

Call to worship (inspired by Isaiah 11:1-10)

We dream God's dream, of a world at peace
Where enemies are reconciled, and children play in safety;
Where the poor and powerless find justice.
We remember God's promise of a Ruler of Peace,
Filled with the Spirit of God, of wisdom and understanding,
Of counsel and might, of justice and faithfulness.
Come Lord Jesus! Open our lives to the Peace which you bring;
let us turn to you and get ready!

Hymn I have a dream, Red folder 39 omit v3

"I have a dream", a man once said,
"where all is perfect peace;
where men and women, black and white,
stand hand in hand, and all unite
in freedom and in love."

But in this world of bitter strife
the dream can often fade;
reality seems dark as night,
we catch but glimpses of the light
Christ sheds on humankind.

So dream the dreams and sing the songs,
but never be content:
for thoughts and words don't ease the pain:
unless there's action, all is vain;
faith proves itself in deeds.

Lord, give us vision, make us strong,
help us to do your will;
don't let us rest until we see
your love throughout humanity
uniting us in peace.

Pamela J. Pettitt

Children's Time

Light the 2nd Advent candle

Sing Like a candle flame Red Folder 59

Gifts – Offering + gifts for Homestart & HARP

Father, today we come anticipating the coming of your Son
As we continue our Advent waiting, looking towards Bethlehem;
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 -
helping children to have a happier Christmas and the homeless to keep warm. Amen

Hymn Make way, make way R&S 141

Make way, make way
For Christ the King
In splendour arrives
Fling wide the gates and welcome Him
Into your lives

*Make way! Make way!
For the King of kings, For the King of kings
Make way! Make way!
And let his kingdom in*

He comes the broken hearts to heal
The prisoners to free

The deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance
The blind shall see

And those who mourn with heavy hearts
Who weep and sigh
With laughter, joy and royal crown
He'll beautify

We call you now to worship Him
As Lord of all
To have no gods before Him
Their thrones must fall.

Graham Kendrick

We say the Grace as children leave for Sundayclub

Opening Prayer

Prepare the way,' the prophets call, 'make ready the highways for God.'
How we long to walk in God's kingdom of peace!
Prepare your hearts, for God's realm opens up a new day.
We long for the time when the wolf and lamb will live together in harmony.
Prepare the way, God promises a new day when adversaries will lay down their arms.
We dream of a world transformed by God's love.
May the God of hope fill our hearts with all joy and peace.
God of hope, we come to you in the midst of a world fraught with troubles.
Although the darkness is powerful, open our eyes, Lord, to the light of your presence.
Give us faith to stand against the voices of division and violence.
Through your Spirit remake us into hope-filled disciples,
discovering lives attune to your wonder and sparking in others a desire to know you more.
In the name of the One who comes to us, we pray, Amen.

Hymn God is working his purpose out R&S 573 omit v5

God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out,
and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be:
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of
God - as the waters cover the sea.

What can we do to work God's work,
to prosper and increase
love and justice throughout the world,
and the reign of the Prince of Peace?
What can we do to hasten the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of
God - as the waters cover the sea.

From utmost east to utmost west,
where human feet have trod,
by the voice of many messengers
goes forth the voice of God:
"Give ear to me, you continents,
you islands, give ear to me,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of
God - as the waters cover the sea."

Let us go out in the strength of God,
with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth
may shine throughout the world.
sin and sorrow let us fight
to set their captives free,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of
God - as the waters cover the sea.

A.C.Ainger

**Bible readings: Isaiah 11:1-10
 Matthew 3:1-12**

I've been struggling a bit with the fact that on only the 4th day of December, we are already halfway through Advent (and we're already having our Christmas dinner!) Today is the second Sunday of Advent, only two more to go before the big day! Christmas Day falls on a Sunday this year, which is why Advent has come early, the last Sunday of Advent being a full week before Christmas, while in other years it might be only a day or two. But there is a sense that Christmas is coming earlier and earlier – most of our neighbours have had their Christmas lights up for at least a week, the Christmas adverts are on the telly, and mince pies and chocolate Santas have been in the shops for months. And there will no doubt be some people saying why aren't we singing any carols yet? But pause for a moment and

think – would we expect to sing resurrection hymns before Lent was over? Why is Advent different? Why do we think a premature birth is OK, but not an early resurrection?

