

WORSHIP AT HOME FOR 29TH NOVEMBER 2020 – ADVENT 1 – WAITING IN THE DARK

Dear friends,

Here we are in Advent – that time of waiting and preparing not only for the celebration of Christ's birth, but for his return. Jesus speaks of the dark days when people might be close to losing hope. He urges them to stay awake to signs that offer hope of the coming deliverance which will certainly come, though at an unexpected time. He speaks to us now – never lose hope but always be prepared – to be alert to the signs of summer even in the darkest winter. Even in these difficult times we can watch for the signs of God.

Every blessing, *Margaret*

Call to Worship: At dawn let us watch for God and celebrate a new day.
At noon, let us watch for God and give thanks for all we are and have.
At dusk, let us watch for God and embrace the darkness of night.
And now – let us watch and wait for God as we worship in Jesus' name.

Mighty God, your Son came to earth as a tiny, fragile human being. As we once more prepare to make the journey through Advent we pray that it will not only be with the anticipated joy of beholding a newborn baby, but also with awareness of where that new life will lead, and what it might mean for us. **Amen**

We come to you, O God, sometimes aware and sometimes not aware.

Sometimes we are aware of our needs – sometimes ignoring the needs of others.

You wait for us, Lord, and as you wait, you call us to wait for you, too.

May we remember how you have helped us – in the kindness of a stranger, in the comfort of a friend, in the call for justice and in the shout for mercy. Make us, who wait for you, approach you and each other with new vigilance, and with new hope. **Amen.**

The words to 'Hark the glad sound!' written by Philip Doddridge [1702-1751]. Singing the Faith 171

1 Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long;
let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song.

2 He comes the prisoners to release in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.

3 He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace to enrich the humble poor.

4 Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, your welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring with your beloved name.

Prayer: Lord, the plants in our gardens are bare now, as winter is here, but we know it won't be long before little signs of life burst forth.

We acknowledge our barren times – the sadness for things we have lost.

We thank you for the memories – for the comfort and hope you bring to us.

We commit to you the new things that will surely come, and we pray we won't be slow to notice these new shoots, and that you will water them plentifully with your love. **Amen.**

Lord, it's that time again, and we can be as eager as children, just wanting the waiting to be over.

We ask forgiveness that we, too, can sometimes see you as a great big Father Christmas – just there to give us what we want or think we need.

We ask forgiveness for the times when we think only of ourselves, when we may see others as 'just another difficult person to buy for'; another Christmas card to be dashed off.

When we prefer comfort to change, challenge us; when we are distracted and not attentive, forgive us; when we are feeble not faithful, strengthen us – and, at all times, transform our dreams into your realities. We pray that we will see signs of you in every person we meet, and that you will open our hearts to receive you. **Amen**

The 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 forever and ever. Amen

The readings today come from the set Lectionary and have uncomfortable elements that we may find hard to appreciate. The OT readings [which we aren't having] would tell us of a God who is hidden [Isaiah 64] and Psalm 80 shows a psalmist who wrestles with a God who is angry at their prayers.

Our NT readings show St Paul addressing a people who are wondering if they can hold true to the end; while, in Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus urging us to be alert to the signs of the presence of summer even in the deepest darkness of the winter when it feels as if the sky has fallen in. We are reminded that the coming of God in the darkness of our world – or in the darkness of personal experience – will be unexpected. So, every year, at the darkest time of the year, we have this season of the Church year to remind us of the need to wait for the unexpected and to be alert for the signs of the kingdom.

I Corinthians 1: 3-9 taken from New Living Translation of the Bible.

I can never stop thanking God for all the generous gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. He has enriched your church with the gifts of eloquence and every kind of knowledge. This shows that what I told you about Christ Jesus is true. Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you strong right up to the end, and he will keep you from all blame on the great day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. God will surely do this for you, for he always does just what he says, and he is the one who invited you into this wonderful friendship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Comment: Here Paul assures the Corinthians that though the full glory of God has not been fully realised among them, they have been blessed with everything they need to keep waiting for that day. They are reminded that the God who called them into fellowship is faithful, but still they are required to wait for the revealing of that which is still hidden. And so it is for us – we have been blessed with so much but we must still wait for the full glory to be revealed to us.

