

Worshipping Together : Apart
Sunday 5th December 2021 at 10.30am
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

A Call to Worship God

From a hill top, someone is shouting: *Get ready for God*
From the valley, someone is whispering: *Get ready for God*
From the field, someone is crying: *Get ready for God*
From the road, someone is singing: *Get ready for God*
From the town, someone is murmuring: *Get ready for God*

Advent Candle Lighting

If you have one, light a candle, or the first and second candles in your wreath and pray:

This year, Lord God
let the day arrive when Christmas comes
for everyone alive, everywhere in the world! Amen

God chooses the most unlikely messengers;
a desert wild-man dressed in animal skins
and eating locusts and wild honey
a poor shepherd, shunned by polite society,
keeping silent watch in the fields
or today perhaps a school teacher, a waitress, a plumber,
a labourer - or even a child

Jesus comes, not just to those of us worshipping now – together: apart,
Jesus comes to us in the words of a preacher and in the song of a choir,
in the siren of an ambulance, in a letter opened in a prison cell, in a visit
to a nursing home,
and in the smile, or the cry of a child.

Hymn – STF 176:

Like a candle flame, flickering small in our darkness.
Uncreated light shines through infant eyes
God is with us, alleluia
Come to save us, alleluia
Alleluia!

Stars and angels sing, yet the earth sleeps in shadows
Can this tiny spark set a world on fire?
Chorus

Yet his light shall shine from our lives, Spirit blazing,
as we touch the flame of his holy fire.
Chorus

Graham Kendrick

Approaching God in Prayer and Saying Sorry

Eternal Lord, we can rejoice
because you are our God and our saviour –
yesterday, today and forever

So I give you thanks today!
Thanks for all those who have passed your word on to me
Thanks that I have been open to hearing your irresistible word,
and thanks that all love comes from you.
As I prepare again to remember your coming, in a baby,
totally dependent, and fully human,
I realise how dependent I am on you.

The fabric of the earth you created to sustain us, is wonderfully and
intricately balanced and made.
You made us to live in community with you, and with each other,
we are interdependent and in need of each other, as well as you.
So I lift my heart and mind to you in thanks and praise for all that you
have been down the millennia, and all that you are doing right now.

I pray that everything I do will point to you
and make people want to know you too.
I pray that your glory will shine
like the candles we light even through, my imperfect life.

So, I pray that others will be drawn to your Church
because of our collective example.

That people will want to hear the good news about you,
and in being drawn to us that they will come to know you for themselves
growing to love you too.

I want to be strong and not be afraid of being your messenger.

But I realise that sometimes, I am a poor and weak messenger.

Along with others, I am fearful and limited.

Sometimes I avoid the path you ask me to follow because I'd rather avoid
the people and the conversations I'd rather not have.

I am a prisoner of guilt and grudge.

But you, Lord Jesus, came to set prisoners free.

Search my heart with your grace and mercy

as I remember the wrong things I have done, and the good things I've
failed to do

Keep a Silence....

Open our eyes to ourselves.

Forgive us and help us, in turn, to forgive others.

Strengthen us then to speak about you, with joy in our hearts and a
twinkle of candlelight in our eye.

In Jesus name I pray

Amen

Zechariah's Story: Luke 1: 8 - 20

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as
priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the
priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.'

¹⁹ The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.'

²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'

Hymn – R&S 163: MP 35: S+F 190:

Angels from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story, now proclaim Messiah's birth:

Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Shepherds, in the field abiding, watching o'er your flocks by night:
God with you is now residing, yonder shines the Infant Light:

Chorus

Sages, leave your contemplations, brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great Desire of Nations; ye have seen his natal star:

Chorus

Saints, before the altar bending, watching long in hope and fear,
suddenly the Lord, descending, in his temple shall appear:

Chorus

*James Montgomery (1771-1854)**

Bible Reading: Luke 3: 1 – 6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch 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 country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And all people will see God’s salvation.”’

Bible Reading: Isaiah 40: 1 – 11

‘Listen’ for God’s Word as two angels encounter a reluctant prophet.

Angel 1: Comfort my people, comfort them!
Encourage the people of Jerusalem.
Tell them they have suffered long enough
and their sins are now forgiven.
I have punished them in full for all their sins.

Angel 2: Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord!
Clear the way in the desert for our God!
Fill every valley;
level every mountain.
The hills will become a plain,
and the rough country will be made smooth.
Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed
and all humankind will see it.
The Lord himself has promised this.

