marginalised. Others, including Pharisees, were too self-satisfied and complacent with their lifestyles which is why John the Baptist was so critical of them. Think about it: how many similarities in society are there between then and now? They needed Christ then; so do we, now!

Several listeners asked John what they ought to do. He told them to share with the needy, in other words to be compassionate, *chesed* in Hebrew. Tax-collectors were directed to act honestly and soldiers were told not to extort or lie to boost their earnings – *sedaqa* or righteousness in Hebrew. The prophet Micah declared what God wants of us, **'And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'** The Baptist declared that evidence of repentance, turning back to God, is shown in the way in which we live, acting justly and looking to our neighbours' needs. It begs a question of us. Are we honest and kind in all our dealings, or do we just pay lip service to the Lord?

We can and should rejoice about many people who go far beyond the call of duty to support neighbours both here and abroad, particularly the lonely and isolated: workers in and supporters of foodbanks and clothes banks; campaigners who have persuaded the Government to support deprived children throughout school holidays; those who run holiday clubs; street pastors who care for revellers in our town centres and everybody whose small random acts of kindness have brought cheer in these trying times. Last but not least of these are people in health and social care who will be working throughout the Christmas period.

At Advent we await God's salvation, so let us do so patiently. We can, of course, prepare ourselves for Christmas by dwelling upon Jesus' nativity story, reflecting upon God's amazing love for us and his assurance that he is Immanuel, God with us and beside us in all things. However, what about preparing for his coming again in glory? If Christ should come back today, would any of us be ready to face him? I have asked this twice in my Advent services, but it is relevant, for Jesus COULD return today, or tomorrow – not sometime never, so be prepared. What should we be doing for such an eventuality? The answer is to copy the example of previous generations of Christians: to stand alongside the broken and grieving; to offer what help we can for as long as we can, but above all else to remain a loving presence in our community. **Come, Lord Jesus, fill us with your love and help us share it with all-comers. Amen.**

*Our closing hymn was written by Revd. Charles Silvester Horne in 1909. He was Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales and MP for Ipswich from 1910 until his sudden death following a lecture on preaching at Niagara Falls*

*in 1914. You may be surprised that Revd. Horne had a son, Kenneth, who achieved fame with his radio programme, “Around the Horne”! Hymn number 185, ‘Sing we the King who is coming to reign;’*

**1. Sing we the King who is coming to reign;  
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!  
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,  
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King: *Chorus*  
*Come, let us sing: Praise to our King,  
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:  
This is our song, who to Jesus belong:  
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.***

**2. All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;  
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;  
Justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;  
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King: *Chorus***

**3. Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;  
Doubt shall not darken his witness within;  
Hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;  
Love is victorious when Jesus is King: *Chorus***

**4. Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray;  
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day  
When this new song thy creation shall sing:**

**Satan is vanquished, and Jesus is King: *Chorus* © Charles Silvester Horne (1865 – 1914)**

***Benediction***

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