Watching the news can be a destabilising experience. Images of wars, earthquakes and famines roll out before us and it can be hard to retain faith in God's good purposes. And this year Covid19 has turned our lives upside down. How are we to react? Whom are we to blame?

We see from this reading – and from the Gospel to follow – that humans have always struggled with these questions. There is a fine line between God inspiring us to create meaning out of adversity, and our thinking that there is a detailed and pre-ordained divine plan. It is one thing to find lessons for oneself in adversity or calamity – but it is quite another to use disaster as a blunt weapon against others. There are no neat answers, no certainties. We put our trust in God – and walk the path in front of us.

Mark 13: 24-37 taken from the New Living Translation of the Bible:

At that time after the horrible days end:

'The sun will be darkened,

the moon will not give light,
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the powers of heaven will be shaken' [see *Isaiah 13:10; 34: and Joel 2:10*]

Then everyone will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds with great power and glory. And he will send forth his angels to gather together his chosen ones from all over the world – from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.

Now, learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its buds become tender and its leaves begin to sprout, you know without being told that summer is near. Just so, when you see the events I've described beginning to happen, you can be sure that his return is very near, right at the door. I assure you, this generation will not pass from the scene until all these events have taken place. Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words remain for ever.

However, no-one knows the day or the hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don't know when they will happen, stay alert and keep watch.

The coming of the Son of Man can be compared with that of a man who left home to go on a trip. He gave each of his employees instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. So keep a sharp lookout! For you do not know when the home-owner will return – at evening, midnight, early dawn or late daybreak. Don't let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning.

What I say to you I say to everyone. Watch for his return!

Comment and Illustration:

God has shown himself to us in the face of Jesus Christ. In Jesus we have a new hope, for God's grace – that is the gift of himself has been given to us in Christ Jesus. This is a gift to each one of us. Will we unwrap this gift and make it ours so that we may be enriched by his grace?

The Son of Man comes to us. The times we live in may be full of trouble and stress – even distress – yet he still comes to us and we should look for signs of his coming and of his presence in our lives.

In this world we each have our own responsibility – each with our own work – and together we are in charge of stewarding this world. And we are accountable to God. He comes to see how we are dealing with this world so we must keep alert - keep awake – not go round with our eyes closed hoping all will come right if we just ignore it. We must all do our part in whatever way we can to further the coming of the kingdom of God – and to be ready always for his coming. Advent is the time to remind us to be alert and be prepared for we know not the time or the place so let's live our lives in the light of God's grace.

David Adam has written this illustration:

It was near Christmas and in the Advent season, and Peter waited for God to come. He prayed every day: 'God, show me your face and I shall be saved.'

Peter had tried to live a good life; he was now old and looked forward to the coming of God. He continued to work in the paper shop where he had worked most of his life. Here he heard all kinds of conversations, and he met many people.

A single mum was telling a friend how she didn't have enough money to buy presents for her child. When everyone else had gone, Peter said to her: 'I heard what you said. I have a few toys on the shelf which aren't selling very well. Just go and pick out what you would like for your child.' She could hardly believe it for there were some wonderful things on the shelves. She went away with her arms full. Peter was delighted – his reward was her smile.

Later that day, he caught a young lad stealing a magazine from the shelves. He was on the way out with the magazine up his jumper when Peter stopped him. He could have called the police or told the boy's parents. He saw the boy was poor and afraid, and he felt sorry for him: 'If you want a magazine, and have no

money, talk with me,' he said. 'Magazines are soon out of date, I can always find one to give you. You must not just help yourself. Take this magazine for free – and ask me another time.' The boy's face changed from a look of fear to a beaming smile. He thanked Peter and ran from the shop.

An old man came into the shop and was saying how lonely he was since his wife died. This would be his first Christmas on his own – he was not looking forward to it. Peter said: 'We were expecting a friend to come for Christmas, and he has said he cannot make it. We have prepared for his coming. Would you like to come to us instead? We would love to share Christmas with you.' The old man's face lit up in a beautiful smile and he said: 'You have made me feel so wanted, and I would love to come.'

That night Peter prayed his Advent prayer, 'Show me your face and I shall be saved.' In a dream God spoke to him and said: 'Peter, today I came to you, and three times you made me smile. Grace and peace be upon you'

[As David Adam wrote: Apologies to Tolstoy!]

The words to 'O, the deep, deep love of Jesus' written by Samuel Trevor Francis [1834-1925].

