

## **2022 4<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER WORSHIP AT HOME ADVENT TWO**

Dear friends,

As we move on into Advent, we think again about John the Baptist who fulfils the role of the prophetic voice, preparing for the Lord's coming. The preparation is repentance and learning to depend only on God. Our gaze is drawn away from concern with ourselves to see a bigger picture – it's not all about us, it's about Jesus. I hope you are all as you would hope to be as you look towards this season of the year. Every blessing, Margaret.

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### **Call to worship:**

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.  
Blessed be his glorious name for ever.  
May his glory fill the whole earth.

Holy God, who alone does wondrous things, gather us now into one people.  
Unite our hearts and minds in the love of Jesus Christ.  
Gather us now into one people so that we may be holy and strong in the hope you have set before us.  
Amen.

Loving God, we come before you as your children and we offer you all that we are.  
We offer our strengths and our weaknesses, our hopes and our fears.  
We offer our skills and our clumsiness, our vision and our blindness.  
We offer our understanding and our ignorance, our willingness and our stubbornness.  
Loving God, we offer you all that we are – take us and use us, break us, reshape us, work with us and through us to the glory of your holy name. Amen

### **The words to 'On Jordan's bank' written by John Chandler [1806-1876] singing the Faith 182**

1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh;  
awake and hearken, for he brings glad tidings from the King of kings<sup>1</sup>

2 Then cleansed be every life from sin; make straight the way for God within,  
and let us all our hearts prepare for Christ to come and enter there.

3 For you are our salvation, Lord, our refuge, and our great reward;  
without your grace we waste away like flowers that wither and decay.

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

5 To God the Son all glory be whose advent sets his people free,  
whom, with the Father, we adore, and Holy Spirit, evermore.

### **Prayers:**

Living God, you have spoken to your people across the centuries – you identified yourself with humankind in Jesus Christ – you dwell within us through your Holy Spirit, making your presence come alive. Accept now the worship we offer and use us for your kingdom.  
Loving God, having come to us, you call us to come to you, promising that *in* Christ we shall find rest for our souls – that *through* Christ our spiritual hunger shall be satisfied – and that *from* Christ we shall receive life in all its fullness.  
Gracious God, we come in response to your call to offer our worship, our thanks, our confession, our lives.

Sovereign God, we come seeking your guidance – your strength – your renewal – and your will.  
Lord of all, help us to come to you not just as an outward gesture, a matter of routine or duty – but in heart and mind and soul.  
Help us to make space in our hectic lives to be still in your presence, and so may *we* live in you, and *you* in us.  
We ask that you accept our worship and use us for your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Merciful God, our maker, and our friend, you offer us peace and plenty – but we make turmoil and want.  
You offer us unity – and we make division.  
You offer us justice, and we make unfair systems.  
You offer us joy, yet we make unhappiness.  
Merciful God, it seems that we forget you at every turn, and allow selfishness to push you from our hearts in the details of our lives.  
We are sorry and ashamed. Forgive us and fill us with the will to do better, and to serve you as you deserve. Amen.

The Lord God pardons us and helps us to make a fresh start, walking alongside us every step of the way.  
Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and 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.

### **Matthew 3: 1-12. [The Message – Eugene Peterson]**

While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called the Baptist, was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: 'Change your life. God's kingdom is here.' John and his message were authorised by Isaiah's prophecy:

"Thunder in the desert!

Prepare for God's arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!"

John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptised into a changed life. When John realised that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming a popular thing to do, he exploded: 'Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the water? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin! And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it is deadwood, it goes on the fire.

I'm baptising you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama – compared to him I'm a mere stagehand – he will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, changing you from the inside out. He is going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything that is wheat up into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

## **Meditation of a listener to John the Baptist [Nick Fawcett – Amazing Man Year A]**

‘Repent,’ he told us; ‘bear fruit worthy of repentance.’ But what did he mean?

A prophet, some called him, but I wasn’t so sure – for with his camel-hair clothes, desert life-style and diet of locusts and honey he came across as eccentric rather than inspired – a tub-thumping fanatic rather than a man of God.

‘You brood of vipers!’ he called us. ‘Worthless chaff!’ What had we done for him to turn on us like that? Of what shocking sins did we stand accused?

It was only later that I understood, after I’d heard and seen the one he pointed to, listened to Jesus of Nazareth, and witnessed the way he lived, loved, died, and rose again.

He turned our faith on its head, rewrote religion, gave the Scriptures a whole new meaning – for he showed us a different way, unlike anything we had seen before. The way of love, compassion, and forgiveness – of others first and self, second – of awesome grace and truth.

