

**Call to worship** (inspired by Psalm 146 & Isaiah 35)

This is the season of holy waiting.  
We wait for the time when the desert will bloom abundantly.  
We watch for the day when all God's people will come together with singing.  
We wait while the dawning light appears on the horizon.  
Come let us walk in the light of God!  
Come once more, with eager longing,  
to receive the promises of God.

Out of the desert places of our lives we gather with joy and gladness.  
Our God has promised that lonely places and deserts will be glad and blossom as the rose.  
Our God executes justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.  
Come once more, with eager longing, and bless the holy name of our God.

**Hymn** Make way, make way MP457

**Advent Candle Lighting - The third candle is lit**

**Sing** - Like a candle flame MP 420

**Opening Prayer**

Life-giving God, we are a blessed people.  
In this moment of worship we pray that you might bless us anew.  
Give us ears to hear the melodies of praise that fill the world around us.  
And as we hear the songs, teach us to sing, to dance with abandon,  
to rejoice in the wonders of your grace.  
Forgive us when we have passed by signs of your mercy.  
From this moment forward,  
open our eyes to the places where joy is springing up from parched ground.  
Lead us by your Spirit in the pathways of your overflowing peace, hope, and joy. Amen.

Prayer handbook p74

**Offering**

God, whose giving knows no end, help us to be generous in this season of giving to family and friends. Help us also to be generous to those we don't know who need help; generous with our time, our patience and our kindness.  
All that we have comes from you and so  
we offer the skills that you have graciously given to us;  
we offer ourselves in service and praise  
and we offer our gifts of money to help bring about your kingdom.  
Receive our gifts by your grace and multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

**Hymn** Hark the glad sound! MP210 OMIT v 3

**Bible readings:**      **Isaiah 35:1-10**  
                                 **Matthew 11:2-11**

Last week I read in the news that Christians are now officially a minority in England and Wales. The 2021 census shows that the proportion of people saying they are Christian is 46%, down from 59% in the last census. And those who said they had no religion was up from a quarter to 39%. For a long time now in the URC we have been talking about how to manage decline and post-pandemic, colleagues I talk to from other denominations are all

saying the same – that some people are not coming back to church, and those that are, are coming less frequently than before. One of the things I found interesting from the census, was that Christianity is the only religion in decline in the UK, all the others have seen an increase – at least in people stating that faith as the answer to a census question. There may be many reasons for that, not least immigrants with a different faith boosting numbers, rather than converts. Or an increased honesty amongst people completing the census – where in the past people might have put Christian, even if they were only nominally so, maybe only attending for funerals and the annual carol service, now people may be less willing to claim to be something they are not. But it did make me wonder what is it about Christianity that is not attractive? Maybe we need to be in the minority for awhile to really appreciate our faith and the culture and lifestyle that comes with it, which is, if practised fully, contrary to the individualistic, want everything immediately kind of world we live in. At Christmas time, a lot of people, for whom it isn't a usual part of their week, temporarily notice Christians and Christianity – they go to a carol service, or their child's nativity play at school. Sometimes this can lead to an over-sentimentalizing of religion, and sometimes it can lead to a criticism of 'religious' people – those holier than thou bah humbugs who don't give gifts, or buy charity gifts, or make their own; those people who don't rush out to buy the latest thing and get into debt. In today's gospel reading, Jesus questions the expectations that people had of John the Baptist. Maybe we too should question our expectations – of Christmas and of how non-Christians view it?

There is a tension between the pious prophet trying to live a better life, and those they hope to inspire, yet often alienate instead. Are people perhaps not attracted to Christianity and church because they see us as out of touch, irrelevant, trying too hard, or being too pious and not being welcoming enough of difference, not willing to listen to what people actually want and need but simply assuming we know. As just one example, I was appalled when I read in *Reform* that a Christian gay couple had been turned away from 31 churches who refused to marry them before they found a URC that would. What does that say to society about the church's openness and relevance to everyday life?

One of the most interesting features of the reading from Matthew is that the supposedly unshakeable John the Baptist is sending his followers to ask whether Jesus is really the one, or if they are to wait for another. We don't often get to see the insecurities of prophets. Last week, John was proud and vocal and had seemingly unmoveable faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Now he is in prison, alone, without his disciples, silenced, and he is not so sure anymore. Perhaps we get like that sometimes – when we are at church, with people who believe what we believe we are strong in our faith, but once we get out into the real world,

surrounded by people who don't have our faith, who maybe think it is nonsense, or simply don't know anything about it, maybe then we are not so sure. Then it becomes harder to talk about what our faith means to us, or what it has done for us. It becomes harder to even invite people to a carol service or a coffee morning. Harder to bring our own children or grandchildren, when there are so many other demands on their time, and they don't want to be the only child in their class that goes to church. Jesus reassures John. He talks of the things God does to bring about the kingdom – the blind are healed, the lame walk, the poor receive good news. Jesus doesn't refer to himself, his preaching, or healing; he doesn't say he has done these things, but he reassures John by listing the effects of the kingdom he is bringing in – a practical ministry – God is making these things happen through Jesus and those who follow him. They don't just say they welcome all – they prove it by their actions. Last week, I compared John the Baptist to Greta Thunberg and considered her prophetic voice in a world of climate crisis. We need to hear her words not just as a good speech, but as a call to personal action. Jesus ends his reassurance to John by saying, 'blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' People had taken offence at John's message and he had been imprisoned for it. People would take offence at Jesus and his focus on the poor and marginalised. People have also taken offence at Greta Thunberg and hurled abuse at her.

