

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Jonathan Dean. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church and pray for them as they pray for you.

Call to Worship

O Lord open our lips:
and our mouths shall proclaim your praise.
Give thanks to the Lord of lords:
for God's steadfast love endures for ever.

Opening Hymn: StF 172 Hills of the North, rejoice!

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here:

https://youtu.be/dYi6pKL4i5o?si=3Vtd3_DQoUlcyh4I

- 1 Hills of the north, rejoice,
river and mountain-spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland, sing.
Christ 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,
let praise his path adorn:
your seers have longed to know their Lord;
to you he comes, the final Word.

- 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 universe be blest.

Charles Ernest Oakley (1832–1865)

Prayer

God of all glory,
you brought the universe into existence,
and raised up witnesses
to your greatness and love.
We praise and adore you.
Grant that by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit
we may worship and serve you,
and praise your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Let us confess our sins to God,
trusting in his mercy and forgiveness.

**Holy and forgiving God,
we have sinned against you and each other
in thought and word and deed.
We have turned from your life-giving word,
and ignored the message of those you sent.
We are unprepared for the coming of your Son.
Have mercy upon us and forgive us,
that strengthened by your love
we may serve you more faithfully;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

'I am making all things new,' says the Lord.

This is Christ's gracious word:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Reading Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I, the Lord, love justice,

I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my whole being shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Reading John 1: 6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."

"Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'", as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Reflection on the Reading

I had a salutary Advent experience rather out of season, this summer. I've been storing it up until now.

We were walking along the cliffs of north Wales, on the Lleyn peninsula. It was breathtakingly beautiful, and there were views across to Bardsey Island and the Irish Sea. I was so caught up in the beauty of gazing at the far horizon that I forgot to look where I was putting my feet. Suffice to say that my undoing was a rabbit hole. I escaped intact apart from a bruised ego, and was offered a lesson in mindful hiking.

This season's readings offer us a far horizon. They're about the coming of God's Kingdom, and the world being and becoming the place it was designed by God to be. So, it would be easy to get quite fixated on the vision they offer in a way that takes us out of the present moment. So: I think there's a challenge in the words we hear at this time of year. It's about keeping a further horizon in our sights, without losing sight at all of the here and now. It's about remembering that the reality of that vision of the future is in fact God's dream for our world, here, today. It's not a distant pipe dream to cheer us up. It's a glimpse of how God wants things to be: NOW. And we're the ones called upon to assist in bringing it into being, step by careful step, in the mundane reality of our simple lives of patient discipleship, right here, right now. So: yes, keep your eyes on the dream. But also keep your eyes on the path ahead. And, from time to time, it's no bad thing to remind yourself of the path you've trodden to get here, either.

Advent, then, is a good time to remind ourselves of what it means to be the Church. A good time for a refreshing of our perspective: past, present and future. To remember where we've come from, to remind ourselves of what we're called to, and to renew our commitment to the present, so that we press on towards the vision of the Kingdom, committed to our mission, here and now, and trusting in the promise that God is working God's purpose out, and won't desert us.

I sometimes wonder whether the Church's problem on its pilgrimage is not so much failing to look at the ground in front of us as neglecting to remind ourselves of the far horizon. That's where Advent is so helpful! Our danger is that we're so focussed on all the immediate threats and obstacles that we sometimes lose sight of the glorious vision that God has laid before us and called us to participate in.

The story is told of an 18th century rabbi, teacher, scholar, in modern day Ukraine, Zusha of Hanipol:

"Reb Zusha was laying on his deathbed surrounded by his disciples. He was crying and no one could comfort him. One student asked his Rabbi, "Why do you cry? You were almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham." Zusha answered, "When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won't ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham,' rather, they will ask me, 'Zusha, why weren't you Zusha?'"

The concern we hear so much in the ministry of John the Baptist, and Jesus to whom he points, is that at the end of all things, as God returns to reign, the question to us, as we look back on our common life, will be: "why weren't you the *Church*?" You see, we have a very particular calling, a unique identity, as the Church of Christ. There may be times when it feels like we do lots of other, really good and certainly laudable things which relate to our central

identity – making hospitable space for others, letting our premises for community use, even gathering for worship that renews us – but they're not the central, core vocation to which Jesus calls us. The far horizon for us, the thing that makes the Church the Church, is this – that here, in this community, there is a glimpse at least of the coming Kingdom of God. That that vision, of the realm where God has come down and righteousness and justice and peace and joy and hope prevail – that that vision is in some way, however small, made real here, among us, and in our life together. That some experience of God's beloved community of unity and wholeness is the reality of our life too.

Jesus chose the words we've heard today from Isaiah to launch his public ministry – and the sermon didn't go down all that well! These words, he felt, summarised what he was on earth to do and the Kingdom he was called to inaugurate. His basic critique of some of his own faith communities was that, led astray by all the distractions of the age, they had lost sight of the far horizon and neglected their core mission. They had only to look to their past – to the witness and vision of prophets like Isaiah – to know what they were called to do and be in the present, for the shaping of the future.