That’s what John was on about there in the wilderness. He was calling us to a change of direction, a turning from one way of life to another, for though he spoke of repentance, he was heralding the one who, far from holding our faults against us, would bear them all on the cross. The one who came not to condemn but to pardon, to make us and all things new.

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Gracious God, thank you for your generous love and awesome mercy – your willingness to welcome us back when we go astray – to time and again pardon our sins.

Remind us of what it cost you to make that possible – of the awesome truth that, through your Son you not only shared our life but endured our death, atoning on the cross for our sin.

Teach us, then, to be truly sorry, and, in heartfelt gratitude, to turn from our old ways to embrace the new. Direct our path, and put a right spirit within us, so that our lives may bear fruit for you. Amen.

**Comment:** For a long time there had been no-one to whom the Jews would have given the name of ‘prophet’. They said that prophecy had been dead for 400 years. Then suddenly out of the desert of Judea came John – dressed in clothing of camel-hair with a leather belt holding it together.

John came to get people ready for the coming of Jesus.

John didn’t seek to draw people to him but sought instead to bring people to God and to make them aware that Christ was coming. John told the people this and said that he himself wasn’t even worthy enough to carry the sandals of the One who was to come. [Such a task was usually carried out by a slave]. John was sure that Christ was far greater than he.

John challenges us too – are we truly preparing to let Christ into our lives or are we more interested in preparing for Christmas? Are we ready for his coming? John calls to the people to repent, and we too would do well to hear that call. ‘Repent’ means ‘turn round’ – that we are looking the wrong way, going the wrong way, so ‘turn around’ to follow the right way if we want to meet the King.

Can we relate this call to much of what we are doing at this season – and to how we are living our lives? Are we truly prepared – or at least preparing – to welcome the King? Like going the wrong way down a road, the further we go, the longer the journey back.

So let’s make sure that we have the directions right. Today turn to God, turn to Christ – and as a preparation for Christmas, turn each day in prayer to the One who comes – and who comes to each one of us.

## **Illustration [David Adam – Sermon Illustrations]**

Making a journey was not easy in Biblical times. An eastern proverb states: ‘There are three states of misery – illness, fasting, and travel’. Before anyone went on a journey they were advised to ‘pay all debts, provide for dependants, provide parting gifts, return all articles under trust, take money and a good temper, then bid farewell to all.’ Roads were often in poor condition, full of holes and bumps that made

travel difficult, if not dangerous. Journeying was never done for pleasure. There were few cared-for roads. Josephus tells us that King Solomon laid a causeway of black basalt stone along the roads that led to Jerusalem 'to manifest the grandeur of his riches and government'. All surfaces and built-up roads were originally built for the king and for his use. Before the king was due to visit an area, the inhabitants were visited and warned to be ready. They had to make sure the road didn't have any obstacles to make the king's journey difficult. They also had to be prepared to welcome him.

John the Baptist is to be seen as one who tells us of the need to prepare the way for the coming of the King, of Christ.

### **Prayers:**

Living God, you spoke, and the world was brought into being – the heavens and the earth, the sea and dry land, night and day, life in all its variety and abundance.

You spoke again in the book of the law – in the poetry of the psalms – in the wisdom of the teacher – the chronicling of history – and in the message of the prophets, revealing your will, proclaiming your purpose. You spoke through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, through those who witnessed to his life and ministry, and through those who shared in the building of his Church.

You have spoken throughout history – through preaching and teaching – through study and quiet devotion – through prayer and fellowship – through the wonder of this world – and still you speak today, your word ever old but always new, able to redeem, renew, and restore.

Speak to us now, we pray.

Help us to use this season of Advent to listen more carefully to your voice, and so to walk with you more closely, this and every day, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **The words to 'Who would think' written by John L bell [b.1949] and Graham Maule [b. 1958] StF 222**

1 Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth  
might not be a plan or army, proud in purpose, proved in worth?  
Who would think, despite derision, that a child might lead the way?  
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day.

2 Shepherds watch and wise men wonder, monarchs scorn and angels sing;  
such a place as none would reckon hosts a holy, helpless thing.  
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers watch a baby laid in hay:  
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas day.

3 Centuries of skill and science span the past from which we move,  
yet experience questions whether, with such progress, we improve.  
While the human lot we ponder, lest our hopes and humour fray,  
God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day.

### **Closing Prayers:**

Lord, send us out and help us to follow you.

Lord, lead us and help us to keep our eyes on you.

Lord, be at the centre of our lives, our thinking, and our actions.

Make us useful in your service and show us how we can live so that our lives point towards Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen.