

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for this Sunday – the Third Sunday of Advent

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.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 13th December 2020, the Third Sunday of Advent

Psalm 126

A Harvest of Joy

A Song of Ascents.

¹When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
‘The Lord has done great things for them.’

³The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is
now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

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A reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-end

The Good News of Deliverance

⁶¹ 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 broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ 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.
⁴ 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.

⁸ 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.
⁹ 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.
¹⁰ 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.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,

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so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

The Testimony of John the Baptist

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' ²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' ²²Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' ²³He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord"',

as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' ²⁶John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent from Cathy Michell, Methodist Lay Preacher and member of the Lordsbridge Team Chapter

Well, what a mixed-up Sunday this is liturgically speaking. Our Gospel reading is all about John the Baptist and, if you're lighting Advent Candles, today's candle is "for" him. But today is also St Lucy's day and, in some places, such as Sicily and Scandinavia, this is a big celebration. And, finally, today is also called Gaudete Sunday.

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Three festivals for the price of one gives us the perfect excuse for a 3-part sermon to match the three candles that are often lit today for the third Sunday in Advent.

We have three figures and three key themes to look at:

The first figure is **John the Baptist** in all his wild splendour; John the Forerunner, John the signpost. John's story – from birth to beheading - lays out the great themes of Advent for us, but especially the theme of **HOPE**, as expressed with such poetic power by Isaiah,

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me, he has sent me to announce the good news!'

The gospel writers want us to know that here is a prophetic figure like Elijah, like Isaiah himself, who God has chosen to point forward and embody the hope of better things to come - God's kingdom, his rule and will triumphant for ever. The long-expected Messiah is about to appear on the Earth in power and glory, to bring judgement and a reckoning. The human response must be swift - repentance, a washing clean, a renewed life now, and sure faith in God's promise of redemption; His good news for all humanity.

And how this theme speaks to us, at the end of a year like no other. Even our small hopes and small joys have been dashed and disappointed since March – the domestic pleasures of hospitality and popping round for a coffee; the hopes of seeing friends and family, grandchildren and grandparents; of going on holiday, or that long-looked-forward to concert or celebration dinner. Hopes to see colleagues and yearned for freedoms, these we have lost. But think of the greater life-hopes that have turned to ashes for those who have been bereaved, who have lost jobs and homes all over the world, those who had hoped for a safe haven and received instead only rejection or punishment. We are badly in need of John's message, however hard to hear for some. We need a larger hope, the Hope of the World, to come and come quickly. We need the man Jesus to be born, to bring us all hope and good cheer this Christmas.

Our second figure is not to be found in the Bible but rather in history and folk lore. It is **Saint Lucy or Lucia** – for it is her day today in the Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox and Anglican calendar of saints to be honoured. Lucy was a Christian of noble birth born in Sicily in the third-fourth century AD, and she eventually died a martyr during the persecutions of the Roman emperor Diocletian. There are many stories of her acts; for example that, having dedicated herself to God's service, she gave her inherited riches away to the poor and even smuggled food to help fellow Christians hiding in the catacombs. It is said that in order to carry more provisions to them, she wore a wreath of candles on her head to light her way in the dark night. So, celebrations for St Lucy's day in Scandinavian countries include young girls dressed in white, each wearing a red sash of the martyr's suffering, but bearing a wreath on her head illuminated by candle flames.

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The name Lucy, or Lucia, derives from the Latin word 'lux' – meaning **LIGHT**. So here is our second theme, as a number of traditions about Lucy present her as the bearer of light and sight in the darkness of our northern winters, as such she is the bringer of warmth and hope. Because of this, her feast day today is seen as a break in Advent, a pause from the theme of penitence, to celebrate the gift of 'seeing' (she is of course the patron saint of the blind) and the gift of light with all the beauty and joy this brings. It makes us remember what Isaiah also wrote;

'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, on those who lived in a land dark as death, a light has dawned.....' (Is. 9:2)

And John's gospel echoes this in the great Prologue of chapter 1 which tells us that, like Lucy, John the Baptist came to witness to a light not his own, a light shining in darkness; a light that can never be extinguished;

'The true light which gives light to everyone was even then, coming into the world'.

It is light that we, too, are looking for. Our politicians have used many metaphors to describe the coming salvation from Covid 19 that the world is looking forward to in this, the darkest time, of the year. The sighting of a train in the distance was one of these images, its headlights shining out as it draws slowly towards us. On Tuesday, the first people received the vaccine for a disease that has brought death and severe disease to millions. This is one of our 'lights' (together with, dare I say, the election of Mr Biden in the States), that is to enlighten our lives in 2021; and how eagerly we look forward to it shining.

But, greater than this, is our sure knowledge of Christ who is The Light of God's abiding presence with us, that we anticipate coming once more this Christmas into our world. Here it will shine most brightly, with our participation, on the people who Isaiah lists in our reading; on the poor, on strangers, captives and prisoners; on those who are heart-broken and those who mourn. How relevant, how cogent is this, to where we are now!

And, so, to our third figure who is, of course, **Jesus** himself. Today is Gaudete Sunday. It is called this because, by liturgical tradition, the opening anthem of the Catholic Mass this Sunday began with the word 'Gaudete'. It means 'rejoice' and was the first word of a quotation taken from Philippians:

'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.'

The same theme is taken up in the well-known Christmas carol entitled, 'Gaudete'. So, **JOY** is our third Advent word this Sunday. As we wait in **hope** with John, and in darkness for the dawn from on high to bring us **light**, so we also wait for Jesus the **joy** of our desiring. The well-known theologian Henri Nouwen wrote that joy is,

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"the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away.'

This is the heart of what our world needs to hear; what we need to hear. Because it is in Jesus that we can look forward this year, despite all our difficulties great or small and the many sufferings of this present time, to a joy deeper than mere happiness, rooted in Him, a joy grounded in God's endless and faithful love. This is what Isaiah witnesses to when he writes in chapter 61 of good news for the poor, comfort for mourners, liberty given to captives, release for prisoners, the binding up of all wounded hearts, garlands instead of ashes, gladness replacing tears.

As we prepare in penitence and faith this season, but also by lighting up all our city centres, churches, homes and trees, opening our Advent calendars day by day, igniting the candles on our Advent rings.....may we know the hope, light and joy, and may we be conduits of that Christ-joy - that abiding, life-changing love, to others all around us. Amen.