

## 2021 12<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER WORSHIP AT HOME – ADVENT THREE

### **An Advent Liturgy for the third Sunday of Advent:**

This week we light the candle of Joy.

Just as the birth of Jesus gave great joy to his mother Mary, so his presence in the world gives joy to those who had none before.

The candle of Joy reminds us that when Jesus is born in us, we too can find the gift of joy in our world.

### **Call to worship: from Isaiah 12: 2-6 -a canticle:**

See, God has come to save me! I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and song, he is my salvation. Oh, the joy of drinking deeply from the Fountain of Salvation!

In that wonderful day you will say, 'Thank the Lord! Praise his name! tell the world about his wondrous love! How mighty he is!'

Sing to the Lord, for he has done wonderful things. Make known his praise around the world. Let all the people shout his praise with joy. For great and mighty is the Holy One of Israel who lives among you.

### **The words of 'Light of the world' written by Tim Hughes. Singing the Faith 175**

1 Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,  
opened my eyes, let me see beauty that made this heart adore you,  
hope of a life spent with you.

*So here I am to worship, here I am to bow down, here I am to say that you're my God.  
And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy, altogether wonderful to me.*

2 King of all days oh so highly exalted, glorious in heaven above.

Humbly you came to the earth you created,  
all for love's sake became poor.

*Refrain*

And I'll never know how much it cost to see my sin upon that cross.  
And I'll never know how much it cost, to see my sin upon that cross.

*Refrain.*

### **Prayers:**

Lord Jesus Christ, you came to our world, sharing our humanity, identifying yourself with us and expressing through actions and self-sacrifice your love for all.

Teach us to follow in your footsteps.

Yours was the way of service, compassion and reconciliation. Despite the rejection of so many, you saw the best in people – you saw the good and the worth which others overlooked.

You loved all without prejudice – without passing judgement- without any strings attached.

Lord Jesus Christ, you come to our world still each day – but to do that fully you need our co-operation and our willingness to be used for your purpose.

You need us to speak for you – to act for you – to show your love and live your life.

You need us to take that way of service to break down barriers and to bring people together.

You need us to take the Way of the Cross – valuing people for what they are, offering trust and encouragement and helping them to believe in themselves.

Lord Jesus Christ, you came to our world to establish a new kingdom – a new era – a new dimension to life. Help us through who we are and all we do to bring that kingdom ever nearer.

Teach us to follow in your footsteps, for in your name we ask it. **Amen.**

And a prayer of Confession:

Loving and gentle God, our hearts are full of so many voices;  
the voice of the advertiser – 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 everybody, 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**

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 for ever and ever. **Amen.**

### **Zephaniah 3: 14-20:**

Sing, O daughter of Zion, shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. For the Lord will remove his hand of judgement and 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 – you need fear no more. On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be: 'Cheer up, do not be afraid. For the Lord your God has arrived to live among you. He is a mighty Saviour. He will give you victory. He will rejoice over you in great gladness; he will love you and not accuse you. Is that a joyous shout I hear? No, it is the Lord himself exulting over you in happy song.

I have gathered your wounded and taken away your reproach. And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you. I will save the weak and helpless ones and bring together those who were chased away. I will give glory to my former exiles, mocked and shamed.

At that time, I will gather you together and bring you home again, and give you a good name, a name of distinction among all the people of the earth, and they will praise you when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes.' Says the Lord.'

### **Comment:**

On the whole, the Book of Zephaniah isn't cheerful reading – and if you look at the serious commentaries on it,, most of them dispute most of what it contains!

Although Zephaniah places it as being in the reign of King Josiah [1:1], again no-one seems sure that that was the date – and it is thought that the original has been edited and patched together from different sources.

However these verses we have here are really uncharacteristic of the book and they are generally thought to have been a later addition – an editor's attempt to have a happy ending to what was, otherwise totally gloomy book.

Certainly it moves from a condemnation of Jerusalem through dire warnings to most of the neighbouring states to this sudden passage that – as the author and lecturer Jane Williams says – have come straight out of Isaiah.