Jesus isn't against organised religion though. And he doesn't speak against Judaism in general. He's simply saying that, when we lost sight of our central identity, the far horizon towards which we're supposed to be travelling, we'll just be one more human institution,

subject to all the perils and vicissitudes of our day. The Church isn't like that: sure, we have financial realities to wrestle with and buildings to maintain and all the rest, but those are means to an end, and not the end in itself. We have to raise our eyes occasionally, from the immediacy and challenge of money and bricks and mortar and day to day life, to the farther horizon, of God's Kingdom of justice, love and peace, which is coming, and will come, and in whose bringing to birth we have such a sacred and exciting and privileged part to play.

It's this living out of God's way of loving the world that makes of a church, The Church. It's this that transforms us from one more human institution to a living, breathing, passionate community of the Kingdom of God. In Advent, we look up to that horizon again, and we recommit ourselves to living in its light and promise.

For God is with us. And even amid all we are going through just now, there is no moment in which we cannot be reconnected to the presence of the living Christ among us, who gives us life and light and hope, even when we are weary, and cynical, and in despair, our eyes firmly cast down at the obstacles right in front of us.

In a few weeks, we'll likely be singing the carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter'. It was written by Christina Rossetti, who lived and worked amid the grim reality of 19th century London, with all its poverty, exploitation and in justice. She was inspired in her efforts

to alleviate poverty and assist the downtrodden and marginalised by her Christian faith. For her, as that carol says, the apparently small commitment of each of us offering our heart to the infant Christ in solidarity with him always led to the growth of God's Kingdom in miraculous and surprising ways. And so I want to end with another of her poems, which I discovered two Advents ago, which talks for me so beautifully about what it means to be The Church, and about the beautiful vision on which we are called, especially today, to focus on, that far horizon of God's purposes for the world. It's a vision of Love, which echoes the vision of Isaiah and speaks eloquently to me of the vision and mission of John and Jesus.

Shall not this infinite Love suffice
To feed thy dearth? Lift heart and eyes
Up to the hills, grow glad and wise.

...Love hangs this earth in space; Love rolls
Fair worlds rejoicing on their poles
And girds them round with aureoles;

Love lights the sun; Love thro' the dark
Lights the moon's evanescent arc;
Same Love lights up the glow-worm's spark;

Love rears the great; Love tends the small;
Breaks off the yoke, breaks down the wall;

Accepteth all, fulfilleth all.

O ye who taste that Love is sweet,
Set waymarks for the doubtful feet
That stumble on in search of it.

Sing hymns of Love, that those who hear
Far off in pain may lend an ear
Rise up and wonder and draw near.

Lead lives of Love, that others who
Behold your lives may kindle too
With Love and cast their lots with you.

Hymn: StF 255 The Kingdom of God is justice and joy

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://youtu.be/mOrkdW5NAM0?si=nTe7c1rBbdC7WDi1>

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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 Rees (1911–1983)

Prayers for God's World and Lord's Prayer

Let us pray.

In joyful expectation of his coming to reign
we pray to our Lord, saying,

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to your world as King of the nations.

We pray for . . .

Before you rulers will stand in silence.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to your Church as Lord and Judge.

We pray for . . .

Help us to live in the light of your coming
and give us a longing to do your will.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to your people

as Saviour and bearer of pain.

We pray for . . .

Enfold us all in your love and mercy,
wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress,
and set us free to serve you for ever.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to us from heaven
with power and great glory,
and lift us up to meet you,
where with all your saints and angels,
we will live with you for ever.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins.

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation.

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever. Amen.

Hymn: StF 335 Rejoice the Lord is King

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://youtu.be/AhEUCSzaU8M?si=zmHGx-aEyruxbHB7>

1 *Rejoice, the Lord is King!
Your Lord and King adore;
mortals, give thanks, and sing,
and triumph evermore:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;
rejoice! Again I say: rejoice!*

2 *Jesus the Saviour reigns,
the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains,
he took his seat above:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;
rejoice! Again I say: rejoice!*

3 *His kingdom cannot fail,
he rules both earth and heaven;
the keys of death and hell
are to our Jesus given:*

*Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;
rejoice! Again I say: rejoice!*

4 *He sits at God's right hand
till all his foes submit,
and bow to his command,
and fall beneath his feet:*

*Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;
rejoice! Again I say: rejoice!*

5 *Rejoice in glorious hope;
Jesus the Judge shall come,
and take his servants up
to their eternal home:*

*We soon shall hear
the archangel's voice;
God's trumpet-call shall sound: rejoice!*

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness
shine upon you
and prepare your hearts and souls
to meet him when he comes in glory;
and the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be yours, now and always. **Amen.**

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