This 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%. This week I also read a reflection about the irrelevance of Advent. A friend had said to the writer of the devotion that she finds Advent frustrating – every year we wait for Christ to bring in the new age, and nothing happens – everything stays the same or gets even worse than before. Neither the liturgical new year of the birth of Christ, nor the calendar new year of 2023 look set to bring us much in the way of good news. The Good Life Christmas special of 1977 showing the merit of a homespun Christmas, will hit a nerve with a lot more people this year who maybe can't turn the heating on for long, if at all. The writer of the devotion wonders whether Advent feels frustrating, boring, or simply beside the point because we aren't serious enough, or haven't sunk low enough yet, to need what it promises, or care about how much others might need it?

Advent is not only preparation for Christmas, it is preparation for the second coming of Christ. As we heard in last week's reading from Matthew, we don't know when that will be, and since we have been waiting for over 2000 years, we can perhaps feel confident that it won't happen in our lifetimes. Indeed, a snippet of something I heard on the radio suggested that if we are doing OK for the most part, we probably wouldn't really want Jesus to come again just now and turn everything upside down. If he did would we find ourselves amongst the sheep or the goats, the wheat or the chaff?

Our preparation needs to be realistic – we need to be God's hands on earth until the second coming. Our preparation needs to be, not buying gifts, or ordering food, making shopping lists, writing cards, and wrapping presents, though all those things are necessary too; our preparation needs to be boycotting Black Friday and giving charity gifts, talking to the homeless and giving them a hot drink or food. Our preparation needs to be inviting friends and neighbours to our carol service – the one service a year they might actually attend, being the voice in the wilderness to the 39% of people who say they are not part of any religion. And dare I say it, it might be delaying your family Christmas dinner by an hour and coming to church on Christmas Day – remembering the reason for the season.

Now, this was not at all where I intended to go with this sermon, so let's get back to our Bible readings. We have the idyllic image of peace from Isaiah that we hear so often – the wolf shall live with the lamb, the cow and the bear shall eat together, and children will safely play with snakes. We've heard it so many times we probably don't pay much attention to it

anymore. But what does it really mean? The Advent Bible Study we are using this year, is a Methodist resource called There is Room. The overarching theme is that in the Bethlehem stable there is room for everyone, and each week addresses a different group of people. This week There is Room for 'difference'. The material comes at this from the angle of the Wise Men who weren't Jewish, and they studied astrology – something which was forbidden for Jews. So, they were definitely different. Coming from Persia, they were also almost certainly Zoroastrians, so they were both ethnically and religiously different. The Bethlehem story has room even for people who might not expect to find themselves there – the shepherds were also outsiders, and even for people who are not religious, or who describe themselves as spiritual not Christian, those people in the 39% who are looking for something, but maybe don't know what they are looking for.

In fact, the material didn't need to stray so far from today's readings, for in Matthew we hear about John the Baptist, the voice crying out in the wilderness. Even by the standards of his day, John was a bit of a strange character. He lived on the fringes of society; he ate locusts and wild honey. He was a forager with a natural lifestyle. The protest elements of his ministry were wearing homemade clothes and eating foraged food. He might fit in well today with those who lie on roads to campaign against the use of fossil fuels, or who live in trees to prevent road or airport construction. He'd probably be a vegan, maybe an eco-warrior, certainly a voice in the wilderness crying out for climate justice. Or maybe he'd be part of the tofu eating wokerati! He was the protester; Jesus was the prophet who followed after hammering home the message – good news for some, and the end of entitlement and power for others. Sometimes, protest and what we might consider weirdness are a necessary precursor to change.

