

Birstall and Rothley Methodist Churches



December 6th, 2020

2nd SUNDAY IN ADVENT



Lighting the Second Advent Candle

Jesus said, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets: I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.'

Amen. Come soon, Lord Jesus!

The second candle is lit

Jesus is the light of the world.

A light no darkness can ever put out.

Advent hymn: StF 185: 2nd verse & chorus

All shall be well in his kingdom of peace ;
freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase ;
justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring ;
wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King :

*Come let us sing : praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King :
this is our song, who to Jesus belong :
glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.*

Charles Silvester Horne (1865-1914)

Reproduced from Singing the Faith Electronic Words Edition, number 185.

Reading: Isaiah 40: 3-5

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Eternal and All-holy God,
beating heart of creation,
source, explanation and goal of everything that is,
enfolding all humankind in your love:
key to our past, strength of our present
and hope for our future.

With joy, we celebrate and praise your name today
because you have given your love for the world
a human face in Jesus Christ, your Son.
Yours is the love that alone lasts for ever,
sharing our joy and bearing our pain,
stronger than evil, hatred and death;
we cannot stray beyond her embrace.

Forgive our failures of faith, hope and love:
the hurt we inflict on you and others,
the selfishness and indifference,
malice and fear,
which mar our lives
and lay waste the body of creation.

Rekindle in us now – the fire of your love,
the light of your truth,
the vision of your glory.

So may we play our part in the coming of your reign of love
and journey together into your kingdom of peace and joy.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

Collect for the Day

God, our deliverer,
whose approaching birth
still shakes the foundations of our world, may we so prepare for your coming
with eagerness and hope,
that we embrace without terror
the labour pangs of the new age.
Through Christ our Lord we pray.
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."

Hymn

StF162

The prophets' voice comes down the years
to teach and to inspire,
to show the nature our God
in words and deeds of fire;
not to disclose some rigid plan
that God has set in stone,
but to renew the promises
the saints have always known.

The prophets' voice speaks of the past -
the actions that reveal
the way God used the people then
this broken world to heal;
and then translates the things gone by
in ways that we find new
so we can judge the world we know
by standards ever true.

The prophets' voice holds up a glass
in which to see our day;
events which span the globe around
and things we do and say.
It calls us to repent and turn
from things that tear life down,
to choose the path that Jesus chose
and share his work and crown.

words: Alan Hinton

Sermon

Before the main act comes on at a pop concert, there has to be a warm-up act to get the audience ready. John the Baptist is the warm-up act for Jesus. Matthew – to show that this is the fulfilment of Old Testament promises – points out that he is the voice of whom Isaiah prophesied, crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord!' (Isaiah 40:3-5).

The Jewish belief of the time was that before God's chosen leader, the Messiah, burst onto the scene, Elijah would appear to proclaim his coming. John even looks like Elijah; his clothes are the same (2 Kings 1:8) and he 'enjoys' a similarly frugal diet: locusts and wild honey. (Sounds delicious!)

To help the people get ready for God's mightiest act: the coming of the anointed one to bring in God's coming reign, John calls people out into the Judean wilderness to be baptized in the waters of Jordan as a sign of repentance.

The wilderness has always been the place for close encounters with God, just as it had been in their escape from Egypt centuries before; as it would shortly be for Jesus in his temptations; as wild and lonely places often are for us when, far from human support mechanisms, we need to rely on our own resources and God's mercy and help.

John's uncompromising message to the rich and powerful, the religious leadership, the opinion-formers and cultural icons of the time, has echoes of Elijah too. (e.g. 1 Kings 18: 17-19). So when the Pharisees and Sadducees come to see what he's up to, he denounces them as 'a viper's brood,' so much as to say that they are descended from the serpent in the Garden of Eden! Since they're apt to claim status on the grounds, 'We have Abraham as our Father,' we can safely imagine that this didn't go down too well!

John is not the one who is to come, just in case anyone's under any misapprehension; he's not fit to act as slave (carry the sandals) of the one who is to come after him: Jesus. John comes merely to prepare the way.

Yet Jesus says of John, 'Among those born of woman, no-one has arisen greater than John...' So we'd better listen carefully to John and act on his admonitions.

So, what must we do? Well, what we must not do is be like the Pharisees and Sadducees (and, be warned, they're the respectable religious types like us!) In John's book they're not ready: they're not willing to change to prepare for Christ's coming. They know they're all right; they have Abraham as their father; they're quids in with God.

But are we much different? It's not enough, you see, to have John Wesley as our father. Have we made our hearts and minds – our lives – right with God? It's about the change of attitude and orientation we call conversion, letting God change us into the people God wants us to be; to bear fruit worthy of repentance; to change our ways from the self-centred, status-seeking greed and vice of this world to focus on God and others, and thus to prepare for the coming of Christ; to throw ourselves on the mercy and grace of God and lead lives of the highest integrity and morality, of service to our sisters and brothers across the street and across the world.

Jesus comes, says John, to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire so you can live in God's way, purified of all the dross in our fallen nature and filled with Christ-like love for the world and all its people. Then you will be ready for life in that kingdom where the tears will be wiped from every eye, there will be an end to death, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Now that's worth living for – even dying for if need be, as Jesus once did – isn't it? Amen.

Hymn

StF 189 [tune 355i]

Wild and lone the prophet's voice
echoes through the desert still,
callings to make a choice,
bidding us to do God's will:
"Turn from your sin and be baptised;
cleansing your heart and mind and soul.
Quitting all the sin you prized,
yield your life to God's control.

Bear the fruit repentance sows,
lives of justice, truth and love.
Trust no other claim than those,;
set your heart on things above.
Soon the Lord will come in power,
burning clean the threshing floor:
then will flames the chaff devour;
wheat alone shall fill God's store."

With such preaching stark and bold
John proclaimed salvation near,
and his timeless waring hold
words of hope to all who hear.
So we dare to journey on,
led by faith through ways untrod,
til we come at last like John
to behold the Lamb of God.

words: Carl P Daw, Jnr (b. 1944)

Prayers of Thanksgiving

Thank you, generous God -
– for giving yourself to the world,
not in the powerful and extraordinary, but in weakness and the familiar:
in a baby, in bread and wine.

Thank you -
– for offering at journey's end, a new beginning;
for setting, in the poverty of a manger,
the richest jewel of your love;
for revealing, in a particular place,
your light for all peoples.

Thank you
– for bringing us to Bethlehem, House of Bread, where the empty are filled,
and the filled are emptied;
where the poor find riches,
and the rich recognise their poverty;
where all who kneel and hold out their hands, are unstintingly fed.

Thank you, generous and gracious God,
in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Prayers of Concern

To the sick and the suffering in every land from whatever cause,
but particularly, just now, to all those seriously ill with Covid-19:
to embrace in the strong flow of your healing love, not only those known to us,
but also the many more not known to us,
yet each one known to you and loved by you...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

To all who exercise a ministry of healing,
and all who put themselves at risk to keep the wheels of society turning:
to surround them with your blessing and protection...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

To the hungry and homeless in many lands, especially to the children:
to those whose jobs, businesses or even homes are threatened:
to everyone, even here in Britain, going without what we take so easily for granted...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

To the asylum-seeker and refugee;
to the prisoner of conscience and the hostage;
to the sex-trafficked and to the abused...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

To all who are victims of terrorism, war and violence wherever they may be;
to bring peace on earth and good will among all peoples...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

To everyone who mourns
and to any who wait anxiously for news of those they love...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

To heal the broken, tortured body of this troubled world,
to transfigure its sorrows by self-emptying love
and to bring in God's kingdom...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

To your Church in all the world,
to our sisters and brothers in Christ who are persecuted for their faith...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

And finally, to us, who meet here for worship:
to strengthen our faith, refresh our hope, and fill us with love.
May we fulfil our calling to proclaim by word and deed
the good news of your coming kingdom...

Maranatha

Come, Lord Jesus!

The Lord hears our prayer!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

Hymn

StF 183

Praise to the God who clears the way
preparing room and space;
for power and pride will lose their sway
as peace comes in their place.

Praise to the God who comes to judge
the truth of word and deed,
who calls our minds and wills to change,
rebuking wealth and greed.

Praise to the God who waits with us
for hope and joy to reign,
who shares our suffering and our loss,
embodied in our pain.

Praise to the God who comes to bring
comfort to all who mourn.
The whole creation "Glory" sings,
as Christ the light is born.

words: Jan Berry (b.1953)

Blessing

May we know the blessing of God :
the one who created all things in a word of love;
the one who redeemed all things in an act of love;
the one who transforms all things in a movement of love.

And may the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always.

Amen.