

Dear friends,

I have prepared the next three Worship at Homes to send to you this time. I wanted to be sure that you had all the season's services with you in plenty of time so that you can spread them out as you please. I anticipate [*Deo volente*] a busy time coming up and I want to ensure that the services are with you. Christmas is suddenly coming up fast – I hope that this season finds you in good spirits and ready to welcome our Lord once again. With every blessing, *Margaret*.

Call to worship:

Lord, you are the source of all hope and healing.

As we gather today, and as winter approaches fast, may you warm our cold hearts and strengthen our weak spirits.

Lead us away from the dark places where our thoughts take us, and take us instead along your holy, hope-filled way.

Loving God, we celebrate your loving presence with us today.

May your light infuse the dark places of our hearts;

may your truth reassure us when doubts drain and exhaust us;

may your peace seep into the restless places of our souls;

and may your grace strengthen, sustain, and guide us,

through this Advent, this winter, and always. Amen.

**The words to 'How deep the Father's love' written by Stuart Townend [B.1963] Singing the Faith 780
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1 How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure,

That he should give his only Son to make a wretch his treasure.

How great the pain of searing loss – the Father turns his face away,

As wounds which mar the Chosen One bring many sons to glory.

2 Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders;

Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.

It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished;

His dying breath has brought me life – I know that it is finished.

3 I will not boast in anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom;

But I will boast in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.

Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer;

But this I know with all my heart – his wounds have paid my ransom.

Prayer:

God of all seasons, your love never wavers, - your power never fails.

You never leave us to our doubts – you never abandon us to our insecurity.

You always hear our cry, and you always help us to begin again – that we may help others in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Living God, we thank you for the opportunity to reflect and mull Scripture together.

We know that sometimes to doubt is to grow – so, Lord, forgive us when we allow our doubts to diminish us. Sometimes looking back helps us to advance, so, Lord, forgive us when we allow our memories to cripple us. Sometimes recognising our tiredness can lead to real rest – so, Lord, forgive us when we allow our weariness to demoralise us.

Forgive us and help us to glimpse your presence in our lives and in our world, so that we may negotiate all obstacles to our faith and be empowered afresh. Amen.

Reliable God – you heal us when we are wounded – you free us when we are bound – you reassure us when we wobble - when we lose sight of you, you show us your love in action and your presence with us. Thank you holy, humble, ever-present God. Thank you. Amen.

God of Advent – thank you for John the Baptist, the greatest and the least. Thank you for his certainty and his doubts – for his honesty and his humility – for his certainty and his doubts – for his passion and his pondering – for his single-mindedness and his reflectiveness – for his questions and YOUR answers, all of which help us today in everyday life and for which we praise you. 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 11: 2-11 [The Message – Eugene Peterson]:

John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison. When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask: 'Are you the One we have been expecting, or are we still waiting?'

Jesus told them: 'God back and tell John what is going on.

The blind see – the lame walk – lepers are cleansed – the deaf hear – the dead are raised.

The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.

Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed!'

When John's disciples left to report, Jesus started talking to the crowd about John.

'What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pyjamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A prophet? That's right, a prophet! Probably the best prophet you will ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote: 'I am sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.'

Let me tell you what is going on here. No-one in history surpasses John the Baptist; but in the kingdom he prepared for you for, the lowliest person is greater than him.'

Comment:

The scriptures never promise an easy life for those who seek to do good. Here is John the Baptist in prison for speaking out against evil. John had dared to speak out against Herod Antipas of Galilee. Herod had dismissed his wife and married his brother's wife, after seducing her. Because John spoke against this he was held prisoner in the fortress of Machaerus up in the mountains near the Dead Sea. John had proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, but there in prison either he or his disciples seem to be having doubts.

Perhaps John wanted to point his disciples in the direction of Jesus. However it happened, John's disciples came to Jesus and asked: 'Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

Jesus doesn't just say: 'Yes', nor does he explain in words. He doesn't argue his case but instead asks them to tell what they see and hear. 'Do not tell John what I am saying, but what I am doing – what is happening. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them.'

Not only are the powers of darkness being defeated but the Scriptures being fulfilled. This is Good News! If we look again at last week's gospel reading and the demands of John the Baptist, we may think that those disciples of John were worried about this 'friend of publicans and sinners'. Perhaps Jesus is not as

hard or as judgemental as they would like him to be. This was not a message of destruction for the wicked but one of the love of God. Maybe John's disciples would have preferred a little more severity.

Jesus says to them: 'Blessed is anyone who takes no offence in me.' We have to accept him as he is and not change him into who we want him to be, for in accepting him he will transform our lives as he transformed those of the people he met.

