

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 27 Nov. 2022 Advent Sunday

**Call to worship** (based on Psalm 122)

I was glad when they said unto me,  
"Let us go into the house of the Lord!"  
We are standing in God's presence,  
alert and ready to receive God's word.  
The night is passing. The day of salvation is near.  
We seek to live as people of the light.  
*Come, Lord Jesus!*

**Hymn** O come, o come Emmanuel MP 493

**Light the 1<sup>st</sup> Advent candle**

**Sing** Like a candle flame v1 & chorus only MP 420

**Gifts**

Father, today we come anticipating the coming of your Son  
As we start our Advent vigil, waiting for the incarnation;  
we wait for the greatest gift of all.  
In gratitude we give in return.  
May these gifts be used for the coming of your kingdom,  
not in some distant future, but here and now -  
in the name of the coming Messiah, Amen

**Opening Prayer** (based on Psalm 122)

I was glad when they said to me,  
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"  
Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.  
We gather with gladness in the Lord's house this day!  
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
"May they prosper who love you.  
Peace be within your walls,  
And security within your towers."  
We gather to pray with our words and our lives  
so that all of God's children will one day know  
peace and economic security, especially thinking of Ukraine,  
Israel/Palestine and Iran.

For the sake of my relatives and friends  
I will say, "Peace be within you."  
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God  
I will seek your good.  
We gather in God's name, who claims us all as kin,  
to speak out and seek peace and justice  
for the sake of all God's children.

URC Prayer Handbook, p72

**Hymn** There's a wideness in God's mercy MP683 omit v2

**Bible readings:**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5**  
**Matthew 24:36-44**  
**Romans 13: 8-14**

There are several possible ways I could go to talk about today's readings, various different, but perhaps overlapping or intertwining themes. The Psalm gives us images of peace –

'pray for the peace of Jerusalem', 'peace be within your walls', 'peace be within you'. It is a litany of peace, a prayer for peace, and Jerusalem certainly needs peace. It is a divided city, within a divided country, with Palestinians shut out of Jerusalem and the holy sites by a wall (pic). The prophet Isaiah also gives us a future image of peace – 'in the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains'... many people will come and go to the house of God to learn God's ways. God will arbitrate between people and the people shall beat their swords in ploughshares (blades of a plough) and their spears into pruning hooks, and they shall learn war no more. Every three years, at Advent, we get this reading from Isaiah of beating swords into ploughshares. More than prayer is required to bring peace – it must be beaten from swords. If you have ever seen a blacksmith at work, you will know that beating metal into something else is hard work. (pic) Making peace is long hard work, whether it is making peace within families or negotiating international peace treaties. And so we come to our Gospel reading. I recently bought a book called 'what were you arguing about along the way?' which is an illusion to the walk to Emmaus. It is Gospel reflections for Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter from the Spirituality of Conflict Project and all the writers are people who have worked, in some way, in the area of conflict resolution.

Themes of anticipation, preparation and recognition run through all the gospel readings that we traditionally read during Advent. They are always coupled with the need for a response, and accounts of different forms a response might take. Matthew chooses to emphasize preparation and response. Today's reading introduces various questions about anticipation and preparation but it also points us to what might happen when hopes and expectations are disappointed. I don't want to be a damp squib, but while many of us wait happily and expectantly for Christmas, many people dread it. For some being with family is not a good experience but a time filled with tension or pretending to be something you're not. For those living on the streets, seeing the bright lights and people out Christmas shopping must make being homeless even harder to bear. Though it happens every year, this year more than ever, there will be children disappointed that they didn't get what they asked for. There will be people spending a cold Christmas because they can't afford to put the heat on. There will probably be less food for many people who have not experienced that before, and for some there may be very little food or festive cheer at all. And then there are the national and global worries – inflation at an all time high, a climate catastrophe that world leaders seem incapable of doing anything about, human rights abuses, shootings and so on and so on.

The traditional interpretation of this text from Matthew is that we need to be ready for the coming of the Lord, because we don't know when it will be. We need to be on constant alert. We are to focus on watchfulness and remember the importance of appropriate preparation. But what is the appropriate preparation for the coming of the Son of Man? We are often advised to live life as though each day is our last, for life is short, but we can't actually live that way – there has to be a balance between expectation and getting on with other things while we wait for whatever we are waiting for. And what about disappointment, unmet expectation? Take a moment to think about something you were eagerly anticipating that did not turn out as you expected – it may be something small, like a concert or going to see friends that got cancelled, a long awaited holiday with awful weather, or it might be a routine medical test that finds something unexpected, a budget statement that brought more than you'd bargained for, or what about the disciples, waiting for the imminent return of Christ which didn't come in their lifetimes...