Angel 1: Proclaim a message!

Prophet: What message shall I proclaim?

Angel 1: Proclaim that all mankind are like grass;
they last no longer than wild flowers.
Grass withers and flowers fade,
when the Lord sends the wind blowing over them.
People are no more enduring than grass.
Yes, grass withers and flowers fade,
but the word of our God endures forever.

Angel 2: Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain
and proclaim the good news!
Speak out and do not be afraid.
Tell the towns of Judah that their God is coming!
The sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power,
bringing with him the people he has rescued.
He will take care of his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs together and carry them in his
arms; he will gently lead their mothers

Hymn - R&S 142: MP 457: STF 264:

Make way, make way, for Christ the King in splendour arrives.
Fling wide the gates and welcome him into your lives.

*Make way! (Make way!)
Make way! (Make way!)
for the King of kings. (For the King of kings.)
Make way! (Make way!)
Make way! (Make way!)
and let His kingdom in.*

He comes the broken hearts to heal, the prisoners to free;
the deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance, the blind shall see.

Chorus

And those who mourn with heavy hearts, who weep and sigh,
with laughter, joy and royal crown he'll beautify.

Chorus

We call you now to worship him as Lord of all,
to have no gods before him, their thrones must fall!

Chorus

Graham Kendrick.

Reflections

John was always going to be a special child, news that he would be born in near impossible circumstances was brought by a messenger from God, an Angel. So, we're not surprised to hear about him again a bit later on in Luke's account of the events surrounding Jesus' coming among us as a baby and as he approached his work of ministry and mission for God.

John the Baptist seems to have been quite a character - a caricature even. Perhaps more than any other New Testament character we can easily picture him standing there in the desert, rough and ready in his camel hair clothes, probably a bit thin and wild looking on account of his odd diet, preaching. I imagine him shouting his message! He certainly

doesn't seem like someone you'd easily overlook, and he seemed to be getting his message across.

But, no matter what his following was, how compelling he was, his role was to point to Jesus – the one who would follow and be greater than him.

Today, as in Bible times, messengers (people who bear God's good news to the world - like the one called for in Isaiah and like John the Baptist) shout out about the need for us to make the rough places smooth, to level the playing field for humankind and call for us to let God in so that God can change our ways.

Sometimes the messengers are organisations, as well as individuals, who point to Christ. And, in pointing to Christ, they point us to those who Jesus longs to see in right relationships with God, and with every neighbour. They point us to Christ, whose face we see in every person throughout the world today, whose plight makes us want to cry out for the sort of justice and fairness that Jesus exemplified 2,000 years ago.

Christian Aid is one organisation shouting out and pointing us to Christ, in the faces of those for whom everyday life is a struggle, and calling us to respond.

Like the prophets of old, they, among others, have a vision for transformation and they need us to play our part, so that the transformation they, and we, pray for can be achieved.

I'm sure you can think of individuals who have transformed the lives of others, sometimes just the people closest to them, and sometimes many, many lives. People like Ghandi, or Nelson Mandela, have brought about change. We know this has not been without its casualties as they have taken a role in trying to level the playing field, so that a fairer and more just society can be brought about for the majority.

You'll be able to think of people, I'm sure, who are making a difference as they speak out and work for justice for all of God's beloved creation today.

And I'm quite sure you'll be able to think of people who have transformed your life through their work or their message - people whose faith has been infectious.

Maybe there are people who have been bearers of God's good news to you, people who have pointed you to Jesus, because, after all Christians, Christ's followers (me and you) are the ones called to point beyond ourselves - despite and with *our* flaws and foibles - to Jesus whose example teaches us that we are called to grapple with any unjust structures that oppress and exclude people. We are the ones with the responsibility for levelling the playing field, so that God's kingdom can be built on earth as it is in heaven – a place of fulness of life for *everyone*.

Our task, like John the Baptist's, is to point to Christ, pointing out and being active where Christ would be active today, and bringing about the transformations that Jesus demonstrated as he embraced those who were forced to live a life *less* than the life God intended for the people God loved into being - people excluded from their community because of their illness, or disability, or morals, or race, or status, or work.

The Gospel writers tell us the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, describing what that Good News is in practical ways, through lives turned around in unexpected and remarkable ways - fishermen turned into miracle workers; women allowed to learn; people healed and restored to the community; people forgiven; a Tax collector returning his ill-gotten gains - I could go on!

I wonder, what do you think would be Good News in some situations around the world? What in the world makes you want to cry out to God?

