

worship notes

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 7th December
The Second Sunday
of Advent
The Revd Andy Braunston

Call to Worship

Come to worship from east and west, north and south,
to prepare a way for the Lord.

Come to worship, rich and poor, comfortable and just getting by,
to prepare a way for the Lord.

Come to worship with your lives and your loves, your prejudices and your politics
to prepare a way for the Lord.

Come to be fed, inspired, and renewed;
we come to prepare a way for the Lord.

Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Grace

We come to worship, Eternal One,
full of praise for Your love and faithfulness.

We come to worship, Lord Jesus,
thankful for the faithful prophets of old.

We come to worship, Most Holy Spirit,
full of joy, yet yearning for change.

Meet us in this place, Eternal Trinity,
that as we offer our praise, You may lift our spirits;
that as we bring our thanks, You may change our hearts,
that as we bring our joy, You may inspire us to serve.

Yet despite our praise, gratitude, and joy, we are conscious, O God,
of grumbling hearts, selfish lives, and miserable spirits.
We know we easily turn away from following You,
preferring the expedient over the right,

the easy over the just,
and the pragmatic over the prophetic.
We are sorry and ask for time to change,
time to return to You,
time to put our lives, and the life of the world, right.
Have mercy, O God, and grant us time to change. Amen.

God, our Maker, is the source of all mercy,
and through the life, death, and resurrection of the Son, Jesus Christ,
has reconciled the world to His own self,
and sent the Holy Spirit amongst us for the forgiveness of sins.
Through the ministry of the Church we receive pardon and peace;
we are absolved from our sins by God,
Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, and Enlivening Spirit,
and find the strength to forgive ourselves. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Come upon us, Spirit of counsel and might,
Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord,
and be our delight.
That as the Word is read and proclaimed
in ancient and contemporary word,
we might judge with righteousness and equity,
and live in peace with people and planet. Amen.

Readings

Isaiah 11:1-10 | St Matthew 3:1-12

All Age Activity

The URC Children and Youth Work Team have prepared these notes on [hope](#) using last week's readings. Hope is the theme I've focused on in this service so that might be a useful resource. Or you may find their notes for this [week](#) with a focus on peace helpful. [These notes](#) from the team focus on today's Isaiah passage presenting it as the identity of Jesus.

Sermon Notes

Isaiah

Last Sunday's reading from Isaiah had an image from the everyday reality of military might and power - albeit with the hopeful yet unlikely image of soldiers turning weapons into agricultural tools. This week, instead of focusing on economic disparity, we are given an image of a truly righteous leader; predator and prey will lie together and even creation itself will be at one with the Creator. Against the lived reality of war, the writer proclaims peace. Against the nightmares of the age the writer offers peace! The shoot springing from disaster and destruction offers the hope of a new beginning. There wasn't, however, much cause for hope in the age in which it was written. Assyria had destroyed the northern Jewish kingdom of Israel which was a more fertile area than the southern kingdom of Judah and so produced more food. It also acted as a buffer against Assyria - a buffer which had now gone as the Assyrians came within reach of Jerusalem. These words may have been proclaimed in a city surrounded by a foreign army, giving hope to a besieged people with little food. The hope offered is of a political leader who does justice, leads with wisdom and cares for the weakest. A political leader like that, then and now, would be a marvel! In this new world absolute power does not corrupt, unlike in our world where humanity's fallenness leads to corruption, cronyism, and crisis after crisis. More, this wise ruler is dependent upon God and knows the source of peace, power, and grace is God's own self. This realisation evokes joy and delight. This is a king who will defend the poor not the elite and those who oppose him will be seen as wicked. As Christians we read this text, particularly in Advent, and our minds are drawn to Jesus as the ideal ruler. Yet for the Jewish people who heard this passage, and still read it, the yearning for a new world where justice and righteousness flow is strong. If secular folk were asked to describe a good politician the attributes in today's passage might be seen as worth considering. As we approach Christmas we are led to wonder how we embody the leadership described in this passage. How do we speak and live of justice? How do we protect the poor and vulnerable even as forces of evil and destruction are raging at the gates?

