

AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION 4th December 2022

2nd Sunday of Advent

Prepared by The Reverend Sue Linford and available on **01308 293062**

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

In today's Gospel we hear the lonely voice of John the Baptist calling, 'Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight.' It is not God's **way** that need to be straightened out, but our **ways**.

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

Let us reflect for a moment on the fact that we have not always walked in God's way.
Lord Jesus, you lead the humble in the right path.

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

You seek out and save the lost.

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

You guide our feet into the way of peace.

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

May the God of love and power forgive us and free us from our sins, heal and strengthen us by his Spirit, and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Collect (special prayer for today)

Almighty God, purify our hearts and minds, that when your Son Jesus Christ comes again as judge and saviour we may be ready to receive him, who is our Lord and our God.

Amen

READING Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."' '

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume 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 axe 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.

‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

REFLECTION

If you were to google ‘Eats, Shoots & Leaves’ Wikipedia would tell you that this is the title of a book by Lynne Truss. The author aims to remind readers of the importance of punctuation in the English language as she bemoans the relaxation of the rules of punctuation in today’s society. And punctuation is important, as even the placing of single punctuation mark can subtly alter the meaning of a phrase or sentence. If you take today’s gospel reading, for example, we heard:

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’.” John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance and forgiveness in the wilderness region around the Jordan. But what if the phrasing were slightly different? What if we heard instead, *‘The voice of one crying out:... “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”*

This makes it much more personal; much more pertinent to each one of us during this season of Advent. After all, it is not God’s paths that need to be made straight. We have just a few short weeks to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, and yet December seems to be a month of consumption. Apparently, we eat millions of pounds more chocolate in December than in any other month. Advent calendars have doors to open each day, and behind them are found not images of the birth of Jesus but chocolate models of the cast of the latest children’s film, or even gin, wine or beer. Where are the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus in all this? Missing, it seems, last seen in the pages of the New Testament.

It was not always like this. In earlier times, Christians spent the four weeks before Christmas preparing themselves for the festival, not by increased self-indulgence, but by a strict regime of self-denial and fasting. This was to help them concentrate on the spiritual meaning of the Christmas story. The Son of God chose to leave behind the glories of heaven and be born as a poor baby, so we should know how much God loves us, and he sacrificed his life for us. And it doesn’t help us to understand that or feel it in our heart if we are bloated on four weeks of over-indulgence. This is a time to look forward, but also to look inwards, to put right what is wrong in our lives; to repent, and seek forgiveness.

It is not the Lord's way that needs straightening out; it is our ways. We let people round the world starve; we continue to damage the environment because it's easier than changing our ways; we walk past homeless people on the street when what they really crave is to be noticed, to feel human. We let our plenty blind us to the plight of others, and our comfort deafen us to the cries of the dispossessed, the refugee, the poor, the hungry, the stranger.

In these short weeks we need to make time and space to reflect on our lives. I repeat, it is not the Lord's way that needs to be straightened out, but our ways. Advent is an excellent time to aim ourselves in the right direction, and to commit ourselves to the right path. And we won't do it by ourselves. We should ask the Lord to take the blindness from our eyes, the weakness from our wills, and the hardness from our hearts, so that our lives, and those of all around us may be flooded by the grace of his coming.

INTERCESSIONS

Blessed are you, Lord our God, for you sent the prophets and John the Baptist to prepare your way. We ask your blessing on all who continue to spread your word and tell of your coming. Help us all to clear away the clutter in our lives and be ready to welcome your Son. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We remember in your presence the troubles and sorrows of our world. We pray for all who are caught up in war or violence; particularly remembering the people of Ukraine. We pray for all leaders and politicians that they may work with integrity for the benefit of all. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We ask your blessing on all who, for whatever reason, do not look forward to Christmas. We remember the homeless and lonely, and all those who are struggling to make ends meet or are deeply in debt.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We bring before you all who are ill and suffering at this time, all who are distressed or overburdened. May they each know the healing power of your peace and presence.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We remember all our loved ones who have died. May they rejoice in the fullness of life, and be with you in glory.

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

Amen

Prayers adapted from David Adam

Gathering together all our prayers, we say the prayer that Jesus gave us

Our Father, who art in heaven,	as we forgive those who trespass against us.
hallowed be thy name;	And lead us not into temptation;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done;	but deliver us from evil.
on earth as it is in heaven.	For thine is the kingdom,
Give us this day our daily bread.	the power and the glory,
And forgive us our trespasses,	for ever and ever. 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.

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

*We give thanks for the saving death and resurrection of Jesus and ask him to be
with us now*

**Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen**

We pray God's blessing on each other

We are pilgrims always journeying homewards. May God walk with us along the roads.
We look for peace and cry for justice. May God make us peacemakers all our days.
We wait and long for the coming of Jesus. May God fill us with wonder and with great
hope.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us
and those whom we love and pray for, this day and for evermore. **Amen**