

## THE BRIDE VALLEY CHURCHES:

### Telephone Service for Sunday 11 December 2022 – Advent 3

The service for today has been prepared by Liz Howlett, with prayers by Sue Taylor, a churchwarden at Swyre, 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.**

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.

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

### *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: Isaiah 35: 1 – 10*

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

*Gospel Reading: Matthew 11: 2-11*

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: "'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'"

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

*Reflection*

'Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come"'

What stirring, encouraging words from the prophet Isaiah. They were proclaimed originally to the Israelites who were in exile in Babylon, those who had witnessed the downfall of their king and kingdom and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. They had been forcibly uprooted from their homes in the land promised to them and their whole identity as God's chosen people had a question mark over it in their minds – if God was God, how had all this happened? How was it that they were divided from their land by hundreds of miles of desert? How could they worship God in a strange land? Isaiah is trying to help them see that the old ways of being may have disappeared, but God is going to do a new thing. He offers them the wonderful poetic picture of the wilderness bursting into bloom – the parched land blossoming into life. What looks dead and barren will be full of life. Things may not be as they once were, as they once were used to, but see with new eyes what God is doing. There is hope, there is a future.

'Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come'

We might think that these words would also have helped John the Baptist himself, as he languishes in prison and questions who Jesus really is. This is a very different John from the one we encountered last week on the banks of the Jordan, fearlessly preaching and baptizing those who came out to him as preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Now in captivity, John had heard about Jesus' ministry in

Galilee and he sent some of his followers to ask him directly, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Was John wondering, did I get it right at the river Jordan? – is this man really the one we have been promised by God? John's own message had been one of strong condemnation of the people's sins – perhaps he thought there should have been a lot more condemnation and judgement in Jesus' ministry. Perhaps Jesus' ministry was not what John had been anticipating. Jesus' reply is very interesting – he doesn't answer yes or no, but he says basically, let my actions and words speak for themselves 'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.' In other words, he is showing John that his main task as Messiah is 'the restoration of the needy and the giving of life to the lifeless.' John needed new eyes, a renewed vision, to see what God was doing through Jesus' ministry. Not so much condemnation, but the bringing of new life. There is hope, there is a future.

'Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come'

And what about us? What about our hands and knees and hearts – are they fearful? Perhaps this is a reassuring message for us too in these tumultuous times we are living through. Perhaps we too need fresh eyes to see where God is at work today, this Advent. Perhaps we can be encouraged to stop and pay attention, to open our eyes to see where Christ is at work – to see where new life is being given. I wonder in what ways Christ might be standing among us, in our communities, as one we do not know, or perhaps we see, but do not recognise. I wonder, do we look for Christ in certain places and not in others? Do we expect his influence to be at work at some times of the day and not at others? Are there people through whom Christ might be working for good, bringing new life in the world whom we ignore? Might we be missing him and some of the ways he is working within us, within our communities, within our world?

#### *A prayer to close:*

Loving God of hope and of the future, in this waiting time of Advent, please strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way and say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come".

Help us to see with fresh eyes where Christ is at work in the world, in our communities, in our lives. Open our eyes to your presence, open our ears to your call in this waiting time of Advent. **Amen.**

#### *Hymn: Hills of the North rejoice*

1 Hills of the North, rejoice,  
echoing songs arise,  
hail with united voice  
him who made earth and skies;  
he comes in righteousness and love,  
he brings salvation from above.

2 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.

3 Lands of the East, arise,  
he is your brightest morn,  
greet him with joyous eyes,

praise shall his path adorn:  
the God whom you have longed to know  
in Christ draws near, and calls you now.

4 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.

5 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 sons of earth be blest.

Let us remember that we are in the presence of God; in church, at home, in hospital or care home, as we pray with confidence, and thank God for His goodness.

We ask a blessing on all members of our clergy and ministry team in the Bride Valley; that they may be rooted and grounded in love and with the sure and certain faith of John the Baptist as they prepare the way for the coming of Christ. Lord in your Mercy **Hear our prayer.**

In the world we pray for leaders of the nations; especially in areas of conflict; Ukraine, China, Myanmar, Palestine. We ask a blessing on all powerful politicians worldwide; that they may discern the course that is just and have the courage to seek only the common good.

Lord in your Mercy **Hear our prayer.**

Grant grace to us, our families and friends; and, in this time of preparation and expectation, we remember all those who dread Christmas because of loneliness or the overwhelming demands of family life. Lord in your Mercy **Hear our prayer.**

Living Lord we remember all those who are sick in body or in anguish of mind. Grant them peace and courage in the knowledge of your presence. In a time of silence we bring to mind all those known to us personally who need our prayers today.

Lord in your Mercy **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who mourn the death of friend or family member. We give thanks for the lives of those who have gone before us; and entrust them to Gods loving care and keeping.

Lord in your Mercy **Hear our prayer.**

Rejoicing in the fellowship of the Blessed virgin Mary, and all the Saints and Angels, we commend ourselves and all people to Gods unfailing love.

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

*The Lord's Prayer*

*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,**

**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*

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.**

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.

*Hymn: Come thou long expected Jesus*

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.

*Charles Wesley (1707-1788) Public Domain*

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