Matthew

It's often said that preachers shouldn't bring politics into the pulpit; yet our reading today is incredibly political! To understand this we need to know a little of the Old Testament story of Elijah. In the book of 2 Kings the prophet Elijah made himself a thorn in the flesh of the political leaders of the day. Queen Jezebel wanted him dead, King Ahab was at the receiving end of his barbs and, in a memorable episode, he intercepted the messengers of King Ahaziah who sought messages from a pagan deity. They reported back of the person they met who had taunted them with the line "Is there no God in Israel?" and who had told them to inform the King of his own demise. They didn't know who this prophet was but on describing "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist" the exasperated Ahaziah knew it was Elijah who had foretold his doom. In today's reading Matthew describes John the

Baptist as wearing clothes made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. The point is clear; John was playing the part of Elijah, a part that meant condemnation of the king. In this case the puppet king Herod who had married his sister-in-law against the strictures of the Jewish law and who collaborated with the Roman occupiers. John announced that it was time to repent as the people were forgetting God and that this was the long-promised time the people had been yearning for. God's reign is at hand. It doesn't get more political than critiquing the royal family, telling people to change their ways, and announcing that the current order of things will be overthrown! In case anyone was to miss the political implications, John dressed as the prophet Elijah. John's ministry was successful with people coming to be baptised in the Jordan to symbolise their turning away from sin and injustice. Even baptism in the Jordan is symbolic; in the days of old the Jewish people crossed it to enter their promised land, now a new promised land is at hand – God's kingdom. The Church gives us this reading in Advent when we are thinking of the coming kingdom inaugurated by Jesus; our Isaiah reading is taken as a sign of Jesus and we are tempted to divorce both Isaiah's prophecy and John the Baptist's preaching from their political contexts; maybe we do that so we don't have to think too much about what repentance, critique of today's rulers, and righteousness might mean for us! There's plenty in Jesus' teaching calling out hypocrisy, the misuse of religion, and a call to leave behind our destructive ways. Like his cousin, Jesus had a contemptuous relationship with Herod; before Pilate Jesus said little provoking Pilate's angry disbelief. John, and Jesus, offered hope, just as Isaiah had in his time. It might not seem hopeful to lay an axe at the root of the tree, but Isaiah reminds us that from stumps come new shoots.

Drawing the Threads

In recent years there have been two great trends in politics. In one rage and resentment are stoked as the social problems we have are blamed on migrants. Small boats crossing the Channel are seen as the biggest problem for our politicians to address; some of us, of course, might think more problems are caused by private jets and their passengers arriving. Against this angry rhetoric traditional parties try to respond by tacking towards the rabble rousers, offering some political "red meat" to the crowd in the hope it will calm their thirst. However, not all political leaders have decided to move towards the anger in order to counter it. In America Zohran Mamdani confounded the Democratic Party's establishment and was elected on a message focused on hope and changing the problems which beset us without blaming the poor and excluded. He not only gained far more votes than his competitors but also increased the size of the turnout. A hopeful sign in an age ever more cynical about our politics. In the UK Zack Polanski's new leadership of the Green Party of England and Wales is interesting in his desire to tackle the issues that others make into priorities head on. He offers a different narrative which resonates with many as speaking of hope. As others try to critique and belittle, membership of his party, and their place in the polls, increases. Regardless of what we think of the policies offered by either Polanski or Mamdani, those who are attracted to them speak of hope and social justice. Of course, it remains to be seen

if this hope is deserved, if their politics are successful, and what it might lead to, but hope in our political life is a rare thing.

Our Isaiah passage offers hope in the midst of the ever-present threat of war. Our passage from Matthew offers radical hope, hope of God's kingdom breaking in but hope tinged with action – that axe poised to bring down the fruitless. A hope that was audacious in telling the crowds to repent and not being afraid to critique the powers of the day. It seems to me that our world is crying out for hope and change; the cost of living crisis demands sacrifice and difficult choices, yet we worry that paying even more tax won't make a difference and we wonder if the very rich really pay their fair share. Rabble rousing politicians enrage the people making them take their legitimate anger out on folk who haven't caused the problems, politicians who offer hope offer an unusual analysis these days, almost Biblical in its implication: times are changing, the rich can't continue as they are and will be called to account. I'm not for a minute suggesting either Mr Polanski or Mr Mamdani are playing the part of John the Baptist, but both have been nurtured by Scriptural messages of justice and of a God who demands righteousness. Might their understandings of their own faith traditions help us understand ours, and its political implications, more clearly?

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God:

a God of justice who lifts the poor,

feeds the hungry, delivers the needy, and crushes the oppressor.

We believe in Jesus Christ:

God made flesh who knows what human life is like,

who through story and miracle explained who God is,

who forgave sinners, ate with outcasts,

loved the unlovely, upset the religious

and challenged the powers of His day.

For this he was unjustly tried, tortured,

and put to a shameful criminal's death.

God, however, did not leave Jesus to rot,

raising him to new life, defeating evil, sin, and death itself.

We believe in the Holy Spirit:

who nourishes us as showers that water the earth,

who makes righteousness flourish and peace abound,

who calls us to be Church

and to proclaim the Kingdom that is to come. Amen.