But even if it has been added on there is still a kind of logic about it.

The only people left are 'humble and lowly' and God comes – to them he has come home.

There is that sudden change in verse 18 from the third person to the first – no longer reporting what God will do, but God himself promising to bring his people back.

Jane Williams writes: 'Isn't that word *home* an emotive one? Think of all the things that have been done in the name of protecting this idea of *home* - so to think of *home* and Jerusalem in the same breath is almost

unbearably ironic just at present. Who has a right to call Jerusalem *home*? But Zephaniah suggests that it can only be home when God is. Home – not so much where the heart is, as where God is.’

The trick, then, is to train our hearts to feel at home only where God is.

St. Augustine wrote: ‘Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.’ Unfortunately, that is not often true. We may know our hearts are restless, but until they do find their home, we don’t know what we are looking for.

The final verse of G.K.Chesterton’s Christmas poem goes like this:

To an open house in the evening  
Home shall all men come,  
To an older place than Eden,  
And a taller town than Rome.  
To the end of the way of the wandering star,  
To the things that cannot be and yet are,  
To the place where God was homeless  
And all men are at home.

It is God’s willingness to be homeless so that he might bring us home which we celebrate at Christmas – which we spend Advent trying to imagine and for which we want to prepare ourselves.

The more we consider just what God was willing to do for our sake is awesome – it is mind-blowing – and to know that it is for us and for our salvation takes the breath away!

**The words for ‘To God be the glory’ written by Frances Jane van Alstyne [Fanny Crosby] [1820-1915]  
Singing the Faith 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 the rejoicing through Jesus the Son;  
But purer, and higher, and greater will be our wonder, our rapture when Jesus we see:

*Praise the Lord! .....*

**Luke 3: 7-18:**

Here is a sample of John’s preaching to the crowd that came for baptism: ‘You brood of snakes! You are trying to escape hell without truly turning to God! That is why you want to be baptised! First, go and prove by the way you live that you really have repented. And don’t think you are safe because you are descendants of Abraham. That is not enough. God can produce children of Abraham from these desert stones! The axe of his judgement is poised over you, ready to sever your roots and cut you down. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.’

The crowd replied: ‘What do you want us to do?’

‘If you have two coats,’ he replied, ‘give one to the poor. If you have extra food, give it away to those who are hungry.’

Even tax collectors – notorious for their corruption – came to be baptised and asked: ‘How shall we prove to you that we have abandoned our sins?’

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

'And us,' asked some soldiers, 'what about us?'

John replied: 'Don't extort money by threats and violence; don't accuse anyone of what you know he didn't do and be content with your pay!'

Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and eager to know whether or not John was he. This was the question of the hour and was being discussed everywhere.

John answered the question by saying: 'I baptise only with water but someone is coming soon who has far greater authority than mine, in fact, I am not even worthy of being his slave. He will baptise you with fire - with the Holy Spirit. He will separate chaff from grain

and burn up the chaff with eternal fire and store away the grain.' He used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people.

### **Comment:**

Let's imagine the scene – out of the desert comes this large, hairy man dressed in clothes made of camel's hair with a leather strap round his waist – a man whose diet seems [according to Matthew's gospel] to consist of grasshoppers and wild honey. Not only does he look rather different to most of the people around but he's shouting his head off about all manner of things!

No wonder people noticed him.

After quoting the prophet Isaiah, this man then goes on to call people 'a brood of snakes who come running from judgement'!

You would have thought this wasn't the way to win friends and influence people! But they came – they really wanted to hear what this prophet had to say.

John had spent a long time in the desert – some may say too long thinking it may have turned his mind. 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. We can imagine that when we think of the wild fires we have seen reported from Australia and California.

When one of those desert fires happened, it was common to see vipers slithering out of the nooks and crannies where they usually lay hidden as they tried to escape the flames.

It must have been this picture which John had in his head when the people rushed to hear what he had to say – certainly he was scathing about them.

