

Salford Methodist Circuit



Advent 3 - John The Baptist - 13th December 2020

Anita Shepherd

Good Morning Everyone and welcome to our online service for the third week in Advent where we'll be looking at foretelling of the coming of Jesus.

Advent Liturgy

*Light a candle in a darkened place,
In its flame see hope on every face,
Christ our Saviour will be born,
Heralding a brand new dawn, so let it burn.*

As we light this candle we remember the prophets, who risked their lives to spread a message of hope: the Saviour will come! This flame reminds us of the joy of his coming.

Advent God, we thank you for all who have risked everything to share the message of your coming in Jesus. Light of our world, shine upon us this day and every day. Amen.

*Stepping through each page of history,
Prophets contemplate this mystery,
Celebrate the coming King,
Words of joy and hope they bring, so let it burn.*

Call To Worship

God has called us
To bring Good News to the poor
To live with integrity

God has called us
To heal the broken-hearted
To bring justice to the hungry

God has called us
To hold on to what is good
To avoid every form of evil.

The Spirit of God is in us
We are people of God

Our focus today is on John the Baptist who foretold the coming of Jesus and our first hymn reflects that the coming of Jesus had been long known by the prophets of the Old Testament.

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Hymn: Long Ago, Prophets Knew

*Long ago, prophets knew
Christ would come,
born a Jew,
come to make all things new:
bear his People's burden,
freely love and pardon:*

*Ring, bells, ring, ring. ring!
Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing!
When he comes,
when he comes,
who will make him welcome?*

*God in time, God in man,
this is God's timeless plan:
he will come, as a man,
born himself of woman,
God divinely human:
Ring, bells, ring, ring. ring...*

*Mary, hail! Though afraid,
She believed, she obeyed.
in her womb, God is laid;
till the time expected,
nurtured and protected:
Ring, bells, ring, ring. ring...*

*Journey ends! Where afar
Bethlehem shines like a star,
stable door stands ajar.
Unborn Son of Mary,
Saviour, do not tarry!
Ring, bells, ring, ring. ring...*

Prayers

Let us come before our Lord in prayer:

Jesus, son of God and son of Mary,
you came among us, baptizing with fire and light,
calling us to the true vocation of humanity:
to reflect the glory of our creator.
We thank you for your work among us,
how you gathered, how you spoke,



how you ate and drank, how you left us your Spirit
to lift us up and hold us in the light.
We praise you, because you came to us,
and keep coming to us,
because of your great love.

Amen.

God, you hovered over chaos,
like a brooding hen, bringing order over chaos.
But we – through thought, deed, misdeed and omission –
have quenched the spirit of life that you give us.
We have turned our faces away.
And now, we turn our faces back to you,
light of all light,
God of all gods,
and ask for the light of your life to lift us again.
Bring us out of chaos into the order of creation,
for your name's sake,
and for the sake of your goodness among us.

Amen.

Bible Reading: Isaiah 61 : 1-4 & 8-11

*The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me
because God anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken.
Announce freedom to captives,
pardon all prisoners.
God sent me to announce the year of his grace –
a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies –
and to comfort all who mourn,
To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.
Rename the "Oaks of Righteousness"
planted by God to display his glory.
They'll rebuild the old ruins,
raise a new city out of the wreckage.
They'll start over on the ruined cities,
take the rubble left behind and make it new.*

*"Because I, God, love fair dealing
and hate thievery and crime,
I'll pay your wages on time and in full,
and establish my eternal covenant with you.*

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*Your descendants will become well known all over.
Your children in foreign countries
Will be recognised at once
as the people I have blessed."*

*I will sing for joy in God,
explode in praise from deep in my soul!
He dressed me up in a suit of salvation,
he outfitted me in a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom who puts on a tuxedo
and a bride a jewelled tiara.
For as the earth bursts with spring wildflowers,
and as a garden cascades with blossoms,
So the Master, God, brings righteousness into full bloom
and puts praise on display before the nations.*

Hymn: God's Spirit is in my heart.