What emotions are involved when things don't turn out as you expect? How do those emotions affect your response to the situation? And to similar situations in the future? Matthew's gospel was written primarily for Jewish Christians after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This catastrophe meant that Judaism could no longer be a sacrificial religion focussed on the temple, it had to find a new form. It did not find its new shape in the vision of the kingdom of God that Jesus had brought. Perhaps what we read in Matthew's gospel is a reflection of his own disappointed hopes and dreams, his frustration and anger that the teaching he followed, what we now know as Christianity, which was never intended to be an alternative to Judaism, or to exclude the Jewish people, had been forced into a position of conflict with Judaism. Matthew, like Jesus, was a Jew. This must have felt like being in exile, like being in a country where he could no longer speak his mother tongue or practice his customs.

Matthew's gospel starts with a theology of inclusivity – there are outsiders and questionable if not scandalous figures in the genealogy of Jesus. His ancestor Obed, was born of Ruth, the Moabite – a definite outsider to the Israelites. His ancestor David, while a great king in many ways, committed adultery and murder. In chapter five we get the Sermon on the Mount, offered to all, and inclusive of all, but by chapter 24 Matthew has changed from openness to exclusivity. We are at the end times when one will be taken and one will be left and the disciples must keep watch for the Son of Man will come like a thief in the night. This change over the gospel of Matthew points to what can happen if we let hurt, anger, frustration or disappointed hopes take control of our outlook.

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Our reading from Romans brings us back to the core of the matter – love. ‘Love does no wrong to a neighbour’ we are told – all the commandments can be summed up in ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. And of course, all are neighbours. Everyone is included. And that is the overarching theme for the Advent material we are using for the house groups in Rayleigh. It is a resource produced by the Methodist church, called There is Room (as opposed to there being no room for Mary and Joseph) based on the lectionary readings for this year – all from Isaiah and Matthew’s gospel. We started this week with ‘there is room for you and me’ and it moves on to explore how there is room for difference, nature, all ages and genders, and those experiencing poverty. On Christmas Day there is room for God, and on the first Sunday after Christmas there is room for refugees. The Bethlehem stable has room for all people, for everyone. God wants all of us to take our place and receive love, wholeness and peace.

In the last days they will beat their swords into ploughshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.

So, in these days,  
will we turn around the camera  
of our self-centred selfies  
to take a long, loving look  
at the face of Christ in others?  
In these days,  
will we dismantle the walls of our fear,  
which keep at arm’s length the refugees,  
the foreigners, the homeless,  
and build them homes  
with those same bricks and these same arms...?

**Hymn** Love came down at Christmas MP451

### **Prayers of intercession**

In the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord,  
kindle in us the desire to remain awake;  
that we might be ready for your coming, and eager to pray.

O God, in days to come the mountain of your house will be established,  
and your joy shall reign.

We pray for the church, especially our church here in Bridgwater Dr and the community we serve,  
that you might teach us your ways and that we might walk in your paths.  
And we give thanks for the success of our Christmas Fair last weekend.  
Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

Out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and you, O God, shall judge between the nations.  
We pray for our nation, and all nations,  
that your peace would be manifest in every corner of the earth.  
Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

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We pray for the World Cup –

for all the players wanting to make a statement on human rights, who couldn't  
for the Iranian players who made a stand for what they believe to be right  
for the families of all the immigrant workers who died building the stadium  
for all people denied human rights in their home country,  
grant them strength to withstand, and grant us the courage to speak out on their behalf.  
Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

In your Kingdom, O Lord, wolves lie down with lambs  
and children play with serpents without fear.

We pray for the sick, the suffering,  
and those in distress of any kind especially those in our own church family who are ill,  
who are in hospital or recently returned home and those who care for them,  
that you would heal all injuries, comfort all grief, and settle all wrongs.  
Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

In your Kingdom, O Lord, even the wilderness and dry land are glad and rejoice.  
We pray for those who rejoice this week – for birthdays, anniversaries or other celebrations,  
that they might obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing might flee away.  
Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

In the fulness of time, O God, you sent your son, to be born of Mary.  
And his name was Emmanuel: God With Us.  
We thank you for your Presence with us,  
and we pray that you might be always present  
with those whom we love but see no longer.  
Come Lord Jesus, **and hear our prayer.**

Come among us O God, and hear our prayers;  
so that when your Son Jesus comes among us in manger mild,  
we might recognize his face and his voice, and come to adore him. **Amen.**

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn** Come, thou long expected Jesus MP 102

**Blessing** (inspired by Isaiah 2:1-5)

Go forth and walk the path of the Lord.  
Go forth and live as one instructed in the ways of the Lord.  
Take the weapons of your life  
and turn them into instruments of peace and justice.  
Praise be to our God who shows us the way!

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing

The Bridgwater Drive Church CCLI licence 257182