Taking offence can be an all too easy escape from the challenge of mending our behaviour. Christmas is often a time when we do better, and even some non-religious people do better – giving to foodbanks, homeless charities, charity gifts benefiting people overseas rather than the person who receives the card, but it is also a time when we spend money with different priorities. We need to consider the shocking level of single-use expenditure that goes on around Christmas, which we manage to make excuses for. Whether it is crackers, or plastic decorations or extra lights. We buy novelty toys, novelty socks, Christmas-themed jumpers, earrings... The list can go on and it can be very hard to reverse this trend and buy fewer gifts that will last longer. Even the food shopping is a marathon of will-power – you may go with a shopping list, but then there is the tempting party food, the mince pies, the boxes of chocolates, most usually on some kind of special offer to entice purchase.

There is a natural reaction to take offence at prophets, those annoying holier than thou killjoys who preach about such things (yes, I'm one of them) – those who give homemade gifts, put the same decorations up every year, and even re-use wrapping paper from previous years. Taking offence can also include unacknowledged guilt. It's easier to have a go at someone else than accept our part in the climate crisis, our unwillingness to change, and give up the things we have become accustomed to. Jesus said, 'blessed is anyone who

takes no offence at me.' This seems quite bland – you don't have to follow Jesus and do everything he says and does, just don't take offence at it. But actually, it lays down quite a challenge – to accept the guilt of only being able to do so much, be it on the climate crisis, or on talking about our faith and showing it in our actions, and the simultaneous challenge of how we could do more. This is the call of Advent – prepare the way. Prepare the way not just for Christmas, but for the kingdom, bringing good news to all.

**Hymn** Oh, how could it be MP 1344

### **LORD'S SUPPER**

Come follow the light that shines for you and leads you towards a stable with a manger and a child.

**Lord, we have followed the light**

Come listen for the voice that calls you to find new life in the broken corners of the world.

**Lord, we have heard the voice**

Come, rich and poor, neighbour or stranger, gather round and share a celebration with the Prince of Peace. **Lord, we have gathered to meet with you.**

Come, like wealthy kings with priceless gifts or poor shepherds with only themselves to bring, for the Spirit has led you to this place where you are offered the promise of new life.

**Lord, fill us with new life.**

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

**And also with you.**

From being a child in a manger dependent on his mother's milk for food, Jesus grew to be the Living Word made Flesh offering everyone the bread of life. He travelled from the manger to the cross where his body was broken, his love poured out, but God held him like a mother and nursed him back to life. Lord, may we see the guiding light,

May we find you in a stable

May we follow you to the cross.

May we find new life through you.

As we gather round the table to celebrate the beginning of a journey from the manger to the cross and back to life again.

Holy Spirit, come among us and bless this bread and wine as we remember how Christ's body was broken and God's love was poured out for us.

On the night when our Lord Jesus was betrayed, he 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.

So draw near with faith. Be strengthened by the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in a stable to be the living bread and died on a cross having poured out his love so we may drink from God's cup of forgiveness. Eat and drink. Take Jesus into your hearts.

As you take the bread, hold it in prayer and remember how the body of Jesus was born, lived and was broken for you, and then we will eat together, united in the one body. **Share Bread**

As you take the wine, hold it in prayer and remember how Jesus poured out his love for you and meets your needs when he lives in your heart. **Share Wine**

**Prayer after communion**

Thank you for bread and wine through which we have remembered your life and love. Lord build a stable in our bodies, place a manger in our hearts and fill it with your love as if it were a new-born child. **Amen**

### **Prayers of intercession**

Today there is good news for us to behold!  
Those who feared that they were worth little to God  
have found blessing in God's sight.  
For in the mercy and love of God,  
the blind shall see, the lame shall walk without pain,  
those who could not hear shall be blessed with hearing,  
and there shall be peace.  
God's mercy and love is poured out for our parched souls.  
Behold! The Lord's compassion is with God's people.  
Believe in the power of God in all things.

In this season of Advent, in the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord,  
remind us that you are always with us. Let us be like Mary, emphatic in our 'yes' to your will.  
Let us be like John – prophets in the wilderness, preparing the way.

Into our troubles and weaknesses, into the barren places of our souls, Come Lord,  
**Come among us and make us whole.**  
Into the war torn and the refugee, into those who live in conflict, Come Lord,  
**Come among us and make us whole.**  
Into the homeless and the unemployed, into those who feel abandoned, Come Lord,  
**Come among us and make us whole.**  
Into the sick and the disabled, into those undergoing treatment and those who are grieving,  
Come, Lord **Come among us and make us whole.**  
Into the poor and the starving, into those who are oppressed or abused, Come Lord  
**Come among us and make us whole.**  
Into the lives of loved ones, into those from whom we are estranged, Come Lord,  
**Come among us and make us whole.**  
Into our joys and celebrations, into our work and our achievements, Come, Lord  
**Come among us and make us whole.**

In the remaining weeks before Christmas help us to be patient with our loved ones and find time to reflect on the real meaning of Christmas amidst the business of preparation and gift buying. In our time of joy and plenty, help us to pray for those who have no homes to celebrate in, no festive food to eat, no family or friends to share the holidays with. And guide us to be generous to those who have little or nothing this Christmas. In the name of your Son, who came to live among us, to bring light to the darkness, we pray. Amen

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Hymn Tell Out my Soul MP 631

### **Advent Blessing**

Follow where the Spirit of Hope leads us  
Listen as the Child of Peace cries for us  
Rejoice as the Love of God embraces us  
And let us go with Hope, Peace and Love in our hearts,  
And the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever within us. Amen