

WORSHIP AT HOME – 13TH DECEMBER 2020 – ADVENT THREE

Dear Friends,

This time of Advent seems to be speeding past as we approach Christmas – but even though it is passing so quickly, we must use the time to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus – and for the coming of the Kingdom. On this third Sunday of Advent we find that repentance is not just about ideas but about action. In Zephaniah, God rejoices over us. Paul encourages the Philippians to rejoice over God. In these readings as well as in the Gospel there is a sense that the time of God's intervention approaches, and that we are called to live faithfully, in the present, welcoming God's presence by acting justly.

I hope that you are all coping well with our changing times and feel that perhaps the time for us all to be able to return to a more normal way of life is in sight. May God be with you all,
Margaret.

Normally we would be lighting our Advent candles – and in some churches this is possible now – but even sitting in our homes we can remember all the years of seeing the candles lit – and see it again in our mind's eye.

'Gracious God, as we relight our first Advent candle, we pray that you would make us open to your word. As we relight our second Advent candle, we pray that you would help us to bear good fruit. As we light our new Advent candle, we pray that you would help us to change – that the light of your concern and love for all creation may shine through us. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.'

Today our period of preparation shifts from repentance and forgiveness to the freed exhilaration of hope, as the momentous truth of God's being within us always, begins to dawn on us . [Susan Sayers]

Call to worship: With hearts changed by love – with lives shaped by grace – with relationships braced by integrity – and with the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon you – come as you are and as you hope to be to worship the Lord of the Advent.

God of gentleness and strength, among all the thoughts crowding into our minds at this season of the year, may we be aware of your presence and ready to listen for that still, small voice that may be challenging us to change something in our lives – or to be the change for another. Amen

The words to 'To God be the glory' written by Frances Jane van Alstyne [Fanny Crosby] [1820-1915]

Singing the Faith no 94.

1 To God be the glory, great things he has done! So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,
Who yielded his life in atonement for sin, and opened the life-gate that all may go in:

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear his voice!

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!

O come to the Father through Jesus the Son; and give him the glory – great things he has done!

2 O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood, to every believer the promise of God!

And every offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives:

Praise the Lord!.....

3 Great things he has taught us, great things he has done, and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;
But purer, and higher, and greater will be our wonder, our rapture when Jesus we see:

Praise the Lord!.....

Prayer: Loving God, for the times when we feel on top of the world and all is going well – when we can look down and feel we are in control and see the future beckoning us ahead; **we give you thanks.**

For the times when we are challenged: when we find ourselves in a desert place with no landmarks to guide us; when we draw on our resilience and discover we can do more than we ever thought possible; **we give you thanks.**

God of mountain top, the valley and the desert, you are alongside us: in our visions, hopes and dreams – in our doubts and questions – in our work and our endeavours; **and we give you thanks. Amen**

Lord Jesus, we pray and adore you, for your birth transcends all time and unites heaven and earth. As you call to us, may we reach out beyond our comforts and privileges, and embrace the needs of all people. Help us to make this Christmas a time of prayer and action for the world's poor and vulnerable, in whom your love was fully revealed in Bethlehem. **In your holy name we pray. Amen**

Loving and gentle God, our heads are full of so many voices: the voice of the advertiser urging us to grab a bargain, three for the price of two;

The voice of greed – take what you can, stockpile and take care of your own;

The voice of exploitation – get what you can, the cheapest price, never mind the cost to the maker;

The voice of reason – you cannot be expected to help everyone, charity begins at home;

The voice of hypocrisy – you pay your taxes and give to charity; you don't need to change anything.

Come, Lord Jesus, with your Holy Spirit, and make in us the change you want to see. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever Amen.

Zephaniah 3: 14-20 – taken from the New Living Translation: here we have Zephaniah's image of light-hearted and liberated singing and dancing with something of the flavour of street parties which celebrate peace after war.

'Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! For the Lord will remove his hand of judgement and will disperse the armies of your enemy. And the Lord himself, the King of Israel, will live among you! At last your troubles will be over, and you will fear disaster no more.

On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be: 'Cheer up, Zion! Don't be afraid! For the Lord your God has arrived to live among you. He is a mighty saviour. He will rejoice over you with great gladness. With his love he will calm all your fears. He will exult over you by singing a happy song.

