

Sunday 14th December

Morning Worship

Third Sunday of Advent

Led by Sue Nelms, LLM

<https://zoom.us/j/82311473640>



Gathering and Greeting

We meet in the presence of God
**who knows our needs,
hears our cries,
feels our pain,
and heals our wounds.**

Opening Prayer

Lord, direct our thoughts, and teach us to pray.
Lift up our hearts to worship you in spirit and in truth,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Lighting the Advent Candle

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true:
to you be praise and glory for ever.
Your prophet John the Baptist was witness to the truth
as a burning and shining light.
May we your servants rejoice in his light,
and so be led to witness to him
who is the Lord of our coming kingdom,
Jesus our Saviour and King of the ages.
Blessed be God for ever.

Hymn – Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding

I Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding;
'Christ is nigh,' it seems to say;
'cast away the dreams of darkness,
O ye children of the day.'

- 2 Wakened by the solemn warning,
let the earth-bound soul arise;
Christ, her sun, all ill dispelling,
shines upon the morning skies.
- 3 Lo, the Lamb, so long expected,
comes with pardon down from heaven;
let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
one and all to be forgiven;
- 4 That, when next he comes with glory,
and the world is wrapped in fear,
with his mercy he may shield us,
and with words of love draw near.
- 5 Honour, glory, might, and blessing
to the Father and the Son,
with the everlasting Spirit
while eternal ages run.

Vox clara ecce intonat
Anonymous Latin, Edward Caswall (1814-1878), Murray's Hymnal (1852),
Hymns Ancient and Modern (1861)

Asking for God's Forgiveness

A voice cries out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord.'

So let us listen, and turn to the Lord in penitence and faith.

cf John 1.23

Lord Jesus, you came to gather the nations
into the peace of your kingdom:
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

You come in word and sacrament
to strengthen us in holiness:
Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You will come in glory
with salvation for your people:
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God,
who in Jesus Christ has given us
a kingdom that cannot be destroyed,
forgive us our sins,
open our eyes to God's truth,
strengthen us to do God's will
and give us the joy of his kingdom,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Chorus: And he shall purify

And He shall purify the sons of Levi,
that they may offer unto the Lord
an offering in righteousness.

(Malachi 3:3)

Readings by Clare Crang

Malachi 3:1-7

3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight - indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵ Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their

wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

⁶ For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. ⁷ Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’

For the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

John 1:6-9

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

Glory to you, O Lord.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection by Rev Priscilla Slusar

I wonder how we would all react if a modern day John the Baptist came into church. He would be dressed in an unconventional style; not exactly the height of fashion and probably quite scruffy. He wouldn't be interested in coffee and cake after the service because his diet would be rather bizarre – locusts and honey. His preaching would be stirring but also blunt to the point of rudeness. It's quite likely that he would call us rude names – “a brood of vipers” or worse! He would almost certainly touch a nerve and make us all feel guilty and uncomfortable – so much so that we would rush to confess our sins and make a commitment to a new and worthier lifestyle.

One thing that we could be sure about is that he would speak with great enthusiasm and display complete faith in God. He must have been an incredibly charismatic person. People flocked to hear him

preach even though he challenged them and was rude to them. But eventually King Herod couldn't take his criticisms any longer and John was put in prison.

Surprisingly, what we hear from John when he is in prison are words of doubt! This strong man, of great faith, who has shown such fierce commitment to God's kingdom, seems to be suddenly consumed by doubts.

He sends a message to Jesus "Are you the one?"

Jesus doesn't give him a straight answer. He tells John's messengers to report to John the miracles that he is performing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, the sick are healed, the deaf can hear, the dead are raised and the poor hear the good news. Perhaps this is a case of "actions speak louder than words". John is being challenged by Jesus to read the signs for himself. If John can read the signs it will allay his doubts.

This "evidence" or sign is as good as a direct answer to John, because John knows the Scriptures and so he knows that this is a reference to Isaiah who presented a vision of the coming of the Kingdom of God. It's as if Jesus is answering in code and John understands the code. This gives John hope; he is reassured that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, even though Jesus' gentle and merciful approach is very different from the image of the Messiah that most people had at that time.

So what is the message for us in this season of Advent?

Advent is a time of preparation for the birth of Jesus, but it is also a time of self-reflection. John the Baptist encouraged his audience to examine their hearts and consciences. Could they honestly say that they had obeyed God's laws? Had they committed themselves to a life of faith? Did they need to "turn their lives around?" In this season of

Advent we are also challenged to reflect on our lives and our faith in God.

Faith in God is often accompanied by periods of doubt and questioning, just like the questioning that John the Baptist felt when he was in prison. As we reflect on our faith, we can also assess the level of doubt in our belief and think about how we can address it.

