

Sunday 12th December 2021

Advent 3 (candles from previous week are lit)

One: Arise and celebrate, good news of deep joy is here!

All: **The warm glow of the Divine lightens our hearts**

One: Here we are together. We are not alone. We gather on this third Sunday in Advent with gratitude and overflowing generosity, blessed multiple times by our give-away God. We are witnesses to joy. *[the 3rd candle is lit]*

All: **The Joy of Christ is good news, unexpected and surprising in its overflowing**

We pray: God-who-lights-up-life give us joyful, generous, and courageous hearts. As we lean on your love may your joy well up in us so that our joy may overflow and flourish, witnessing to a life of constant gratitude, full of grace, cathartic hilarity, and goodness.

Call to worship

Let us meet with our God, whose Spirit is with us now and throughout our daily lives. Let us pray for opportunities to share the blessings we receive, for God to provide the words with which we might speak them, and inspire actions through which we might share them, that all might be joyfully drawn to the God we serve.

Hymn: R&S 135 Joy to the world

Opening prayers:

O Lord our God, God of the prophets and God of the now, you are with us. Your power gives us victory. You take delight in us. And in love, you give us new life. Hear us as we come to you today. To you, O God, we lift our hearts; how great you are. You are our saviour; you are our power; you are our strength. You are the giver of life-giving water to quench our spiritual thirst. You are a bounteous one beyond our imagining. You are the giver of gifts beyond compare. To you, O God, we lift our heart, we raise our eyes, and we shout in joyful adoration.

Blessed God, hear our prayers of sadness and regret for times when we have been blind to the needs of neighbours, deaf to the cries of the distressed, silent at the sight of the abused, careless with the frightened and supportive of greed and corruption. We confess our obsessions with

things material and frivolous, fripperies wrapped in tissue paper. Open our ears and eyes, and our hearts, to be more receptive to what we see and hear from those we meet. Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

God knows the depths of our sorrow. God knows the depths of our grief for wrongs done. God knows the pains of regret for deeds undone. God knows the depths of our hearts. To God we repent, and forgiveness is given. Amen.

Readings: Philippians 4.4-7; Luke 3.7-18

Anthem

Reflection

Last week Leonora spoke about John the Baptist and repentance. This week the reading continues Chapter 3 and mentions more of what John said. John tells those who have come to be baptized that their faith needs to make a difference to their everyday living. He shares three kinds of teaching: a warning to the crowds not to rely on their religious pedigree; advice on some simple ways to live justly; and a prophetic promise about the greatness of the one who is to come. In response to his words various people asked, ‘What then should we do?’ (v.10). It’s a recurring question in Luke’s writing: the lawyer (Luke 10.25); the rich ruler (Luke 18.18); the Jerusalem crowd (Acts 2.37); the jailer (Acts 16.30); and Saul on the Damascus Road (Acts 22.10).

What should we do? A question asked by the crowds listening to John the Baptist. He had just told them they were a crowd of snakes, you vipers! Not a nice thing to call anyone. He was cross with them because they had not shown enough sincerity as to why they wanted to be baptised by him. It was as though they just wanted baptism to escape God’s punishment for their wrongdoings. They were just saying they were descendants of Abraham. That was not enough for John as he said even God could make these stones descendants of Abraham, so your argument does not hold water. You could even be being hypocritical. So they were snakes or vipers in some translations. Maybe this verbal abuse was enough to make them think again so they asked ‘what should we do?’

John’s response is not without cost to the individual. He also speaks directly to the situations of those asking the questions – and speaks of how they can relate to others. In the Gospel, the called for response is

profoundly down to earth and practical, centring on the generous sharing of resources. Underlying this is a called-for ethic and attitude of contentment – a call to be content with one good coat, enough food, the legitimate amount of tax revenue and sufficient wages.

It is notable that John – often presented as a fiery radical prophet – does not call people in what were controversial occupations to find new work. Instead, he calls them to work out the substance of their repentance (changing their ways) and live their newly baptized lives within their normal day-to-day duties. Commenting on this, Joel Green says, ‘John’s message contains within it a critique that not only points the finger of judgement at large-scale injustice but in fact reaches into the realities of day-to-day existence. Life at the local level and one’s own normal network of relationships are touched by this ethical vision, with the result that repentance must be understood within and related to even the most mundane.’ (Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, 1997 ISBN 978-0-8028-2315-1). Again, note Luke’s little phrase ‘Even tax collectors’ (v.10). When was the last time we gave thanks for and prayed for those working honourably at HMRC? Why not, as they do send us several thousand pounds each year as Gift Aid!

That aside what John is telling the people then and us now is that we should be content with what we have and not exploit others for personal gain. Be happy and joyful that we have one coat, enough food and shelter and enough money to manage. If we have more, we should give to others. This is not so easy in our materialistic society but as Christians we should show Christ in our lives by doing good, joyfully with no moans.

The reading from Philippians is one of my favourite passages from the Bible, so much so I had it stuck up by my desk at work for many years. It tells me and you to rejoice in the Lord always and not to be afraid as God is with you and take all your anxieties to God with thanksgiving and I add Joy. Taking things joyfully to God when one is feeling low is not easy, but we know that living a Christian life is not easy.

In Advent 2020, in the middle of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a post appeared on Facebook saying that Christmas that year was not about getting what you want but being content with what you have. At the heart of John the Baptist’s message is a call to contentment. What might this look like today, especially when the might of commercial advertising plays on a sense of discontent that will only be assuaged by purchasing the product or service being promoted? If the

planet is to survive, those of us who have plenty will have to be content not just with what we have but with less. Might being seen to live in this way be an important way of being good news in our time? If we didn't try with less material things last year let us try this year. Let us be joyful in doing it.

The crowd that came to John for baptism thought ancestry was enough, and they didn't need to do any more than that. Perhaps we think that calling ourselves Christian, or attending church, is enough. But it isn't. We are called to 'bear good fruit', and the responsibility for that lies with us. Let us rejoice in the coming of Christ and be joyful for that.

Hymn MP 442 Lord of the church, we pray for our renewing (tune Londonderry air)

Prayers for the people

O Lord our God, in these uncertain times with so many changes to our lives we can struggle to make sense of it all. Be with us in this time of preparation that we may find comfort, love, purpose, joy, hope and meaning this Advent and Christmas season.

For those families who suffered so much in recent storms, who lived without basic comforts of light and heat and warm food; for those who had to moved house and leave their own home comforts; for those who stayed put and struggled to exist; for those who rallied round and helped and supported their local community in its hours of need.

For families suffering abuse and harm, neglect and cruelty, be they old or young, victim or perpetrator – may each of us look out for need, look out for signs and be brave enough to speak out and stand up and be counted; for medics, teachers, social workers and all on the front line of care, give them wisdom, insight and strength in the heat of the storm to do their very best for all who are in need.

For countries who seemingly choose to self-destruct, who choose to rule in ways we see as harmful, cruel and wrong; for countries who seek to establish power and influence by corruption and violence and greed; for countries who seek to show support and help and who seek peaceful ways of resolving simmering situations that look likely to explode.

We pray for those who work in government, who lead us and speak out in opposition. We pray also for the civil servants such as those who work

for the HMRC who do vital work managing so many aspects of our lives even when their decisions and policies are not popular.

For all who feel the weight of illness and pain, of death and dying; for those impacted by Covid in all its forms and those whose treatment for other conditions have been side lined or at best delayed; for those who have to prioritise and choose who has what care; for care deliverers and providers pushed into crisis by Covid and winter and increasing demand. Let us take a moment of silence to think of those who we know are suffering

silence

For family and friends who are walking through Advent uncertain what Christmas celebrations they should arrange or embrace or cancel; for those who face Christmas alone or ill, cold or hungry, fearful of the now and more fearful of the future hardships and pain.

Finally, we pray for ourselves that we may have eyes to see need, mouths to speak words of comfort, smiles to say 'I love you' when hugs are out of bounds. May we O God be your eyes, your ears, your mouth to those who share this Advent with us and those whose lives touch ours; may we be the bringers, the signs of 'good news' to them.

These are our prayers for all your people.

Amen.

Offertory prayer

Loving God we thank you that we can joyfully give our money and our time in service to you and all those around us.

Hymn

MP 457 Make way, make way

Blessing

Lord, help us to go into the world in peace; to be of good courage; to hold fast to that which is good; to strengthen the fainthearted; to support the weak; to honour everyone; and to love and serve the Lord. Be within us and among us, and remain with us always.

Amen.