*God's spirit is in my heart;
he has called me and set me apart.
This is what I have to do,
what I have to do:*

*He sent me to give the good news to the poor,
tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,
tell blind people that they can see,
and set the down-trodden free,
and go tell everyone
the news that the kingdom of God has come;
and go tell everyone
the news that God's kingdom has come.*

*Just as the Father sent me,
so I'm sending you out to be
my witness throughout the world –
the whole of the world:
He sent me to give the good news to the poor...*

*Don't carry a load in your pack;
you don't need two shirts on your back;
God's workers can earn their own keep –
can earn their own keep:
He sent me to give the good news to the poor...*

*Don't worry what you have to say;
don't worry, because on that day*

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*God's spirit will speak in your heart –
Will speak in your heart:
He sent me to give the good news to the poor...*

Bible Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

*Always celebrate,
never stop praying;
in everything be thankful
(this is God's will for you in the Messiah Jesus);
don't quench the spirit,
don't look down on prophecies,
test everything,
if something is good, hold it fast;
if something looks evil, keep well away.
Now may the God of peace himself make you completely holy. May your
complete spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our
Lord Jesus the Messiah. The one who calls you is faithful; he will do it.*

Bible Reading: John 1 : 6-8 & 19-28

*There was a man called John, who was sent from God. He came as
evidence, to give evidence about the light, so that everyone might believe
through him. He was not himself the light, but he came to give evidence
about the light.
This is the evidence John gave, when the Judaeans sent priests and
Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"
He was quite open about it; he didn't try to deny it. He said, quite openly,
"I am not the Messiah."
"What then?" they asked. "Are you Elijah?"
"No, I'm not," he replied.
"Are you the Prophet?"
"No."
"Well, then, who are you?" they said. "We've got to take some kind of
answer back to the people who sent us. Who do you claim to be?"
"I'm 'a voice calling in the desert,'" he said, "'Straighten out the road for
the master!'" – just as the prophet Isaiah said.
The people who had been sent were from the Pharisees.
They continued to question him.
"So why are you baptizing," they asked, "if you aren't the Messiah, or
Elijah, or the Prophet?"
"I'm baptizing with water," John replied. "But there is someone standing
among you that you don't know, someone who is to come after me. I'm
not good enough to undo his sandal-strap."
This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

Meditation of John the Baptist



They mistook me for the real thing, some people...
can you believe that?
A few of them –
no, more than a few –
actually thought I was the one they'd been waiting for:
the promised Messiah,
sent by God to redeem his people.
Well, I soon put them right on that,
for it was the last thing I wanted people to think,
the opposite of everything I'd been trying to say.
I was a servant, that's all,
my task was to prepare the way,
to make the path of the Lord that little bit easier
when he finally came,
and I was more than happy with that role,
counting myself privileged,
truly honoured,
to play some part in bringing his kingdom closer.
Did I succeed?
That's not for me to say,
but I did my best,
striving to point, in word and deed,
away from myself and towards him,
and if I helped even one person respond,
then it was worth it,
my job well done.
It's down now to you
the torch yours to carry in turn,
for my journey, in this life at least, is nearly done.
He needs *you* now to speak for him,
your life to express his love and mercy,
and though you can't do that alone,
by his Spirit and in his strength
your witness *can* help others see him for themselves.
There's a limit, of course,
for his light shines brighter than we can even begin to,
but if you can reflect just a chink,
the merest glimmer of his radiance,
then, believe me,
you'll make a difference to someone, somewhere,
greater than you'd ever dare imagine.

Second Meditation of John the Baptist

Who was I, they wanted to know,
and I knew full well what they were thinking:
that I was the Messiah,
the promised one of God,



come at last to set them free.
Why wouldn't they listen!
I'd spent weeks, months, out there in the wilderness,
pointing to the Christ,
preparing the way,
and still they'd made up their minds it was *me*.
Clearly I had to spell things out –
so that's what I did.
"Let's get this straight." I said, "once and for all:
it's not me!"
But still they kept on,
their minds, it seems, already made up.
I could have knocked their heads together,
such was my frustration,
but the misunderstanding wasn't entirely their fault,
much though I wish it were.
Somehow, despite my best intentions,
I'd put across too much of *me*
and too little of *him*.
Perhaps it was the camel-hair clothes,
the diet of locusts and honey,
the desert life –
who can say? –
but, whatever it was, I'd obviously sent out mixed messages,
failing to point as unmistakably to the Christ as I imagined.
What about you?
Do you make the same mistake?
You may not think so,
but, take it from me, it's easily done:
what you say and do
and what you *think* you say and do
are not necessarily the same.
So ask yourself this, prayerfully and honestly:
who does your life speak of –
you or Jesus?
The answer may surprise you,
as it did me.

