

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 13 December 2020

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. This is a Communion service for Christ Church. Next week will be a Communion service for Bridgwater Drive, live-streamed from there. Bridgwater people please do not partake of the elements today, as we will do it in person next Sunday.

The psalm set for today is 126. Although we will not be reading it, and although we won't be actually singing, only Thora will, I liked the words of our call to worship and hopefully we are singing songs of joy in our hearts that we can meet together, albeit in a strange way, and through the wonders of technology meet with those at home. Let us give thanks to God for all that we do have. Or, as the artist Tracey Emin said in a radio interview last week, having had major surgery for cancer this year – I'm so happy to be alive, happier than I have ever been!

Call to worship (based on Psalm 126)

Though we could be resentful,

we come to give thanks.

Though we could be complaining,

we come to offer appreciation.

Though we could be upset about what we lack,

we come in gratitude for what we have.

We enter now into this time of worship

carrying seed to sow, singing songs of joy, rejoicing together.

Written by Joanna Harader

A new hymn – the words seemed perfect for today's readings, and for the Advent candles --
(hope, peace, love and joy)

Hymn Hope is a candle
Hope is a candle once lit by the prophets
Never consumed though it burns through the years
Dim in the daylight of power and privilege
When they are gone hope will shine on

Peace is a candle to show us a pathway
Threatened by gusts from our rage and our greed
Friend feel no envy for those in the shadows
Violence and force their dead end course

Love is a candle whose light makes a circle
Where every face is the face of a friend
Widen the circle by sharing and giving
God's Holy dare love everywhere

Joy is a candle of mystery and laughter
Mystery of light that is born in the dark
Laughter at hearing the voice of an angel
Ever so near casting out fear

Christ is the light that the prophets awaited
Christ is the lion the lamb and the child
Christ is the love and the mystery and laughter
Candles make way Christ is the day

Church Hymnary, © Selah publishing, Music: © Douglas Galbraith

Opening prayer

We come to worship Christ
Who proclaims good news to the poor,
binds up the broken-hearted,
frees the prisoner
and comforts those who mourn.

We come to worship Christ
Who bestows 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.

We come to worship Christ
Who rebuilds ancient ruins
and restores broken places.

written by Phil Whyte, Church of Scotland

O God most high, you love justice, hate oppression, and promise both liberty and justice.
Anoint us by your Spirit, that we may bring good news to the downtrodden,
Bind up the broken and set the captives free.
Help us to proclaim your favour, that those who mourn will be comforted,
Tyrants face justice, and our earth be renewed according to your will. **Amen**
from the URC Prayer Handbook (based on Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11)

Offertory

We give thanks for people's generosity in giving to the Christmas appeal, helping Hopeworx, Home-Start and HARP. May the gifts help to bind up the broken and set free those held captive to poverty and hopelessness.

God, whose giving knows no ending,
we offer up the treasure that you have entrusted to us;
we offer up the skills and time that you have graciously given to us;
we offer up ourselves in service and praise.

Receive these gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

written by Joanna Harader, <http://spaciousfaith.com/>

Advent candles

We light the third candle for John the Baptist who called people to prepare for the coming of Christ. The light shines in the dark and the darkness has not put it out. There appeared a man named John, sent from God: he came as a witness to tell of the Light so that all might believe through him. Holy one, make us faithful in waiting and ready for your coming so that we may make ready the way for Jesus to come into our lives. **Amen.**

Hymn The Candle Song (Like a candle flame) played by the CC Music Group
No singing, please read the words on the screen or at home

Like a candle flame
Flickering small in our darkness
Uncreated light
Shines through infant eyes

Yet his light shall shine
From our lives, Spirit blazing
As we touch the flame
Of his holy fire

*God is with us, alleluia
God is with us, alleluia
Come to save us, alleluia
Come to save us, Alleluia!*

Bible readings: **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**
 John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sermon

Picture John on the witness stand - John's gospel maintains a judicial dimension from beginning to end - being interrogated. The leader of the religious establishment sidles up to him and asks three times: "Who are you?" John answers truthfully, but differently, each time. Trying to be clear about his identity, John answers in three ways: he clarifies who he is not - not the Christ and not Elijah. He references a Hebrew Bible text that discloses something of his vocation – that he is "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness". And, he owns the limitations of his actions - "I baptize with water" and there is another immanently more worthy. In order to witness to Jesus, John has to know who he is not, who he is, and what he does. Can these same three methods help us claim our identity within our vocation to bear witness to Jesus?

John's identity is crucial to how he is able to bear witness and what his character witness means. However, in the end, this passage isn't so much about John as it is about his testimony. Here are seven things we learn about Jesus from John's witness that a first-time hearer would not have known, from this passage and the verses immediately following:

- Jesus is the true light. In John's gospel, light refers to Jesus as the Word's ability to create and maintain life
- Jesus is exalted. John is not worthy to even untie his sandal.
- Jesus is the Lamb of God, a symbol of God's deliverance of the Israelites in the Exodus.
- Jesus takes away the world's sin. sin is singular because the world's brokenness is communal.
- God's Spirit is upon Jesus and remains with Jesus.
- Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus is the Son of God, meaning John recognizes that Jesus has a special relationship with God and a unique ability to reveal God.

