

Sunday 6th December – Advent 2

Led by Sue Nelms, LLM

Opening words

Look towards the east, O Jerusalem,
and see the glory that is coming from God.

Alleluia, alleluia.

**Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.** *cf Isaiah 40.3–5*

Opening words and lighting of the Advent candles

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true:
to you be praise and glory forever.
Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets,
but in our days you speak through your Son,
whom you have appointed the heir of all things.
Grant us, your people, to walk in his light,
that we may be found ready and watching
when he comes again in glory and judgement;
for you are our light and our salvation.

Blessed be God for ever.

Hymn – On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry

I On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
Awake and harken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!

2 Then cleansed be every life from sin:
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

3 We hail you as our Saviour, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward.
Without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

4 Stretch forth your hand,
our health restore,
and make us rise to fall no more.
O let your face upon us shine
and fill the world with love divine.

5 All praise to you, eternal Son,
whose advent has our freedom won,
whom with the Father we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

Confession

A voice cries out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’

So let us listen, and turn to the Lord in penitence and faith. *cf John 1.23*

Heavenly Father, you call us to repent of our sins:
soften our proud and stubborn hearts.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you declared the forgiveness of God:
teach us to forgive one another.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit, you search our hearts and show us the truth:
direct us in your way of righteousness.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May the God of love bring us back to himself,
forgive us our sins, and assure us of his eternal love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Readings - Read by Ann Roebuck

Isaiah 40:1-11

40 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’

⁶ A voice says, ‘Cry out!’
And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.
9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
Lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight",
4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the
forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of
Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing
their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,
and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I
is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I
have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Reflection: Written by David Newton

Today's readings force upon us the oddities and paradoxes of the Christian Faith. We read Isaiah 40 (and rightly so) as pointing to Christ. We do so because Mark reads it this way too. But, on first glance this is not an obvious thing to do.

'Comfort, O Comfort my people' we read, and we think of Christ. Yet what comfort is here? A draughty stable, infanticide by Herod, and a grizzly death. This is a strange kind of comfort.

We read that the Glory of the LORD shall be revealed in the One for whom John 'prepares the way'. And yet that glory is found in the life of one who is *truly* human, who enters life through a birth canal, suckles at a breast, eats, sleeps and poops; learns, suffers and dies. This is a strange kind of Glory.

We read, 'Here is your God', and our thoughts are taken to the cross. *Ecce Homo* – behold the man. In the one who is seen as cursed through hanging on a tree; here, we see God. This is a strange kind of God.

And then in Mark we read of what John was like. A full-blown eccentric who eats locusts and honey. Perhaps even one might have called him 'mad'. At the very least here is a man knocked off balance, who lives well outside of the normal parameters of social existence. And this man is the one who 'Prepares the Way of the Lord'. This one is the LORD's messenger. This is a strange kind of messenger.

The oddities of the Christian Faith stare at us in the face.

Through the centuries Christianity has done a good job of trying to make all this less strange. If that reference to history might let us think we're off the hook, the church of the present age is perhaps the guiltiest of all.

God is a God of Comfort, we say. A crutch to make us feel better about ourselves. A therapeutic drug – the opiate of the masses.

God is a God of Glory, we say. So, we look to the extraordinary, to the "miraculous" to prove God. We look to see God in any event that lies beyond our human understanding, instead of in the depth of our interactions with self, neighbour and world.

Here is your God, we say. We look to see God in the glitter ball that dazzles. We think we see God in the exceptional rather than the ordinary – in the religious experience we've had or the unexplained event that happened to us. These moments point to God, so we think. Pointing to the cross and saying 'here is your God' is rather harder, rather odder.

So, we get rid of the oddities of the story of Jesus to craft a god in our own image: a god that provides comfort in ways we recognise, that shows forth glory in ways we recognise. Here is a that does not unsettle or disturb us.

As we prepare to welcome Christ again, one of the things we must do is to (once more) wean ourselves off these idols of Comfort and Glory and remind ourselves of just how odd it is that God's Comfort and God's Glory are in fact revealed in a babe born in a manger, who eats, farts and makes mistakes in his arithmetic; just how odd it is that God's Comfort and God's Glory are revealed on Calvary and then in the resurrected body which still carries the marks of crucifixion.

It is of course, not just odd. It is the glorious and liberating good news. For it means that Christianity is not about escape from this world (despite how often it is portrayed like this). It is not about escaping from its eccentricities, its mundanities, and even its sufferings, but rather it is about meeting God in and through them.

So, it is perhaps not surprising that the person who Prepares the Way is John the Baptist. This eccentric character points to God. Down the ages, God's Comfort and Glory have been revealed through the strangest of people! The misfits, the outcasts, the jesters... We should not be surprised to hear God's Voice in such place.

Nor should we be surprised to meet God in the mundane. We all have a tendency to look to skies to "see" God. We think we see God in mysterious feeling, or unusual happenings, in particular actions we can't explain. That must be God, we think. But this can ever only lead us to a god of the gaps. The LORD is met on earth – in the mundane: in the washing up, in helping the annoying neighbour, in just 'keeping on' when doing so feels really hard. This is where God is present – whether we feel it or not.

And finally, we should not be surprised to meet God in the darkness. *Ecce Homo* – Behold the Man whose life carries the very life of God – hung on a tree. This is your God. For in the place of darkness we see that nothing – not even death – can ever distinguish the light and life of God.

In the eccentric, in the mundane, in the darkness – here the light shines. Here is your God; here is the Comfort and Glory of the true LORD. Amen.

Affirmation of faith:

Let us declare our faith in God.

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

cf Ephesians 3

Prayers of Intercession

As we wait with hope and anticipation for the coming of our Lord, let us pray for peace and mercy for ourselves and the world.

We pray for the church throughout the world. During this season of Advent, we ask that you prepare us spiritually for the coming of our Saviour. We pray for your blessing on all those who lead, preach, and

teach. We pray that the church will be a herald of good tidings, speaking in a strong voice of the glory of the Lord revealed in Jesus Christ.

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

Make straight the crooked places of the world and lead the nations into the way of peace. We pray that you drive away despair from our politics, revive our dreams of justice, equality and truth and restore our passion for what is good and right. We pray for nations in crisis: those at war, those suffering political turmoil, those in economic recession, and those ravaged by the pandemic, that all may be able to find a space of peace and happiness during this coming season. Lord, reveal your glory so that all people shall see it together and become your own.

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

We pray for all people around the world who are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus: we pray that we may not forget the poor, the displaced, the hungry, the homeless, the lonely, the bereaved, the

depressed or anyone who may need our help at this special time.

We pray for our community, family, and friends: that we may be kind and generous to others and to each other. As lockdown eases may we remain sensitive to people's needs and vulnerabilities and remain

responsible and sensible in all our interactions. We pray that we will reveal His glory in the way we live and His love in the way we treat others.

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

We pray for all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. We pray especially for those in our church family who have ongoing medical treatment, those who have recently had surgery; and those who have surgery and treatment coming up. We pray that they will be touched by God's gentle tenderness bringing them comfort, strength, and healing. Bless those who care for them with patience, resilience, and rest.

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

We pray for those who have come out of the wilderness into new life.

In a moment of silence, we remember those who we love but see no more...

Lord look upon them with the eyes of mercy, counting them righteous not for their merit but through the love of Christ. Gather them into your heavenly rest; and raise them to new and eternal life.

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

We join our voices with all those who speak of the Gospel of Christ.
Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Collect:

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power and come among us,
and with great might succour us;
that whereas, through our sins and wickedness
we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honour and glory, now and forever. **Amen.**

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

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 forever. Amen.

Blessing

Our Lord says, 'I am coming soon.'
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

May the Lord, when he comes,
find us watching and waiting. **Amen.**

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

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen