



THE METHODIST CIRCUIT OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Second Sunday of Advent: 5th December 2021

This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use while you are unable to attend worship in a church building. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Call to worship

Listen to the voice crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Make His paths straight.

Get ready to welcome the coming King.

Lighting of the Second Advent Candle:

We light the second candle here, for the second coming of Christ.

He will return, ending pain and fear, restoring the world to life.

Jesus, we trust in your return;

O come, O come Emmanuel.

Help us live with patient hope,

O come, O come Emmanuel.

Hymn: Come, thou long- expected Jesus (Singing the Faith 169)

Come, thou long-expected
Jesus,
born to set thy people free,
from our fears and sins release
us,
let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and
consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art,

dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a king,
born to reign in us for ever,
now thy gracious kingdom
bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all-sufficient merit
raise us to thy glorious throne.
Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Let us pray together

Lord Jesus, Light of the World, the prophets said you would bring peace and save your people from trouble. Give peace in our hearts in this advent season. We ask that as we wait for you to come again, you would remain present with us. Help us today, and every day to worship you, to hear your word, and to do your will by sharing your peace with each other. We ask it in the name that is above all names, the name of Jesus Christ who is the reason for the season.

Prayer of confession

We have sinned against you;
we have done evil in your sight.

We are sorry and repent.

Have mercy on us according to your love.

Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us from our sin.

Renew a right spirit within us

and restore us to the joy of your salvation,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

cf Psalm 51

Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; (Malachi 3:1-4) Luke 3: 1- 6

Reflection

In our lectionary for the second Sunday of Advent, we are offered an unusual reading from the book of Baruch. Baruch is a book of the apocrypha – books which appeared in the Greek translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Bible. In some English translations it appears as a separate section between the Old and New Testaments, but in the Latin Vulgate Bible the books were interspersed amongst the other books. The man Baruch was reputedly scribe for the prophet Jeremiah, (Jer 36:4-32) that is, he wrote down the things that the prophet Jeremiah dictated to him. However it wasn't Baruch himself who wrote the book, rather it was most likely named in his honour in the fashion of the time.

Baruch offers hope to an exiled people and he encourages them to prepare themselves, because God has not forgotten them and will soon lead them to a place of beauty, joy and safety. In the prophecy, Jerusalem sees her scattered children returning home from every direction, bringing a time of joy and celebration.

The prophet Malachi also encourages preparation for the coming messenger of God. He says this messenger will be like 'refiners fire' and 'fuller's soap' - cleansing and purifying, making the people Holy again. So they had better be ready for his coming, preparing themselves body and soul.

Then in Luke's gospel we hear again the message of 'being prepared' as John the Baptist comes to prepare the way for Jesus. The gospels were written to tell the story of a momentous act of God; of God himself coming amongst his people as an expression of his love for them; experiencing what it means to be human; sharing in the pain and suffering of humanity; redeeming his broken world and broken people and showing them the path to fulness of life in Him.

Luke uses a quotation from Isaiah (Lk 3:4b-6):

*'The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*

This seems to be a message not too dissimilar from that of Baruch!

Luke uses this quotation to remind the people of the ways in which God had acted decisively throughout history so that his people had learned to trust his promises; and to show that Jesus was the messenger who had been promised. So Luke interprets John the Baptist appearing in the desert as preparing the way for God to act again in history – this time to bring about the salvation of all his people.

We are told that the Word of God came to John in the wilderness. And hearing this word John the Baptist travels around the Jordan valley proclaiming baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and as a sign of this repentance John baptises them with water - a symbolic cleansing in preparation for the one who will come 'like refiner's fire' to purify.

The imagery of the wilderness in this message would have resonated very much with the story of the Exodus that everyone would have known, would have been taught from childhood, it was such an important story for the Jew's and still is. It's their experience of God caring for them and leading them to safety and freedom. It is God providing for their needs on the 40 year journey. It was God giving the law and commandments to Moses on mount Sinai. It was the old covenant made with Moses.

Now the old is washed away in preparation for a new covenant that will come once more from out of the wilderness. The New Covenant in Christ comes from the same origin as the old covenant with Moses. And so the way has been prepared for the coming of Jesus, not just physically and spiritually but theologically as well.

As we enter the Advent season we too must prepare for the coming of Jesus, prepare to greet the coming of the Kingdom of God and prepare ourselves to enter it. We must prepare our church to be ready to receive those who come seeking Christ and his kingdom among us during the season. We must prepare the way for God to be one with us.

Christmas is a time when, more than any other time, people are likely to come seeking the Kingdom. One good thing about all the Christmas lights and decorations and shopping, is that it can prompt people to take notice of the spiritual longing inside themselves. This is why they often go looking for the Kingdom at such a time - maybe not even consciously realising that that is what they are doing. But they go to church for carol services, for crib services looking for something. So we need to be ready to receive them and welcome them.