Some of the crowd thought he himself was the Messiah – this was a claim which John swiftly denied by saying that he wasn't good enough even to untie the sandals of the one to come. That act of undoing someone's sandals was a servant's task so would have resonated with his listeners.

The people who flocked to see and hear John wanted to know what they had to do to escape the 'coming judgement'. John didn't tell them to kneel down and pray, go to the synagogue as often as they could – nor did he tell them to read the scriptures all the time. John directed his comments at the way they lived. He told the tax-collectors not to overcharge so as to line their own pockets. He told the soldiers not to charge protection money. He told those who had plenty to share what they had with the poor. These were all issues that Jesus also tackled – John was certainly on the right lines here.

He was trying to make it clear that just appearing to be 'godly' by going to the temple, by reading the Bible, by praying was not what God required. God wanted a change of heart which would be reflected by the way the people lived their lives. It is what he wants from us – all the outward show will not cut it – it is reflecting his goodness, his compassion, his mercy in our lives and in the way we treat others, whoever they are.

John was uncompromising in the way he spoke to the crowds – really, often shouted at them. You would wonder, perhaps, why anyone would go to him – would accept what he was saying to them – would flock

to be baptised by him. People were longing for the Messiah to come – John was there to pave the way - to show them what they had to do to be ready.

He was uncompromising – and later on, he did use a few too many words when he criticised Herod Antipas, the puppet ruler of the area, for marrying Herodias [ who was, at one and the same time Herod's sister-in-law and his niece].

Herod Antipas met Herodias who was married to another man called ..... Herod! Antipas seduced her and later married her!

So now, Herod Antipas was related to Herod who was married to Herodias!!

So, in one way or another, Herod, Herod Antipas and Herodias were all related through Herod the Great! Confusing, eh! And what a severe lack of imagination in choosing names!

By the standards of Jewish law and opinion the marriage of Antipas and Herodias was well out of order.

John the Baptist used a few choice words and pointed out that their actions were wrong. This was too much for the Herod clan and John found himself in prison because he refused to compromise his message for his own safety. He knew what was right and stuck to it, whatever might happen.

I wonder if there are any areas in our lives where his lack of compromise just might embarrass us!?

**Prayers:** Living God, we thank you for the great message of the Gospel – the glad tidings of your love – the good news of your coming to our world through your Son Jesus Christ. May that message inspire us again during this Advent and Christmas season and in the days to come.

We thank you that the Good News of Christ has challenged people across the ages, and that though it has been proclaimed countless times – though we have heard it ourselves so many times before – it continues to be news for us and news for all – able still to speak to individuals across the world.

So now we pray for those you have specially called to proclaim the Good news – ministers, preachers, evangelists, teachers – all those with the special gift and responsibility of communicating your word. Grant them wisdom, dedication, inspiration and courage that they may witness faithfully to you in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Speak your word of love and move in the hearts of all who hear it. **Amen.**

### **The words to 'Wild and lone' written by Carl P daw, Jr. [b.1944] StF 189**

1 Wild and lone the prophet's voice echoes through the desert still,  
calling us to make a choice, bidding us to do God's will.

'Turn from sin and be baptised; cleanse your heart and mind and soul.

Quitting all the sin you prized, yield your life to God's control.'

2 'Bear the fruit repentance sows; lives of justice, truth and love.

Trust no other claim than those; set your heart on things above.

Soon the Lord will come in power; burning clean the threshing floor:

Then will flames the chaff devour; wheat alone shall fill God's store.'

3 With such preaching dark and bold John proclaimed salvation near,

And his timeless warnings hold words of hope to all who hear.

So we dare to journey on, led by faith through ways untrod,

Till we come at last like John to behold the Lamb of God.

**Closing Prayer:** God of the desert places, whose judgement was proclaimed by the prophets of old, help us, too, to be willing to wait for the right time and the right place in which to demonstrate your love, that has more power than words alone to challenge and change. **Amen.**