Hymn: On Jordan's bank

*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!*

*Then cleansed be every life from sin;
make straight the way for God within,*

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*and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.*

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

*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.*

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

Here we are again in the season of Advent, which, for me at least, seems to have come round very quickly, it hardly seems five minutes since last Advent and I just don't know where the last year has gone to. And this is in spite of us still living with the global pandemic of Covid-19 which has meant us spending most of 2020 very differently from how we would have expected or planned.

Whilst preparations for Christmas are still going ahead and we've been seeing or hearing adverts on the papers, in the radio, on the TV telling us to pre-order our festive food and giving us gift ideas for our family and friends Advent and Christmas this year will be very different from what we're used to. Even as far back as October Government ministers were advising us to prepare for a "digital Christmas" where we see family & friends via Skype or on Zoom rather than being able to gather together in person.

Normally by this time of year I have had a good number of Christmas songs and carols going round my head because I and my fellow members of Salford Royal Choir have been busy rehearsing our Christmas programme in readiness for December, but not this year since we're not allowed to sing together in person due to the Coronavirus. Instead Carol Concerts and Carol Services are being planned to go online.

For us as Christians, Advent is also a time of preparation, waiting, hope and looking forward and while we too shop for presents and festive foods, our focus is on the coming of God's gift to all mankind, his Son, Jesus Christ. Perhaps this year more than ever we all need the hope of a brighter future – that brighter future that is ushered in by the coming of the Christ Child which we look forward to and celebrate at this time of year.

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Our Old Testament reading concentrates on the looking forward aspect of Advent in the long term if you like, because Isaiah isn't just looking towards the birth of Jesus but is foretelling what Jesus will do in his adult ministry, which as we know, began when Jesus was about 30. Isaiah presents us with a checklist of what God's promised Messiah will do for his people when he comes and these qualities and actions will enable him to be recognised as God's Messiah. We're more familiar with this passage where it comes in Chapter 4 of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus reads it in the synagogue in Nazareth and then tells those listening that this Scripture had been fulfilled.

Whether you'd been listening to that passage in the time of Isaiah or at the time when Jesus read it in Nazareth, we can only imagine those words gave the Israelites hope for a future; a future that was going to be better than the times they were living in. The same is true for us today, Isaiah's words bring us a glimmer of hope for the future, a better world, where the hungry are fed, the sick are looked after and we can help this come about by caring and sharing the resources we have both as individuals and as a Church communities. We may think that the poor and needy are in the developing world, and so they are and we can assist them by fundraising and donating to organisations such as All We Can, Christian Aid and numerous other charities, both known and not so well known that work with partner organisations to bring about hope of a better future to those who need it.

But there are also people closer to home that need support in some way or other. Over recent years there has been a growing rise in the numbers of people who need to use foodbanks to feed their families. This number will have increased during and as a result of the pandemic. In addition to this there's the problem of providing those children who are entitled to free school meals food when the schools have been shut and during school holidays. I'm sure we've all been aware of the work done on their behalf by the footballer Marcus Rashford. I know that the members of the Circuit churches contribute to local foodbanks and also collect items of clothing and other goods for local charities who help those in need in our local areas.

By doing what we can, however small it is, we're helping to bring a glimmer of hope to those in need not just at this time of year but throughout the twelve months.

Traditionally we think of Advent as the time when we prepare for the coming of Jesus as a baby – the last window of a traditional advent calendar usually reveals a manger scene and yes Advent does help us to prepare for Christ's birth but it also helps us to prepare for his second coming, as God's promised Messiah whom Isaiah spoke of who would do the wonderful things he speaks of in the passage we heard earlier. But before the promised Messiah comes we need to prepare ourselves and our world and this is where John the Baptist comes in.

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John's role, as Nick Fawcett points out in both of the meditations we heard earlier, was that of a servant, the person who pointed the way to the coming Messiah. His job, if you like was to prepare the way for the "One who is to come", to point towards Christ, rather like the fingerposts we see in town centres all over the country pointing to the Railway Station, the Bus Station, the Museum or the Cathedral, - I'm sure we've all seen them at one time or another and if you're in a strange town, been grateful for them being there. So it is with John the Baptist, he's there to show the Israelites, and us, the right way to go to find God. Preparing the way for the coming Messiah who will bring salvation to all, not just God's chosen people.

