

Dear friends,

Here we are in December! I know it is a sign of growing old, but I really do think this year has just flown by! This week we explore what it means to point to Jesus – to divert our gaze from concern for ourselves to see a bigger picture – it's not about us but about Jesus. Here John the Baptist fulfils the role of Isaiah's prophetic voice preparing for the Lord's coming. The preparation is repentance and learning to bear 'good fruit' by depending only on God. When the Lord, the Messiah, comes he will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.        As ever, you are with me in thought and prayer. *Margaret*

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**Call to worship:**

God is here – present always and everywhere.

Let us make God the focus of our thoughts and worship.

Blessed be God's glorious name – may his glory fill the earth – and may the earth be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Amen.

Lord Jesus, you are the head of your body, the Church.

Sometimes we can make it seem it is all about us – who we are, what we believe and do – but in truth it's always about you, Jesus.

We come to give you honour and praise – to bring ourselves into line with your example.

We are here to worship you. Amen.

This week we would light the second Advent candle – and we light this candle to affirm our faith in Christ. May his light shine brightly in our sin-darkened world, and bring hope, healing and joy this Advent and always. Amen.

**The words to 'Wild and lone, the prophet's voice' 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 stark 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.

**Prayer including Lord's Prayer:**

God of steadfastness and encouragement, how much you care for us – watching and waiting and forbearing and choosing just the right moment to come into our world and into our lives.  
You come with wisdom and understanding, with justice for the poor, bringing peace between predator and prey.

You come like sweet rain releasing the scent of spring.  
You come as the baby in the manger.  
May you find before you a path that is straight and may you find us steadfast.  
May the earth be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. Amen.

We will not hide from you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will come just as we are – but we see that what we are is not all that you made us to be, and we ask you to help us to be honest about our weaknesses - our lack of love - our self-absorption - our deafness to your call - our blindness to others' claim on our attention and action - the grudges we bear.  
Forgive the faults we are aware of, and those we hide even from ourselves.  
Each day let us bring more of ourselves into the searching light of your beauty so that we may be changed, and shine, to reflect back your own glory to you. Amen.

Loving God, you promise us healing when we turn away from the things that harm us; you promise us a welcome when we leave behind the things that separate us from you; you promise us forgiveness when we find the courage to name our sins; for you are full of love and long to see us whole, living life to the full, generously and compassionately. 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 – taken from The Living Bible – copyright 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois 60187**

While they were living in Nazareth, John the Baptist began preaching out in the Judean wilderness. His constant theme was: 'Turn from your sins.....turn to God.....for the Kingdom of heaven is coming soon.' Isaiah the prophet had told about John's ministry centuries before! He had written: 'I hear a shout from the wilderness, 'Prepare a road for the Lord – straighten out the path where he will walk.'

John's clothing was woven from camel's hair and he wore a leather belt; his food was locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem and from all over the Jordan Valley, and, in fact, from every section of Judea went out to the wilderness to hear him preach, and when they had confessed their sins, he baptised them in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptised, he denounced them. 'You sons of snakes!' he warned. 'Who said that you could escape the coming wrath of God? Before being baptised, prove that you have turned from sin by doing worthy deeds. Don't try to get by as you are, thinking, 'we are safe for we are jews – descendants of Abraham.' That proves nothings. God can change these stones here into Jews!

And even now the axe of God's judgement is poised to chop down every unproductive tree. They will be chopped and burned.

With water I baptise those who repent of their sins; but someone else is coming, far greater than I am, so great that that I am not worthy even to carry his shoes! He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He will separate the chaff from the grain, burning the chaff with never-ending fire, and storing away the grain.'

**Comment:** In Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist represents the turning of the ages. John appears as the belonging to the old but he points to the new. His preaching is in keeping with that of the old prophets but he indicates the coming fulfilment of promises. He is one with Old Testament prophecy but he is the voice, not the highway. He comes dressed like Elijah. There was a belief that Elijah would return before God's placing the ideal king upon the throne. It is as if in John's ministry all Israel's hopes are coming to fulfilment and completion.

John calls for repentance because the kingdom of heaven is near: God is near. He implies that the everyday world is changing as he speaks. He insists that we cannot rely on our status of yesterday. We cannot presume on God in old ways. Repent, he preaches – show the fruit of repentance. By your good works you will show your awareness of the coming kingdom, the reign of God.

And above all, John points to Jesus. John's baptism is merely preparatory. There comes another who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire, the life and the judgement of God. That life of God comes as a gift, not an achievement or a reward – a gift. Something new is happening, says John, and he points decisively to the one in history who will establish the justice of God's kingdom. He is urgent in insisting that this is happening here and now!

**Meditation of a listener to John the Baptist – taken from 'a Most Amazing man – year A' written by Nick Fawcett. Copyright 2010 Nick Fawcett.**

'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 lifestyle and diet of locusts and honey he came across as eccentric rather than inspired – a tub-thumping fanatic rather than 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 had 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 any we'd 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 life to another – for though he spoke of sin and 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.

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

Remind us 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.

**Prayer:**

We give thanks, this Advent season, that you move among us, Lord, inspiring us to greater depths so that we are eager to say again: 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

We look forward to Christmas, the giving and the sharing, the trimmings and the trifles, but most of we look forward to welcoming you, Lord Jesus, the one who shows us a better way to live.

We give thanks for the witnesses to you who have gone before us and we are grateful to stand in that lineage and to pass on faith to those who will come after us.

With praise and thanksgiving in our hearts we journey this season of Advent, in eager expectation of your coming among us. Come, Lord Jesus, show us the way. Amen.

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Earlier this month I met someone who knows little of church but who knows that they want God in their life. This person was so worried that they didn't look right, wear the right things, speak the right way. I wonder just how many people there are out there who are struggling in the same way. It is so important to get the message to each of them that God doesn't really care what you look like, how you dress and speak – that all that is important is what is in your heart and in the way that you live, trying your best to follow Jesus' way. Unfortunately, there are many people who feel that they are judged by other churchgoers – and it is vital that we ensure that there is no judgement [that is ultimately up to God in the final instance] but that we show a welcome and a warmth wherever we can.

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**The words to 'Hark the glad sound!' written by Philip Doddridge [1702-1751]      StF 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 prisoner's 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 heart 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.

**Close:** Lord, lead us 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 Christ.  
Amen.

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