

worship notes



The Third Sunday of Advent
15th December 2024
The Revd George Watt

from the United Reformed Church

Lighting of Advent Candles

(see also the prayers on the main Worship Notes page)

As we light the third candle of Advent, we look forward to the coming of the Light of the World, and give thanks for those who in the past brought light into our dark world. We rejoice in the prophets including John the Baptist who spoke God's Word to us. We pray for the increase of light which finds fulfilment in Christ.

Call to Worship

Surely God is our salvation. **We will trust, and we will not be afraid.**

For the LORD GOD is our strength and our defence. **He has become our salvation.**

With joy we will draw water from the wells of salvation. On that day we will say:
Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name.

Make known what he has done among the nations. **Proclaim that his name is exalted.**

Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done glorious things.
Let this be known throughout the world.

Shout out loud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel who lives amongst you.

Opening Prayers

Let us pray: Lord, we look forward with anticipation as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We want to shout out 'are we nearly there yet?' But waiting and patience is part of life and your plans.

We thank you that this is not wasted time. It gives us the opportunity to write or email Christmas greetings to friends and family. We have time to think about what presents we should be buying to show our love for others. There is all the food to prepare for the big day.

But it is also a time to hear you speaking to us through the prophets. A time to get ready to receive the king of kings, born into our world, so that Christmas isn't just yet another day. Lord, we are bowled over that Jesus should come and live amongst us and we are not worthy to receive him into our midst.

So, we have an opportunity to look at ourselves and how we act to see if we are worthy to meet with him.

We are blessed that we are so rich, although we don't recognise it. We have not just two coats but a wardrobe full of clothes, while others even in this country go cold. We have stuff, lots and lots of stuff and yet we look for even more this Christmas, when others don't even have a place to call home. Our tables will groan with foods of all descriptions as we rightly celebrate with others, but there are those who will grow hungry.

Challenge us about our consumerist lifestyles and help us look to the example of John the Baptist who lived, ate and dressed simply. As we enjoy so many good things may we not desire more but share with others what we already have.

Here is good news that although we do not deserve God's love, yet he has lavished it on us with the sending of Jesus into the world. He sends his prophets to challenge us and gives the opportunity to change our lives around, so that not only are we blessed but we can bless others. Thanks be to God.

We gather up our prayers now as we say together the Lord's Prayer in whatever version or language you are familiar with: **Our Father ...**

Readings

Zephaniah 3:14-20 | Philippians 4:4-7 | St Luke 3:7-18

All Age Activity

Before the start of the service, give everyone a piece of paper with a smiley face on one side and a sad face on the other. Ask everyone to hold up how they are feeling this morning. Ask if anyone is willing to explain why they have chosen one or the other. This could lead into prayers including thanksgiving for the things that have made people happy and asking that God would turn people's sadness into joy.

Read Luke 3:7-18 (Good News Version)

After each pause ask whether people feel happy or sad and why.

It is important to stress that John wanted people to follow God and that God helps us to do the right thing. Sometimes we are threatened with punishment if we do the wrong thing (e.g. if you don't tidy your room you won't get to go out to play), This is what John

is doing to encourage us to do the right thing. We won't always get it right and God will help us to do better next time.

Crowds of people came out to John to be baptized by him. "You snakes!" he said to them. "Who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send?"

Pause

Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins. And don't start saying among yourselves that Abraham is your ancestor. I tell you that God can take these rocks and make descendants for Abraham! The axe is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire."

Pause

The people asked him, "What are we to do, then?"

Pause

He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it."

Pause

Some tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what are we to do?" "Don't collect more than is legal," he told them.

Pause

Some soldiers also asked him, "What about us? What are we to do?" He said to them, "Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay."

Pause

People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah.

Pause

So John said to all of them, "I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Pause

He has his winnowing shovel with him, to thresh out all the grain and gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out.”

Pause

After responses it may be appropriate to lead in a prayer of confession, offering words of forgiveness and asking for the help of the Holy Spirit to do the right thing. In many different ways John preached the Good News to the people and urged them to change their ways.

Pause

In the prayers of intercession these could be focussed on those who plan and plot evil (the snakes) praying for a change of heart and mind. Praying for those who are the victims of oppression and exploitation and remembering those speak out and act for them. Praying for the consequences of personal choices (e.g. in respect of the environment) and corporate decisions made by governments and companies. In the coming week Migrant’s Day will be marked. Prayers for migrants and refugees could be included.

Sermon Notes

All three passages speak of judgement but points to good news!

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Zephaniah may have prophesied during the reign of Josiah before his reforms. During his reign the Temple was refurbished and Josiah found the ‘Book of the Law’ – suggesting that God’s Law had been forgotten and was not being followed resulting in the reforms. (God’s Law is not about legalism but how to live lives to distinguish them as the people of God.) Zephaniah is offering hope that the Day of the Lord is coming when those who weren’t living in God’s way would be punished and would no longer be oppressing others. God will welcome those who seek to follow his ways ‘back home’ and the weak (the lame) and the marginalised (the outcast) will be rescued and their shame will be turned into joy. Moreover, external enemies would no longer be a threat. Zephaniah paints a picture of God’s kingdom being a place of peace, justice and inclusivity.