This is a massive witness. The religious establishment, charged with knowing stuff about true light, sins and the Son of God, don't know these things. It takes this scruffy, upstart John to tell them. Isn't it predictable that those leaders, faced with embarrassment, would either want to cover up for their ignorance or would want to discredit this strange witness, John? John's witness lends credibility to Jesus' movement. Jesus' first disciples were actually John's disciples who follow him after John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God. Furthermore, in John's gospel, witness is the beginning of faith. Bearing witness, is like telling a story. I'm sure we all know how hearing a personal story makes us want to support a cause or give to a particular charity. Or how when we have been affected by something ourselves, or our family have, we want to fight for that cause. This Christmas, more than any other in recent years, will be tough for many people. Many people will be struggling and will go hungry. This week, the Trussell Trust which is the umbrella organisation for food banks, had a poster campaign to raise awareness about food poverty and people going hungry. We have had a

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poster up in the church window. I've had one in the manse window and Sandy has had one up at her house. Here is Josh's story from the Trussell Trust website:

Growing up in an overcrowded house and a troubled family environment, Josh from South Wales, didn't have the best start in life, and he was taken into foster care at the age of 16. After several housing changes and a relationship breakdown, Josh ended up living in a youth hostel. "Things just went downhill, but I wanted to try to sort myself out," he admits.

Struggling to afford food, Josh eventually found the courage to ask for the help he needed and was referred to his local food bank, where he was instantly welcomed: "I was a bit nervous and I was only 16 but when I got to the food bank the people were really nice. They sat down with me, we had a chat and they made me feel welcome." He continues: "The volunteers at the food bank also try to sort you out with other stuff. Even if they can't help you directly, they point you in the right direction and try to help you that little bit more."

Josh is grateful that the food bank was there to help in his time of crisis: "It made me feel really good when I could get food and speak to people at the food bank. They're really nice people, you don't get many places like this." He continues: "It's not a nice way to be when you have no food. And it's not just food, you've got to buy clothes now and then, washing powder and cleaning products. By the time you've bought all that and paid your bills you don't have much left for food; you can't live like that."

Josh hopes things will continue to improve, but after all he's been through so far he still remains apprehensive about his future: "I want a stable home and a working life but I don't know what the future has in store. I want it to be good but only time will tell, I don't know what's around the next corner yet." (you can see his story here: https://youtu.be/A4Y_CBwR2D8)

There is no mention of food in the nativity story, but I think we can assume that Mary and Joseph didn't have too much to eat if they couldn't even find a place to stay. And the so-called Wise Men, didn't turn up until months later and didn't bring anything edible! Like we saw in the Posadas video – if we think of Mary and Joseph today, we would have to think of a homeless couple – at least temporarily homeless. Joseph would have had no work while they were travelling to Bethlehem and then running to Egypt to escape Herod. We don't know exactly how long it was until they got back to Nazareth and Joseph could take up the woodworking again, but like refugees today, we're definitely talking years, not weeks. If Mary and Joseph had a new born in the UK in 2020, I'm pretty sure they'd need a foodbank at some point.

Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 in his first sermon – he was the one who came to bring good news to the oppressed, relief to the broken-hearted, and liberty to prisoners. Those prisoners need not be literal prisoners, they can be imprisoned in poverty, in hunger, in confusion, in loneliness. We too are called to bring relief to the oppressed and the prisoners as much as we can. As we approach Christmas, let us not dwell on what we can't do – sing carols, gather in large groups round a Christmas dinner, visit loved ones – let us rejoice in what we can do, send Christmas greetings, not

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only to long-lost friends, but to prisoners, donate to charity, pray. The huge amount of Christmas lights in people's homes this year, are proof that people are making the best of things and will celebrate Christmas somehow. The darkness is full of lights. Jesus is the light of the world – let us go out into the world and share that light.

Hymn Hark the glad sound! (R&S 137)

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long;
let every heart prepare a throne,
and every voice a song.

He comes, the prisoners to release,
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

He comes, from ignorance and doubt
to clear the inward sight;
and on the darkness of the blind
to pour celestial light.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
thy welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with thy beloved name.

Lord's Supper - as you follow at home, please say the words in bold

Let us celebrate this joyful feast.
People will come from east and west and north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

Let us lift up our hearts. **We lift them to the Lord.**
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God,
for you have turned our grief into songs of joy,
and clothed us in salvation and victory.

You planted the earth and all life,
and called a people to be your light in the world.
When they were taken weeping into exile,
you promised through your prophets
to bring them home to Zion, singing and laughing.
Salvation has come in your Messiah, Jesus,
— the one whose coming light
your servant, John, bore witness to.
Filled with your Spirit,
Jesus came proclaiming good news for the poor,
healing for the broken hearted,
and the day of freedom to all who are bound.
He was killed by the proud and powerful,
but with your wonderful power you raised him to life.
In his presence we are filled with expectant hope and joy,
and eager to embrace your eternal covenant.

Therefore with all your people on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

This is the mystery of faith:

**Christ took the form of a slave
Christ took the cross of shame
Christ gives the free gift of life.**

Send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,
and we may be ready to live for you
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life, and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

Gracious God, we pray today, for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them,
through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising
awareness of issues.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those working hard to develop and deliver vaccines, for doctors, nurses, porters and
cleaners, carers and their families, as they battle tiredness and depression to keep going.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who feel lonely and sad. Those not able to see family or friends. Those trapped
by mental or physical illness; trapped by poverty and social exclusion.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those awaiting test results or
treatment, for the dying and those who mourn. May your infinite love and grace surround them and
bring them peace, in Jesus' name. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Tell Out My Soul (R&S 740)

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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 to same;
His holy Name--the Lord, the Mighty One

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

Tell out, my soul, the glories 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!

Blessing

Follow, where the Spirit of Hope leads you
Listen, as the child of Peace cries for you
Rejoice, as the Love of God embraces you
and go now, with Hope, Peace and Love in your hearts
and the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever with you. Amen

(A World of Blessing, ed. Geoff Duncan)