Some time ago, on 'Thought for the day', or some such thing, a contributor said "Indifferent people cannot make a difference". How true! The world's blind indifference to the plight of a world straining under the powers of greed, intolerance and selfishness can only be transformed by the *concerned* and *active* difference we each make - even through the simple choices we make every day about what we buy, our food, our clothes, or where we invest our money, where we give our money or our time or our love.

The world is desperate for words and work that can bring about fresh hope - activity that will transform. It doesn't even have to be transformation on a grand scale, every positive action can build up and up until eventually our actions level the playing field, raising up those in the metaphorical valley and lowering those on their metaphorical mountain top. Wherever we see wrong we should consider how, with integrity, we might set it right.

Our understanding of God and God's love for the world should frame our understanding of who we are and what our calling is, and help us frame our understanding the world.

Faced with huge challenges, we're tempted to think that there's nothing we can do, that it's too late or too hard. Just imagine what the prophets of the Bible would have to say to that! They were never shy of telling people to change their ways, repent, turn their lives around and orientate their lives to God's ways for living. Their faith in God was so strong that they inspired people to hope, when they'd forgotten how to. And they pointed people to God, just as we must as God's messengers today. Like the prophets of old, we *too* have a mission of hope for *transformed* communities.

So, I wonder, what source of hope can we bring? What is the voice we as a Church can find in order to bring about the fresh hope and the transformation that's required to bring love and dignity to our communities?

We see signs of hope in the commitment and care we have for one another. But what more we can do to bring faith, hope and love to the lives of others? And can we be a prophetic voice?

What needs changing to level the playing field and prepare the way for the Lord, for kingdom values on earth, such that God's joy when human life flourishes is part of our mission.

What obstacles can we remove from the path, so that people will be able to hear about and meet Jesus?

We have a message to pass on, a message of transformative hope that can point people to God, people whose voice we hear in the cries of those who feel they are in a wilderness, people who really need to know God's great love for them, people on our own doorstep.

True prophets help us to imagine what a renewed earth would be like, so that we'd take every opportunity and give anything to work for it, for God's sake and for the sake of everything and everyone that God loves.

Hymn - R&S 200: S+T 255:

The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
and all things cry 'Glory!' to God all in all.

*Bryn A. Rees (1911-83)**

Holding the World in Prayer

Now bring before God in prayer a world in need of hope and crying out for transformation.

In the desert John spoke his words of judgement,
he challenged people to change, to repent, to turn their lives around to
face God, to be baptised.

I remember before you in prayer Lord
those who hear only words of judgement;
those struggling in a desert of despair;
those who are afraid for their future;
those who feel worthless and unloved;
those who are isolated and lonely.

By the lake and in the marketplace,
Jesus spoke his words of invitation,
challenging people to follow him,
transforming them with his spirit of love.

I remember before you in prayer
those who speak words of encouragement;
those who walk with the despairing;
those who give hope to the fearful;
those who offer friendship to the unloved;
those who stand alongside the lonely.

Equip all of us, Lord, to be among those messengers of hope -
those who make the rough places smooth.

I pray for those who find it difficult to say sorry,
and those who find forgiveness too difficult.

I give thanks for John the Baptist
who prepared the way for something new to happen,
bridging the gap between old and new, judgement and forgiveness.

And, as we all prepare to remember the birth of your son as a baby I pray
for myself and those I know, that the child within us, the child who waits
for you to comfort and soothe us, ease our suffering and forgive us, may
be touched by you now as we wait in a quiet moment for your company
and healing touch.

Keep a Silence....

I gather together all my prayers as, with my Church family, I say
Our Father, who art in heaven...

Hymn - Tune: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty

Hark a voice is calling, clear and triumphant:
'Make, across the desert a highway for the Lord.
Every hill and valley, level out before him:
God comes in glory – hear His holy word!'

Gospel of redemption, word of forgiveness!
God, in endless mercy, his people has restored.
Sanctified by water, hallowed by the Spirit,
life in abundance, Christ on us has poured!

God so long awaited, righteous in judgement,
all creation trembles to see your holy face.
Come in grace and glory, rule with truth and justice,
holding creation in your love's embrace.

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Closing Words and Blessing

Listen for God's messengers;
listen for God's call;
listen for the joy that God can bring
as hope is restored to those who were lost in a wilderness
and those who were suffering from an indifferent world.
May joy be our mission to the world,
as we wait for God's coming in Jesus.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all evermore. Amen

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