

Dear friends,

As we continue through Advent we look at how we navigate our doubts. John the Baptist was imprisoned and began to question whether or not he had got it wrong and so sent some of his disciples to see Jesus and ask whether he really was the Messiah. Jesus answers by inviting John to look at his words and deeds which fulfil Isaiah's prophecies – and he affirms John as the messenger. Foretold by Malachi, sent to prepare the way. When it seems to us that everything we have strived for is going wrong, it is natural that we, too, doubt – that we wonder whether we are following the right path. But when we turn to Jesus we see, as John would have seen, his words and actions and that they fulfil all the prophets foretold. So let us be strong and have courage and belief as we go forward. Every blessing, Margaret.

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**Call to worship:**

Do your hands ache? Do you have wobbly knees? Is your heart filled with fear?

Rejoice and be thankful for the Lord is coming to open blind eyes, to make the deaf hear, and to make the lame leap like athletes.

So let joy and gladness abound and be done with sorrow and sighing.

Lord, you are the source of all hope and healing. As winter approaches fast may you warm our cold hearts and strengthen our weak spirits. Lead us way from the dark places where our doubts take us, and take us instead along your holy, hope-filled way. Amen.

Lord, we celebrate your presence here with each one of 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 'All hail the power of Jesu's name' written by Edward Perronet [1726-1792] and adapted by John Rippon [1751-1836]                      Singing the Faith 342**

1 All hail the power of Jesu's name! let angels prostrate fall;  
bring forth the royal diadem. And crown him Lord of all.

2 You seed of Israel's chosen race, you ransomed of the fall,  
hail him who saves you by his grace, and crown him Lord of all.

3 Hail him, the heir of David's line whom David lord did call,  
the God incarnate, Man divine, and crown him Lord of all.

4 Let every kindred, every tribe on this terrestrial ball,  
to him all majesty ascribe, and crown him Lord of all.

5 O that with yonder sacred throng we at his feet may fall,  
join in the everlasting song, and crown him Lord of all!

**Prayer including the Lord's 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 might help others in Jesus' name. Amen.

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

We know that sometimes to doubt is to grow – so, forgive us when we allow our doubts to diminish us.

Sometimes looking back helps us to advance – forgive us when we allow our memories to cripple us.

Sometimes recognising our tiredness can lead to real rest – 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, that we may negotiate all obstacles to our faith and be empowered afresh. In Jesu's name we pray. Amen.

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

God of Advent, thank you for John the Baptist – the greatest and the least, for his certainty and his doubts – for his honesty and his humility – for his passion and his pondering – for his single-mindedness and his reflectiveness – for his questions and for your answers, all of which help us to day 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 taken from The Living Bible – copyright 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois 60187**

John the Baptist, who was now in prison, heard about all the miracles the Messiah was doing, so he sent his disciples to ask Jesus: 'Are you really the one we are waiting for, or shall we keep on looking?' Jesus told them: "Go back to John and tell him about the miracles you've seen me do - the blind people I've healed, and the lame no walking without help, and the cured lepers, and the deaf who hear, and the dead raised to life; and tell him about me preaching the Good News to the poor. Then give him this message, 'Blessed are those who don't doubt me.'"

When John's disciples had gone, Jesus began talking about him to the crowds. "When you went out into the barren wilderness to see John, what did you expect him to be like? Grass blowing in the wind? Or were you expecting to see a man dressed as a prince in a palace? Or a prophet of God? Yes, and he is more than just a prophet. For John is the man mentioned in the Scriptures – a messenger to precede me, to announce my coming, and prepare people to receive me.

Truly. Of all men ever born, none shines more brightly than John the Baptist. And yet, even the lesser lights in the Kingdom of heaven will be greater than he is!"

**Comment:** John the Baptist's huge success earned him powerful enemies. He was arrested by Herod Antipas for telling crowds the truth – the king was in an incestuous marriage. In prison, this once powerful man loses his confidence and sends to ask his cousin if he has been on the right track or not:

‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?’ maybe he thinks Jesus is not doing enough. Jesus reassures John by telling his messengers to report what they hear and see. It is just like Isaiah’s vision of the joyful return – people are healed – but it goes even further here as the dead are raised, the poor given good news, and God seems to bless those who do not get offended by this. It is a joyful, confident message.

Jesus goes on to talk to the crowd about John. They went out into the desert to see a prophet, not a reed – and to hear God’s message. Indeed, John was the prophet who was clearing the way for the Messiah – he was the returned Elijah, the greatest human being. However, the ‘more’ Jesus brings means that even the lowliest person who belongs to the kingdom of God is greater than John.

**Meditation of John the Baptist – taken from ‘A Most Amazing Man – year A’ by Nick Fawcett.  
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‘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, I’d 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’d baptised wasn’t 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 had begun 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 impressions 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 – 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’m free nonetheless, for the one I’d longed to see had come at last, bringing liberty to all.

I’d lived to see the dawn of his kingdom.

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

**Prayer:**

Loving God, for the countless ways you’ve 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.

*And a prayer by David Clowes taken from ‘500 Prayers for All Occasions’ published by David C. Cook, Kingsway Communications LTD. Copyright 2003 David Clowes.(a prayer for all ages)*

Heavenly Father, we praise you for all you have shown us in Jesus. Now we know that you are not far away. We thank you that though we cannot see you, you have promised that no matter who or what we are, no matter what we have done or failed to do, you will be very near to each & every one of us.

As we prepare for Christmas, help us to remember the coming of Jesus. We praise you for the joy of his living presence in our lives.

Father, we praise you that he came into this world just as we did, as a helpless baby.

We thank you that his coming has left us in no doubt about your love and mercy and we praise you that he has opened the way to real life now and for all eternity.

We praise you for the story of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the angels, the wise men and the star. We praise you for the carols we sing and the joy we share in the celebrating the arrival of Jesus. We are all the more thankful that it is not just a story but a message of the birth of the saviour of the world. Forgive us, Father, if we spend so much time preparing to enjoy ourselves that we forget those who will have no joy this Christmas. Forgive us that, as we decorate our homes, we forget those who have no home.

Forgive us if, as we welcome the baby in the manger, we forget he was the man on the cross.

We make our prayer in the name of Jesus, who came and who still comes. Amen.

**The words to 'Beneath the paper wrappings' written by Clare Stainsby [b. 1959]**

**StF 192**

1 Beneath the paper wrappings, there's an open stable door,  
beneath the fir tree trappings, there's a welcome and there's more.

Beyond the tinsel fairy is a presence that's divine,  
there's a child to change the future, turning water into wine.

*Refrain: Look inside, look above, look beyond and see the love, look inside and you will see.*

*Look inside, look below, look beyond & you will know the one who came to give his life for you and me.*

2 The miracle of childbirth now reveals God's only Son,  
a miracle beginning that continues on and on.

The stable holds the echo of the tomb that's yet to be,  
on the manger lies the shadow of the cross he's yet to see.      *Refrain.....*

**Close:**

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

When 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 your faithfulness is deeper than our doubts. Amen.

Say to those of fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear.'

God's highway is before us: walk in his Holy Way. Amen

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