John was, as it says in verse 8 "only a witness to the light" and in the later passage we heard from John's Gospel we have a clear case of mistaken identity as the priests and the Levites appear to think he is either the Messiah or Elijah, no matter what John himself tries to tell them.

This also comes across very clearly in the meditations that Frank read to us - I could almost see John getting red in the face and stamping his foot as he says "it's not me!" - trying to get this piece of information across to those who were questioning him. He is just the messenger - a role he feels both privileged and happy to have.

As I said earlier we too need to prepare for the coming of Christ into our lives and our world, to repent, as John calls us to, of our wrongs, clear out our hearts and lives of all the unpleasantness that may be there, asking for God's help and forgiveness as we do so. By doing so we can make room in our hearts for the coming Christ child, inviting him in to dwell with us.

Although the meditations I'd chosen for this morning are very similar they also pose some important points we need to think about, act on and be challenged by if we're going to follow John's example and point others to Christ.

The first is concerning mistaken identity - because people thought John was the Messiah or Elijah, he wondered whether he'd put across too much of himself and not put enough emphasis on the "One who is to come". This is something we too need to be careful of, when we're telling others, our friends, family, and colleagues about the coming of Jesus and inviting them too look to his coming and prepare to welcome him into their lives. We need to make sure that we are pointing very definitely towards him and taking a backwards step ourselves, keeping in the background and focussing the attention wholly towards Jesus, the true light of the world.

The second is the challenge to each and every one of us that comes over so clearly in the first meditation we heard - that we need to carry on what John the Baptist started all those years ago and thousands of others have done down the millennia since. It's our turn to carry the torch for Jesus as it were, to be a light in the darkness for others showing them the way to the true light of the world

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using our lives to express his love and mercy to others but all the while continuing to make sure the focus is on him not ourselves. As far as Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham and New Testament scholar, is concerned it's you and I who are the modern day "voices in the wilderness pointing others to Christ" Can we rise to this challenge using both words and deed?

In his letter to the Thessalonians, St Paul's purpose was to strengthen their faith and give the new believers assurance that Christ would return even though they didn't know when. The verses we heard urged them to live in peace with one another, to encourage one another, be kind to each other, continuing to pray and give thanks to God for everything he's done for them.

These things still hold true today and it's through having a prayerful attitude, even when it's not always practical to pray that we can receive the strength we need from God to carry out his work in our world.

For many different reasons the world today is just as dark as it was for the Jews in both the times of Isaiah and John the Baptist, and badly needs the light of Christ to shine brightly bringing light, healing and hope for a better future. As we wait for the coming of the Christ-child let us do what we can to point towards his light, the true bright light of the world and to show others the way to God through Jesus, just as the candles on the advent ring offer a glimmer of that light to us here today. To paraphrase the spiritual, we need to go and "let our little lights shine" in the world around us – not just during Advent but at all times – making that little bit of difference to those we meet.

Prayer of Intercession

We pray today for all who are downtrodden, all who are oppressed, all who know the heavy hand of marginalization on them. God, we turn to you, remembering the words of Mary, praying that you will lift up the lowly, you will raise the voice of justice, and you will scatter oppression. May all who are oppressed be set free.

We ask this, in joy and gratitude.

In your name we pray.

We pray that we might find rhythms of life that sustain us here. Rhythms for cultivating and renewing the earth; human community; justice; and creativity.

We ask this, in joy and gratitude.

In your name we pray.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,

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*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,
and the power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.*

Hymn: Christ is the world's light

*Christ is the world's light, Christ and none other;
born in our darkness, he became our brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
glory to God on high.*

*Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
no one can serve him and despise another;
who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.*

*Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother –
he, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
glory to God on high.*

*Give God the glory, God and none other;
give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;
give God the glory, God with us, my brother:
glory to God on high.*

As we go our separate ways for the week, a prayer of blessing:

Gather in, Lord, we have been nurtured by your Spirit of Life.
Now, sent out, we go in the assurance that your Word lasts for ever,
and your promises are true.
Let the lowly be lifted up.
Let the hungry be fed.
Let the mighty listen:
God, who is merciful, hears all.
Come, let us go in the blessed joy of God's kindness.
Amen, Amen, Amen.

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