Complete Mission Praise no. 522

1 O the deep, deep love of Jesus! Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free;
Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me.
Underneath me, all around me, in the currents of Thy love;
Leading onward, leading homeward, to Thy glorious rest above.

2 O the deep, deep love of Jesus! Spread His praise from shore to shore,
How He loveth, ever loveth, changeth never evermore.
How He watches o'er His loved ones, died to call them all his own;
How for them He intercedeth, watches over them from the throne.

3 O the deep, deep love of Jesus! Love of every love the best;
'tis and ocean vast of blessing, 'tis a haven sweet of rest.
O the deep, deep love of Jesus! 'tis a heaven of heavens to me;
And it lifts me up to glory, for it lifts me up to Thee.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray for all those who are watching and waiting from places of confinement; for men and women beating their heads against prison walls; for butterflies beating their wings against panes of glass; for animals pacing up and down in cages; for the people who are caged by poverty or imprisoned by riches; for those who are bound by addictions, or bitterness, or hate. Grant to them – and to us – the freedom of spirit that never gives up hope, and which, in Christ, never dies.

Lord, we pray for our troubled world; for places where war or natural disaster or pandemic have struck, where people may find it hard to have hope.

We pray for our community: for the people we know and those we don't; we pray for all in their sorrows and joys.

We pray for those who wait for news, whether good or bad, that you will be with them.

We pray that those around us will be aware of the true meaning of Christmas, that we might be signs for them.

We pray for all who watch and wait.

We pray for all who seek, that they may find.

In Jesus' holy name we pray, **Amen**

A Meditation of Matthew [one of the twelve disciples] written by Nick Fawcett. ‘No Ordinary Stories’

The time is coming, they tell me: the day of the Lord’s return, when we shall stand before him and he will separate the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the wicked. So [they say] forget about the present and think instead about the future, for that’s what matters – our final destiny – the life to come – nothing else.

Well, I’m sorry, but have I missed something? For that’s not the way I heard it, not what I thought Jesus was saying at all. Keep alert, he warned, certainly, for the day will dawn as God has promised – but when that will be we’ve no idea; today, tomorrow, or far beyond, who can say? It’s not the ‘when’ of his coming that should concern us, but the fact that he will, and the difference that makes not to the future but to the here and now – to the way we live every moment of every day.

We have a job to be doing, a broken world out there needing to hear his word and know his love – and that is what will concern him when he comes, not whether we’ve been looking forward eagerly to his kingdom but whether we are doing something to make it happen – to help to build heaven on earth.

So what will he find in you? A life dedicated to his service, continuing his ministry where he left off, or an obsession about the future so strong that you’ve forgotten about the present?

A life lived for others, committed to bringing light where there is darkness, joy where there is sorrow – or a preoccupation about yourself, with securing your own salvation?

Don’t think I doubt his promise. The time is coming, just as they say, a day when we shall be called to account and made to answer for the way we’ve lived our lives. But if I were you I wouldn’t dwell on that too long: I’d get down to the business of discipleship and to walking the way of the cross – or otherwise you may find, when the moment comes and judgement is pronounced, that the verdict is very different from the one you had in mind.

The words to ‘Will your anchor hold’ written by Priscilla Jane Owens [1829-1907] StF 645;

1 Will your anchor hold in the storms of life, when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?

When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain, will your anchor drift or firm remain?

We have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll;

Fastened to the Rock which cannot move, grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love!

2 Will your anchor hold in the straits of fear, when the breakers roar, and the reef is near?

While, the surges rave, and the wild winds blow, shall the angry waves then your barque o’erflow?

We have an anchor.....

3 Will your anchor hold in the floods of death, when the waters cold chill your latest breath?

On the rising tide you can never fail, while your anchor holds within the veil.

We have an anchor.....

4 Will your eyes behold through the morning light the city of gold and the harbour bright?

Will you anchor safe by the heavenly shore, when life’s storms are past for evermore?

We have an anchor.....

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

In the name of God who calls you to be his disciple,

who cherishes you as a precious child, who invites you to be part of his kingdom work:

be bold, be blessed and be yourself.

And may the blessing of God – the Father who created you – the Son who found you and saved you – and the Holy Spirit who lives and works within you, be with you and all whom you love today and for all eternity. Amen