So how should we prepare? John Betjeman wrote a poem called Advent 1955 which suggests that maybe some of the ways we do prepare are a little strange, here's an extract:

And how, in fact, do we prepare
The great day that waits us there -
For the twenty-fifth day of December,
The birth of Christ? For some it means
An interchange of hunting scenes
On coloured cards, And I remember

Last year I sent out twenty yards,
Laid end to end, of Christmas cards
To people that I scarcely know -
They'd sent a card to me, and so
I had to send one back. Oh dear!
Is this a form of Christmas cheer?
Or is it, which is less surprising,
My pride gone in for advertising?
The only cards that really count
Are that extremely small amount
From real friends who keep in touch
And are not rich but love us much
Some ways indeed are very odd
By which we hail the birth of God

Betjemen in this poem expresses the tension between our preparations for the celebration - the feast, and our preparation to meet Jesus. We have to prepare ourselves physically, spiritually and theologically to be in the right place when he comes. We must be prepared for the coming of the refiner - the one who will make us holy through redemption.

We have to hold on to perspective. We must not allow our preparations for the feast to distract us from the message of the coming of Jesus because then it becomes something that distracts us from God rather than leading us to him. When the giving of presents and cards become ritualistic, from a sense of duty or guilt rather than from genuine love and grace then the message ceases to be one of love and care and becomes one of indifference. So we need to think carefully about what message we are actually sending.

For the people of Jerusalem part of the task of preparation was that of making sure their city was fit for purpose for the people of God. Perhaps we also need to take time to examine our church and community to be sure that it is fit for purpose for the coming of God's people – be ready to be ambassadors for his kingdom, living the life of love, justice, peace mercy, hope and generous hospitality that Jesus taught us. Ready to welcome everyone sharing his love with others and bringing new people to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of the kingdom. We should use it as a time to prepare ourselves for a season of joy and celebration, but we should also take the time to prepare ourselves and make sure that we are fit for the kingdom.

So as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ we must also prepare our church as a community that is ready to draw people into the kingdom, to fulfil our calling as a place where those who come seeking can find the path way to the kingdom of God through the love and care that they experience when they enter through the front door.

Rev Andrew P Biggs

Hymn: Purify my heart (Singing the Faith 508)

Purify my heart,
let me be as gold
and precious silver.
Purify my heart,
let me be as gold,
pure gold.

*Refiner's fire,
my heart's one desire
is to be holy,
set apart for you, Lord.*

*I choose to be holy,
set apart for you my master,
ready to do your will.*

Purify my heart,
cleanse me from within
and make me holy.
Purify my heart,
cleanse me from my sin,
deep within.

Brian Doerksen (b. 1965) .

A time of prayer

We pray...
For those lost in the desert.
May they find the straight path.

For those down trodden.
May they be lifted up.

For those in dry places.
May they find you as the living
water.

For those heart broken.
May they find peace in Jesus.

For those seeking healing.
May they be healed.

For those seeking consolation.
May they be comforted.

For those waiting to be heard.
May they find justice in you.

For those waiting for transformation.

May there be sprouts of change.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer
Our Father

Hymn: Hills of the North Rejoice (Singing the Faith 172)

Hills of the north, rejoice,
Hills of the north, rejoice,
river and mountain-spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland, sing.
Christ comes in righteousness
and love,
he brings salvation from above.

Isles of the southern seas,
sing to the listening earth;
carry on every breeze
hope of a world's new birth:
in Christ shall all be made
anew;
his word is sure, his promise
true.

Lands of the east, arise!
He is your brightest

greet him with joyous eyes,
let praise his path adorn:
your seers have longed to know
their Lord;
to you he comes, the final
Word.

Shores of the utmost west,
lands of the setting sun,
welcome the heavenly guest
in whom the dawn has come:
he brings a never-ending light,
who triumphed o'er our darkest
night.

Shout, as you journey on;
songs be in every mouth!
Lo, from the north they come,
from east and west and south:
in Jesus all shall find their rest,
in him the universe be blest.

*Charles Ernest Oakley (1832-1865)
and Editors of English Praise,*

A prayer of blessing

And now may the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us and all we love now, tomorrow and the days to come. Amen.

Readings:

Baruch 5:1-9

5

Take off the garment of your
sorrow and affliction, O
Jerusalem,
and put on for ever the
beauty of the glory from God.

2

Put on the robe of the
righteousness that comes from
God;

put on your head the diadem
of the glory of the Everlasting;

3

for God will show your
splendour everywhere under
heaven.

4

For God will give you evermore
the name,

‘Righteous Peace, Godly
Glory’.

5

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon
the height;

look towards the east,
and see your children gathered
from west and east

at the word of the Holy One,

rejoicing that God has
remembered them.

6

For they went out from you on
foot,

led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to
you,

carried in glory, as on a royal
throne.

7

For God has ordered that every
high mountain and the
everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to
make level ground,

so that Israel may walk safely
in the glory of God.

8

The woods and every fragrant
tree

have shaded Israel at God’s
command.

9

For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,

with the mercy and
righteousness that come from
him.

Luke 3: 1- 6

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler[a] of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler[b] of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler[c] of Abilene, 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region

around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

5

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

6

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”’

New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

*Advent Candle prayer: Text © Sam and Sara Hargreaves, engageworship
Prayers by Peggy Kabonde
CCLI Licence 176885 (HMC) 178993*