John's question suggests that he fears that he has got it all wrong – he had identified Jesus as the Messiah – was it all a mistake? His own ministry now seems to be ending in seeming defeat and it seems that Jesus is doing nothing to help him specifically. Jesus reassures John, inviting him to look beyond his own suffering and fear to recognise that God is at work. Jesus is the Messiah because his healing channels God's power in God's kingdom. Hope is offered to those in need. Jesus invites John to work through doubt to trust [just as Peter had to learn at a later date.]

Meditation:

'Are you the one?' I asked – 'the one we've been waiting for, yearning for, across the centuries?'

I should have known, you say, without need of confirmation, but remember that I had been locked up in prison for months with no news of anyone or anything, and it was hard to understand why God had let that happen, let alone to keep faith in the future.

What if I'd been wrong – mistaken the signs? What if the man I had baptised hadn't been the Messiah after all, the chosen one of God?

It could all have been some ghastly mistake – and, in my dark, dank cell, that thought began to haunt me. So when word filtered through that Jesus was at work, his words creating a stir, naturally I wanted to know more – to gauge whether my first impression had been right and not some deluded dream.

I sent out my followers to learn more, and the news they brought me said it all – news of the blind able to see, the lame to walk, lepers made whole, and the dead raised – of good news for the poor – justice for the weak and hope for the oppressed. Ancient promises fulfilled at last.

I remain a captive of course – I'd expected that – but I am free nonetheless, for the one I had longed to see had come at last, bringing liberty to all.

I had lived to see the dawn of his kingdom.

Now, if necessary, I was ready to die for it too.

Prayers:

Loving God, for the countless ways you have transformed people's lives, restoring and renewing – we praise you.

For giving strength to the weak, hope to the oppressed, freedom to those held captive, and healing to the sick – we worship you.

For bringing joy to the sorrowful, peace to the troubled, and light to those in darkness – we thank you.

And, above all, for conquering evil with good – hatred with love – and death with life, we honour and acclaim you.

Humbly and gratefully we offer our lives to your service and for the work of your kingdom. Amen.

Creator God, maker of all that is, we come before you, knowing of the world's distress.

We ask you to bind up the wounds of your Church and to heal our fractured lives.

Your world is in danger, Lord. Through foolishness and ignorance we have harmed it – help us to put right what we have spoiled.

Give us courage, Lord, to journey out in faith – to put ourselves at risk for the sake of your kingdom.

Wherever there are barriers to faith, love, or joy help us to remove them.

We pray for people who live in barren places – for those who scrape a living from bare earth – those whose homes are destroyed by floods. Help and support all those who work for aid agencies. Give wisdom and

compassion to those who govern us. Give us generous hearts, Lord, and remove from us the fear of want that makes us unwilling to share what we have.

For we are in need, Lord God, and we can do nothing without you. Amen.

Illustration of theme – from Sermon Illustrations by David Adam:

When Bede writes about St Aidan he says: “The highest recommendation of his teaching to all was that he and his followers lived as they taught. He never sought or cared for any worldly possession and loved to give away to the poor who chanced to meet him whatever he received from kings or wealthy folk. Whether in town or country, he always travelled on foot unless compelled by necessity to ride; and whoever the people he met on his walks, whether high or low, he stopped and spoke to them. If they were heathen, he urged them to be baptised, and if they were Christians, he strengthened their faith and inspired them by word and deed to give a good life and to be generous to others.”

It was the example of a life lived for God that spoke out louder than the words he spoke and backed up what he preached.

The words to ‘O for a thousand tongues’ written by Charles Wesley [1707-1788] Singing the Faith 364

1 O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise,
the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace.

2 My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad, the honours of your name.

3 Jesus – the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease;
‘tis music in the sinner’s ears, ‘tis life, and health, and peace.

4 He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me.

5 He speaks, and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive;
the mournful, broken hearts rejoice; the humble poor believe.

6 See all your sins on Jesus laid: the Lamb of God was slain:
his soul was once an offering made that all may heaven gain.

7 In Christ, our Head, you then shall know, shall feel, your sins forgiven,
anticipate your heaven below, and own that love is heaven.

Closing Prayer:

Lord, as we go out into the world, may we be signs of your coming kingdom.

As we struggle through the dark, may we know that you are there with us.

And, as we walk the way of faith, may we know that your faithfulness is deeper than our doubts. Amen.

And may the blessing of God, father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with us and all whom we love and all for whom we pray in this Advent Season and on through all eternity. Amen