Philippians 4:4-7

Paul may well have written the letter to the Church in Philippi when he was in prison. This may have been while under house arrest in Rome – but this should not be underplayed. Paul was not able to do and go where he wanted to. It may have thwarted his plans to go to Spain. He may be writing at the time of an earlier imprisonment (tradition has it that he was imprisoned in Ephesus) which would have been a harsh experience. And of course,

Paul had been imprisoned in Philippi. It may also be that the Church at Philippi were experiencing a level of persecution. And yet he rejoices and encourages them to rejoice because their faith surpasses their suffering. He reassures them that the Lord is near in their suffering and suggesting that he won't let suffering have the last word. He points them to an important and powerful gift at their disposal – the gift of prayer. But that is not simply about a shopping list of wishes but should include the important element of thanksgiving. Although there is no explicit reference to judgement, by inference his readers will be vindicated in their suffering because of their faithfulness and have cause to rejoice. Ultimately those who are perpetrators of oppression and persecution will face judgement.

Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist may seem like a very strange man – living in the wilderness, wearing clothes of camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey. But he poses a challenge for his listeners and us to live a simpler lifestyle. He could speak with an authenticity, speaking from a place of vulnerability without any status in worldly terms. His words seem harsh. But that is the role of the prophet to speak out against what is wrong. Sometimes drastic language is needed for us to sit up and take notice. He is making it clear that there are consequences for our actions if we don't follow God's ways. One example is our care of the planet. There are many prophets who are warning of the destruction of our world as a result of our actions unless change takes place. He makes it clear that status and family ties does not mean that we can take God's blessing for granted. All are subject to his judgement. But in the midst of the threat of judgement and punishment there is hope. In contrast John speaks of those who follow God's ways and as result bear fruit – we might say the fruit of the Holy Spirit. He also talks practically about what that fruit might look like. Those who have too much can share with those who have little or nothing. There is no place for dishonesty and exploitation, even though our privilege might enable us to operate that way. John's call is to be counter cultural in the way we live our lives and treat other people.

Affirmation of Faith

**We believe in the parent God
who loves us and cares for the least and the lost.
We believe in Christ who stepped into the world
because he believed change was possible
and began the transformation.
We believe in the Holy Spirit
who sets our hearts on fire
to build God's kingdom here on earth as in heaven.
We believe in the Church, not the institution,
but the radical bunch of disciples who listen to what we should do.**

Prayers of Intercession

We are living in a dark world. | **The light of the world is coming.**

Lord, John the Baptist warned against snakes. Those who plan and plot evil. We pray for those who are their victims, victims of crime, violence and exploitation. This is not how you want things to be. We pray for freedom for them, so that they need not be afraid.

We remember especially those who have suffered as a result of crimes of genocide and flouting of human rights, which was marked in the last week.

We pray for those who speak out for justice in this country and across the world. We give thanks for those who offer protection to others. For Police Officers, Social Workers, parents, teachers and others.

We pray for the perpetrators, that they might have a change of heart and mind.

We are living in a dark world. | **The light of the world is coming.**

Lord, John the Baptist warned against the consequence of bad decisions. We pray that we would learn to take care of this planet. You have sent prophets to warn us of the consequences of not changing. Help us to make the right decisions about how we live our lives so that as we act together we can step back from the brink of destruction.

We pray for governments and corporations that they would be good stewards of resources, so that the future of the planet might be ensured. But also that there would be a just and fair sharing of those resources so that there would be an end to poverty, hunger and homelessness.

We are living in a dark world. | **The light of the world is coming.**

Lord, John the Baptist encourages us to live our lives in a way which reflects that we are following in the footsteps of Christ. We pray that you would show us the way of peace and love. We sometimes think that we can't do very much to bring about change. But help us and all those of faith and goodwill to stand up for what is right even if they feel they are a lone voice.

We pray for relationships under strain or breaking. We pray for peace within families so that children can grow up with security.

As we prepare to celebrate International Migrants Day we pray that you would help us not just to love those close to us, but to love those who are strangers. We thank you for those who come to our country and enrich it with their presence and contribute to our nation. We pray especially for those coming to seek refuge who don't always find a welcome. Help them to feel safe and accepted here. For them and for all migrants

separated from their loved ones may they still feel them close and held in each other's hearts.

We are living in a dark world. | **The light of the world is coming.**

All these prayers we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is present with us now but will come in all his glory to establish his kingdom in all its fullness. Amen.

Dedication Prayer

Lord we bring to you all that we are and all that we have to be used by you to build your kingdom. We may not have very much, but what we have we bring to you, knowing that you can multiply our small offering. Use us and our gifts to make a difference.

Blessing

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. And the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you and those you love, now and forevermore.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Christ's is the world in which we move		724		
Colours of day dawn into the mind	572		167	1039
Darkness like a shroud covers the earth			170	110
Great is the darkness that covers the earth			405	835
Hail to the Lord's anointed	127	474	228	204
Hark the glad sound the saviour comes	137	277	171	210
Joy to the world the, Lord is come!	135	320	330	393
Light of the world you stepped down into darkness			175	1086
Like a candle flame, flickering small in our darkness			176	420
Make way, make way for Christ the King	141	279	264	457
On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry	134	334	182	538
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord	740	286	186	631

RS – Rejoice & Sing | CH4 – Church Hymnary 4 | StF – Singing the Faith | MP – Mission Praise