I will gather you who mourn for the appointed festivals; you will be disgraced no more. And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you. I will save the weak and helpless ones; I will bring together those who were chased away. I will give glory and renown to my former exiles, who have been mocked and shamed. On that day I will gather you together and bring you home again. I will give you a good name – a name of distinction among all the nations of the earth. They will praise you as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes. I, the Lord, have spoken!'

Luke 3: 7-18 – again from New Living Translation.

Here is an example of John's preaching to the crowds that came for baptism. "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming judgement? Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God. Don't just say: 'We are safe – we're the descendants of Abraham.' That proves nothing. God can change these stones here into children of Abraham. Even now the axe of God's judgement is poised, ready to sever your roots. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."

The crowd asked: 'What should we do?'

John replied: "If you have two coats, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."

Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptised, and asked: 'Teacher, what should we do?'

"Show your honesty," he replied. "Make sure that you collect no more taxes than the Roman government requires you to."

'What should we do?' asked some soldiers.

John replied: Don't extort money, and don't accuse people of things you know they didn't do. And be content with your pay."

Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. John answered their questions by saying; "I baptise with water; but someone is coming who is greater than I am – so much greater that I am not even worthy to be his slave. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to separate the chaff from the grain with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing floor, storing the grain in his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire." John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people.

The words to 'Colours of day' written by Sue McClellan [b. 1951], John Paculabo [b. 1946] and Keith Rycroft [b.1949] Singing the Faith 167

1 Colours of day dawn into the mind, the sun has come up, the night is behind;
Go down in the city, into the street, and let's give the message to people we meet.
So light up the fire and let the flame burn, open the door, let Jesus return.
Take seeds of his Spirit, let the fruit grow, tell the people of Jesus, let his love show.

2 Go through the park, on into the town; the sun still shines on; it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again; the people of darkness are needing a friend.
So light up the fire.....

3 Open your eyes, look into the sky, the darkness has come, the sun came to die.
The evening draws on, the sun disappears, but Jesus is living, his Spirit is near.
So light up the fire.....

Comment; John the Baptist came out of the desert like a hell-fire preacher. He came warning people that the way they were living their lives was wrong and that they needed to repent and to turn their lives round. He also warned them that words weren't enough – no good thinking that as they were Jews they would be fine anyway.

Just imagine the scene. Out of the desert came this large, hairy man, dressed in clothes made of camel's hair. He had a leather strap round his waist – and he lived on a diet of grasshoppers and wild honey [sounds a bit like a first century Celebrity: get me out of here!]

And not only does he look different, he's also shouting all manner of things! After quoting the prophet Isaiah, he then goes on to call people 'snakes who come running from judgement'!

John had spent a long time in the desert – some might think far too long. The desert was covered in brushwood, twigs and dry stalks of dead plants. At times a spark could set the desert alight, burning anything that could be burnt and, when this happened, it was common for vipers to slither out of the nooks and crannies where they lay hidden, and attempt to escape the flames. It must have been this picture which John had in his head when the people rushed to hear what he was shouting about. Some thought he was the Messiah – a claim which he quickly denied by saying that he was not good enough to untie the sandals of the one to come. [The act of undoing someone's sandals was the work of a servant.]

The people who flocked to John wanted to know what they had to do to escape the coming judgement. He didn't tell them to get on their knees and pray, or to go to synagogue as often as they could, nor to read the scriptures non-stop. Instead he directed his comments at the way they lived. John told the tax collectors not to overcharge so lining their own pockets – he told the soldiers not to charge protection

money – and the well-off were told to share what they had with the poor. Indeed, John was a forerunner for these were all issues which Jesus tackled.

John the Baptist was trying to make it clear that just appearing to act in a godly manner by going to church, reading the scriptures and praying was not what God required. God wanted – and wants – a change of heart and that would be reflected by the way people lived.

John didn't compromise what he was saying in order to make people feel better. If what he said embarrassed them when they thought about their lives, then they needed to do something about it! Same now – are there any areas of our lives where John's lack of compromise would embarrass us? Well, he made it pretty clear how to deal with that and so to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Messiah. It may be a challenging and even painful task – but what a wonderful goal – to make ourselves ready for the coming of the King.

The shaft of hope has been present through this. It is as if the forgiveness we receive – if we truly repent – enables that shaft of hope to flood us with unexpected light and joy. From the viewpoint of forgiveness, the coming of Christ – both as we look back to Bethlehem and forward to the last day – is not something to fear, but to anticipate with great delight and eagerness.

Those who listened to John the Baptist enthusiastically took up the challenge and gave up the behaviour which they had probably always known was questionable but which they had never had the nerve to deal with before. In the gathering momentum some of them even became over-enthusiastic and then we see how easily John the Baptist could himself have been tempted to go along with their misguided assumptions. Thankfully, his own vigorous self-awareness kept him humble and he was able to use their questions to point their expectations in the right direction – to the Messiah who was coming – the saviour himself.

Prayer: God of judgement and of mercy, we pray for those entrusted with great wealth, that they might see where they could make changes and so enrich others.

We pray for those entrusted with great power, that they may make changes for the good of those they serve.

We pray for those entrusted with great influence, that they may make changes which would inspire others. We pray for ourselves also, that we too might change, and become more approachable, more open, more generous and more like your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

And a personal prayer:

God of justice, we pray for those whose voice we hear but try to ignore – **that we might listen.**

We pray for those whose voices make us uncomfortable – **that we might understand.**

We pray for those in the wilderness of poverty – **that we might share.**

We pray for those in broken relationships – **that we might be bridges.**

We pray for the confused – **that we might be patient.**

We pray for the angry – **that we might offer calm.**

We pray for those who have no voice – **that we might be a place for them to be heard. Amen.**

Meditation of John the Baptist written by Nick Fawcett.

Shall I tell you something strange? Almost funny you might call it, were it not so sad.

It's about me – the voice in the wilderness – the baptiser in the Jordan – the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord.

Well, I managed that, didn't I? Or at least so they'll tell you -I made straight a path in the wilderness; I paved the way for his coming – and, yes, I have to say I made a good job of it. Too good, in a sense, for much to my embarrassment, many were so impressed they followed me instead of him.

But it wasn't just them who got it wrong – it was me, for when Jesus finally came I was as unprepared as any.

Oh, I didn't realise it at the time, far from it – in fact, I thought I was an example to them all – the one who, more than any other, understood who he was and what he came to do.

'Behold the Lamb of God!' I told them; 'the one who comes to take away the sin of the world.'

A good speech, wouldn't you say? But it was just words, sounding impressive, but belying the truth underneath. And it wasn't long after – when his ministry had begun and mine ended – when he was travelling the byways of Judah and I was rotting in prison – that I found myself questioning everything. 'Could he be the Messiah?' I asked, 'the one we'd so long waited for?'

If he was, then why was so little happening – why so little evidence of his kingdom getting closer? I should have known different, of course I should – and, yes, you may well say a hint of jealousy coloured my judgement. But, honestly, how would you have felt in my position, knowing that having given your all, more would be asked – even life itself?

It won't be long now before they come for me, I'm under no illusions. There's no escape – no possibility of a last-minute reprieve; that wife of Herod's won't rest until she sees me dead and buried – the voice in the wilderness silenced for ever. I wasn't prepared for that when I started – and I still wouldn't have been just a day ago. But thank God, he has given me time to think – to hear what Jesus is doing – to understand what it is all leading up to – and I'm ready now, at last I'm ready – prepared for anything, prepared for everything!

From Paul's Letter to the Philippians Chapter 4; verses 4-7 – taken from New Living Translation:

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember the Lord is coming soon.

Do not worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. If you do this you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus..

The words to 'There's a light upon the mountains' written by Henry Burton [1840-1930] StF 188

1 There's a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the spring
when our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the King.
Weary was our heart with waiting, and the night watch seemed so long;
but his triumph-day is breaking, and we hail it with a song.

2 There's a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air;
and the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer:
for the suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our spirit is the travail of his own.

3 He is breaking down the barriers, he is casting up the way;
he is calling for the angels to build up the gates of day;
but his angels here are human, not the shining hosts above;
for the drum-beats of his army are the heartbeats of our love.

4 Hark! We hear a distant music, and it comes with fuller swell;
'tis the triumph song of Jesus, of our King Immanuel;
Zion, go now forth to meet him; and, my soul, be swift to bring
all your finest and your noblest for the triumph of our King!

Closing prayer: May the light of John's message shine in the dark places of our hearts; the urgency of his message transform the complacent places of our hearts; and the challenge of John's message lead us to change the priorities in our hearts this Advent and always. Amen

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us and with those whom we love, now and for evermore. Amen