

THE BRIDE VALLEY CHURCHES:

Telephone Service for Sunday 12 December 2021 – Advent 3

The service for today has been prepared by Liz Howlett, and can be accessed by phone on Sunday morning on **01308 293062**.

Welcome to this service for the Bride Valley churches. Today is the third Sunday of Advent. We begin our act of worship with a prayer of awareness:

Light within all light, Soul within all souls, at the breaking of dawn, at the coming of day, in this season of Advent, we wait and watch.

Your Light within the morning light, your Soul within the human soul, Your presence beckoning to us from the heart of life.

Hymn: A great and mighty wonder

1 A great and mighty wonder,
a full and holy cure,
the Virgin bears the Infant
with virgin-honour pure.

Repeat the hymn again!

'To God on high be glory,

and peace on earth to men!'

2 The Word becomes incarnate
and yet remains on high.
And Cherubim sing anthems
to shepherds from the sky.

Repeat the hymn again!

3 Since all he comes to ransom,
by all be he adored,
the Infant born in Beth'lem,
the Saviour and the Lord.

Repeat the hymn again!

4 And idol forms shall perish,
and error shall decay,
and Christ shall wield his sceptre,
our Lord and God for ay.

Repeat the hymn again!

*Mega Kai paradoxon thauma Germanus (c.634-c.732)
Translated John Mason Neale (1818-1866) Public Domain*

Invitation to Confession

We come together to receive the forgiveness of a new day.

We come together to rejoice in the freedom to begin again.

We come together to receive mercy from our heavenly Father.

Prayers of Penitence

Christ came in humility to share our lives: forgive our pride.

Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

Christ came with good news for all people: forgive our silence.

Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Christ came in love to a world of suffering: forgive our self-centredness.

Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

Absolution

May the God of love bring *us* back to himself, forgive *us* our sins, and assure *us* of his eternal love in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Collect

God for whom we watch and wait, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son: give us courage to speak the truth, to hunger for justice, and to suffer for the cause of right, with Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

First Reading

Philippians 4: 4 - 7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3: 7 - 18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Reflection

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' The opening words of John the Baptist's 'good news' to the people who came out to him in the region around the river Jordan. We might wonder how he would begin some 'bad news'! I wonder what would happen if we started every service with those words! So, what is going on here? Perhaps we could imagine this is a bit like when you are in the surgery and you are baring your arm ready for the jab and instead of the nurse saying, 'Relax', or 'A small scratch', they say, 'This is a needle, and I am going to hurt you and you will likely have some painful after effects, but it is going to be good for you in the long run'. He is giving it to them straight – there is no sugaring of the pill here. I think we could also see this as a wake-up call – John could be saying to the people, 'Don't just sleepwalk through your lives – don't just come out to me because you are bored, and you want some entertainment. You are wasting your time and mine if you think baptism in the river Jordan, or family connections with Abraham are going to guarantee a soft ride through life and God's favour for you. Wake up and do what needs doing, whilst you still have time'.

I think we could see this as shock tactics. As humans, we seem to be programmed to prefer what feels familiar, what feels comfortable and uses the least amount of energy – it seems to be very difficult for us to change our habits – how we think, how we live, how we relate with one another, how we view and relate to God. Often it takes something big, something that turns our lives upside-down, making the old ways simply impossible to go back to, that demands that we have to make a new start – and that is no easy matter.

I have had a sad shock of my own this year which has shaken me and led me to reflect on life a great deal. A friend of mine, who was 6 months younger than me, died back in the spring. We had known each other for almost 30 years and our children had gone through school together. I often think of her. One of the impacts of her death on me has been this: as my awareness of the fragility of life has grown so much stronger, so has earthly life become more precious to me. None of us know how much more time on earth we have – this is not about my being morbid – it is a fact of life – and this realisation has made me feel that I don't want my life to be weighed down by petty squabbles, or by keeping a long list of wrongs – life is literally too short it seems to me. What I am wanting to do more and more is to express gratitude; to say sorry when I need to; to offer forgiveness to others; in other words, to express love and to keep short accounts.

So what about John the Baptist? What may we find at the heart of his message? In one of the verses just before our gospel passage it says that he was going round all the region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. A baptism of 'turning around' – that is what repentance literally means. We can think of this as a turning around to start walking back to God. There is a lovely illustration of this: a person was out in the countryside walking. It was a fine day and the sun was still in the sky but moving towards setting. This person then saw a couple of people walking towards her. When they got nearer, she could see that their faces were glowing with wonderful light. She wondered what this was about and as they passed her, she turned around and saw that they were walking towards the sun and their faces were lit up by its light. Walking towards the light, walking towards the light of God, walking towards the light of Christ.

And for John, repentance is a very practical matter – all the different groups who come to him with questions about what they should do – he answers with practical advice – help those in need; don't swindle those who pay you their taxes; don't use your position as a soldier to abuse others, but to come to their aid. John is saying clearly that how we are with other people is fundamental – it really matters how we treat one another. What he says is that if we are

walking towards the light, walking towards God, it will be noticeable in our treatment of others, especially those more vulnerable than we are, or with less power than we have.

In spite of the bracing, off-putting opening line of John the Baptist's speech, therefore, he really is proclaiming good news – that there is room in God for those on the edges, such as the tax collectors and those likely to be viewed with suspicion, such as the soldiers. He is proclaiming good news through his emphasis on practical signs of repentance, thus giving the message that whoever we are, we can make a difference in the world for the better. And he is proclaiming good news in the way that he points away from himself and towards Jesus. 'I am not the messiah', he says, 'but there is one coming who is' – and that is the best news of all.
Amen.

Hymn: On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
come then and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings from the King of kings!

2 Then cleansed be every Christian breast,
and furnished for so great a guest.
Yea, let us each our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

3 For thou art our salvation, Lord,
our refuge, and our great reward;
without thy grace our souls must fade
and wither like a flower decayed.

Watchful at all times, let us pray.
That God may bring in God's kingdom with justice and
mercy, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord have mercy.**

That we may seek Christ in the scriptures and
recognise him in the breaking of the bread, let us pray
to the Lord: **Lord have mercy.**

That God may bind up the broken-hearted, restore
the sick and raise up all who have fallen, let us pray to
the Lord: **Lord have mercy.**

And as our Saviour taught us, so we pray:
**Our Father, who art in heaven,
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,**

In love and compassion, **come, Lord Jesus;**
In wisdom and truth, **come, Lord Jesus;**
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among *you* and remain with *you* always.
Amen.

4 Stretch forth thine hand, to heal our sore,
and make us rise to fall no more;
once more upon thy people shine,
and fill the world with love divine.

5 All praise, eternal Son, to thee
whose advent sets thy people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Spirit bless, for evermore.

*Jordanis oras praevia Charles Coffin (1676-1749)
Translated John Chandler (1806-1876) Public Domain*

Prayers

That the light of God's coming may dawn on all who
live in darkness and the shadow of death, let us pray
to the Lord: **Lord have mercy.**

We commend ourselves and all for whom we pray to
the mercy and protection of our heavenly Father.

**Merciful Father, accept these prayers, for the sake of
your Son our saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

**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**

The Blessing

Hymn: Come thou long expected Jesus

1 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.

2 Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

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

4 By thine own eternal Spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all-sufficient merit
raise us to thy glorious throne.

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Prayer of Awareness and Invitation to Confession adapted from Praying with the Earth: a prayerbook for peace, John Philip Newell, Canterbury Press (2011).