Most people know what it is to face uncertainty or doubt in their spiritual lives. Doubt about the presence of God may occur when we face difficulties – like John the Baptist when he was in prison. For us, it may be during an illness or when a loved one dies or when we hear of major tragedies or natural disasters in the world. We may question “Where is God in this?” or “Why does God allow this to happen?” I can remember one occasion when I experienced what I will call a serious “dry patch” in my faith. I was not well, I was feeling tired, and then a very dear friend, Martin, died – and I felt guilty because I had not visited him for a while. I had known him since I was a teenager. He was one of the clergy who had inspired and encouraged me to be a priest. He was the priest who married John and me. It is when we feel low that doubts assail us – just like John the Baptist in prison. The “dry patch” changed when I attended Martin’s funeral. The atmosphere in the church, the warmth of love there, and the words of the priest leading the service, inspired me. I felt the presence of God again so strongly that my faith was strengthened. There are still doubts – there always will be – but faith is belief in spite of doubts, not without doubts.

Even the saints experience such doubts – so we’re in good company! Mother Theresa once wrote “My smile is a great cloak that hides a multitude of pains. People think that my faith, my hope and my love are overflowing and that my intimacy with God and union with his will fill my heart. If only they knew.” If someone like Mother Theresa, who was such a shining example to all of us, could feel doubt like this from

time to time then it is no wonder that our faith will be challenged in the same way at times.

Doubt can be good for us. It makes us question and explore our beliefs so that we reach the truth for ourselves. It challenges our naive beliefs and we reach a deeper understanding and so it is doubt that is the beginning of real faith.

Faith cannot be based on easy explanations and proofs. Faith has been described as “things hoped for but not seen” – and we have to look for signs that act as steps towards faith.

Jesus expected John the Baptist to be able to interpret the signs that were described to him and, in this way, his faith was strengthened. During Advent we are encouraged to look for the signs of God around us - the wonder of creation, or the kindness of friends or strangers, or the feeling of God’s presence through prayer and worship.

These signs of God’s kingdom help us to overcome our doubts, strengthen our faith, and help us to prepare to welcome God among us in the form of a baby in a manger. Amen

Affirmation of Faith

Let us declare our faith in God.

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us**

with power from on high.

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession by John Crang

For this morning's intercessions I have knitted together verses from Isaiah chapter 35 (the lectionary reading for today) with the prayers written for the Diocese by Claire Brockelsby.

Let us pray for the Church, the world, and all in need, watching and waiting for signs of God's kingdom among us.

God of promise

In this season of Advent, help your Church to wait well. Where we are tempted to rush ahead, slow us down. Where we cling to old expectations, open our eyes to new possibilities. May we be faithful in watching for your presence in unexpected places.

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

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.

God of compassion

We pray for those who feel overwhelmed by the season - by noise, pressure, or the weight of unmet expectations. Bring peace to anxious hearts, rest to weary bodies, and joy that is not dependent on perfection.

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

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;

the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for Gods people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

God of justice

We remember those who, like John the Baptist, sit in places of uncertainty. For the homeless, the displaced, and those caught up in the violence of war. May your presence be known in places of fear and instability, and may your kingdom come through acts of mercy, and through voices that speak truth, and hands that bring healing.

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

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

God of transformation

Where deserts feel dry and lifeless, bring bloom. Where lives feel stuck or broken, bring movement and hope. We especially bring to mind those who are sick, and those who find this season a lonely one. We also bring to mind those who grieve and those who have painful memories at this time, and we pray that your love and peace may surround them.

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

God of mystery

When we ask, “Are you the one?”, remind us to look again - not for grandeur, but for grace. Not for spectacle, but for the steady unfolding of your kingdom. Help us to trust, and to wait, and to join in your work.

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

Gathering all our prayers, spoken and silent, we say together:
Merciful God, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Collect

God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

Hymn – On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

- 1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
come then and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings from the King of kings!
- 2 Then cleansed be every Christian breast,
and furnished for so great a guest.
Yea, let us each our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

- 3 For thou art our salvation, Lord,
our refuge, and our great reward;
without thy grace our souls must fade
and wither like a flower decayed.
- 4 Stretch forth thine hand, to heal our sore,
and make us rise to fall no more;
once more upon thy people shine,
and fill the world with love divine.
- 5 All praise, eternal Son, to thee
whose advent sets thy people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Spirit bless, for evermore.

Jordanis oras praevia
Charles Coffin (1676-1749) Translated John Chandler (1806-1876)

Notices

Conclusion

Lord God our creator and sustainer
In a world alive with miracles
We want to love you.
We want our will to disappear into your will.
We want to be one spirit with you.
We want to live in the middle of your Trinity
And praise you with thanksgiving and joy.
We want to be watching and waiting when you come. **Amen**

May the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always.
Amen

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
In the name of Christ. Amen.