John the Baptist in 21st century England, might well be homeless, have a mental illness or be neurodivergent. Each week the Advent Study material includes a short video. This week, as part of there being room for difference, we are invited to be more welcoming to neurodiversity. **Show video.**

Following on from the thoughts on John, as a protester and prophet, we might think of Greta Thunberg – a teenager on the autistic spectrum, who has on several occasions has said how she sees her autism as a gift which has kept her focussed on the climate crisis. There is a place for people who are different. The radical protester is a necessary part of a society facing a crisis – and now we are facing many crises, not only the climate, but a post-covid mental health crisis, a cost-of-living crisis, an energy crisis, a war in Europe crisis. We need those brave and different people to cry out in the wilderness so that the body of main opinion will change. If we want to hear the voice of John the Baptist today, we could do

worse than listen to Greta Thunberg and other young people, listen to those with mental health issues, to those who are neurodivergent, to those who don't think, look or act like we do. And that includes those people who might say they don't want to be Christian, who don't want to come to church on a Sunday, who are nervous about entering a church building, but who are looking to the church to give them something – maybe a warm place to sit, maybe somewhere to chat and not feel lonely, or maybe a glimpse of a different world, the kind of world Jesus came to bring about. Advent isn't beside the point – the preparation is just as important as the birth, the welcome is more important than the quality of the roast potatoes, the welcome of everyone, in all their marvellous difference is more important than whether there is a gift waiting from them or not – the biggest gift is the coming of Christ and how much we all need it.

Hymn On Jordan's bank R&S 134

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
come then and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every breast from sin:
make straight the way for God within,
and in each heart prepare a home
where such a mighty guest may come.

For thou art our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward.

without thy grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch forth thy hand,
and bid the fallen sinner stand.
shine forth, and let thy light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

All praise, eternal Son, to thee
whose advent sets they people free,
whom with the Father we adore,
and Spirit blest, for evermore.

Charles Coffin

Prayers of intercession

Prepare, for the day of God's coming draws near!
Prepare for peace. Holy God may the divisions between us be erased.
May we, people of all backgrounds, walk with one another.
listen to one another; bear one another's burdens.
May we be peacemakers in everything we say and do.
We give you thanks for how uniquely and distinctly each human being has been made,
for all our characteristics and differences which make us who we are.

Prepare for hope. Merciful God, when we look around,
the promises of your Kingdom seem so distant.
Grant us tenacity: to bring light where there is darkness;
peace where there is strife, comfort where there is despair.
Let the light of your presence shine in us,
so that all may know that the darkness will not win.

Prepare for God. Almighty God, you stripped yourself entirely to come into this world.
Weak, fragile, and dependent, you gave yourself into the care of an unwed teenager.
In following you, may we become as vulnerable.
May we strip away all that protects us, all that we hide behind, and let it burn like chaff.
May our actions bear fruit that glorifies you, eternal God, love incarnate.

Lord, we pray too for places where the Church is met with indifference, or misunderstanding where we are feeble and failing, where our witness is no longer heard. Yet we also acknowledge that the church has often fallen short of your dream that all are welcome, We have often not welcomed those who are different, or through ignorance have made them feel unwelcome – forgive us Lord and help us to be better.

We pray for our world, for places at war or torn apart by violence, where creation groans with eager longing for a redemption long denied, where the temperatures and seas rise, and where the poorest are hit the hardest. We pray for those who suffer from the cruel economic systems we perpetuate, for those worried about how they will pay their bills this winter, for those worried about what they will eat, if they will eat. We give thanks for those like Greta Thunberg who are willing to be abused and maligned to bring us to awareness of the crisis in your good creation.

We pray for your healing presence amongst those we love and worry about and name now in the silence of our hearts....

Holy One, Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. May those of us who have so much to do find quiet spaces to hear your voice. May those who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. May those whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" In this season of Advent, suspended between hope and fulfilment, may we never forget the gift of your Son. May we be overwhelmed by your mercy. May we be honest about the darkness within us, and perceptive of the light around us. May we make straight the path for the Lord, that together we may see God's glory revealed. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Come, thou long-expected Jesus R&S 138 (tune at 663)

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.
Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Charles Wesley

Blessing (Romans 15:5-6, 13)

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, in this Advent season and beyond. Amen