Intercessions

We bring our prayers to God for the needs of the world, the Church, those we love, and ourselves knowing that God holds us in love and inspires us to change.

Eternal God,
we look at our world and its needs
seeking Your wisdom and understanding;
our world is at war, and where not at war busy preparing for it,
yet we long for peace.

Give your counsel to peacemakers
bless their efforts of diplomacy and dignity, of passion and protest,
that lands, homes, and children may be safe,
that people need not flee for their lives,
and that justice will flow.

God, in your mercy...**hear our prayer!**

Risen Lord Jesus,
we look at Your Church and its needs
seeking fortitude and knowledge,
the Church suffers through persecution and indifference,
yet we long to follow You.

We pray for congregations meeting in secret,
where prayers are said in fear and candles lit in darkness.
We pray for congregations facing closure knowing their work is complete,
and for Christians in these islands
faced with indifference, suspicion, and distrust.
Give us a vision of who we are to be, Lord Jesus,
in these changing times.

God, in your mercy...**hear our prayer!**

Most Holy Spirit,
we look at our own lives and needs,
and the needs of those we know and love,
seeking fear of the Lord and righteousness.

We bring to You, first those who are ill in mind, body or spirit,
those in despair and think life not worth living...

We lift ourselves before You,
faithful, yet often faithless, disciples,
a holy, yet often unholy, people,
folk who are fearful of social change, attitudes and values
when we should be full of awe for You alone...

Remake us, O Spirit,
that as we bring our needs,
the needs of the Church,
and the needs of our world before You,
we act to make a difference.

God, in your mercy...**hear our prayer!**

We bring all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught saying, Our Father...

Offertory

The prophets in our world tell us not to flee the wrath to come but adapt to the changing climate. Our prophets point out the idiocy of business as usual in the face of catastrophic changes and urge us to live more simply so that others may simply live. Giving is part of the change we need to embrace; giving to charities and good causes, giving of our time, talents, and treasure. Giving our love with generous hearts.

In our churches the length and breadth of our nations we give; we offer hospitality, we collect food for the hungry, we give money to causes near and far, we give of our own time and love so that others may value themselves and God more highly. And, of course, we give with our finances; sometimes in the plate, sometimes in envelopes or via standing orders directly to the bank so our money arrives even if we don't! So, we offer our all our gifts, of time, talent and treasure to God, that it may be used to pave the way of the Kingdom. Let us pray

God of every good gift,
we thank You for all that is given here in this congregation,
let our gifts and generosity be signs of our love and life,
that the voices crying in the wilderness of our world
may prepare a way for your coming kingdom. Amen.

Holy Communion

Introduction

God be with you!

And also with you!

Lift up your hearts!

We lift them up to God!

Let us give God our thanks and praise! **It is right and proper so to do!**

It is indeed right and good to give You thanks and praise,
almighty God and everlasting Maker, through Jesus Christ your Son.
For when he humbled himself to come among us in human flesh,
he fulfilled the plan You formed before the foundation of the world
to open for us the way of salvation.
Confident that Your promise will be fulfilled,
we now watch for the day when Christ our Lord will come again in glory.
And so we join our voices with angels and archangels
and with all the company of heaven to proclaim Your glory
for ever praising You and singing:

The Slane Sanctus

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Holy, most holy, all holy the Lord,
in power and wisdom for ever adored.
The earth and the heavens
are full of your love;
our joyful hosannas re-echo above.

Blessèd, most blessed, all blessed is he,
whose life makes us whole,
and whose death sets us free;
who comes in the name of the Father of light,
let endless hosannas resound in the height.

Thanksgiving & Memory

Yes, Holy One, we bring You our praises for Your marvellous work;
You formed us in Your very image,
set us in the midst of all creation,
and made this world a garden of delight.

For this we thank You; for this we praise You!

Yet we chose not to work with Your creation but go our own way,
abusing and exploiting Your world and each other.
In response You gave holy law to guide us, judges to protect us,
and prophets to call us back to You
through hard, direct, and often political words and action.
Yet we did not listen and so,

in Your good time, You became one of us, one with us.

For this we thank You; for this we praise You!

In Jesus You know what human life is like,
its glory and tragedy, its joy and sorrow.

Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor, healing for the sick,
sight for the blind, release for captives, and the coming of Your Kingdom.

For preaching love and fidelity

He was betrayed by one he loved.

For proclaiming justice and peace,

He was given over to secret trial, lying witnesses and violent torture.

For showing how abundant life brings joy,

He was nailed to a cross and left to shameful death.

But You did not leave Him in the grave, and raised Him on high,
defeating death, sin, and injustice.

For this we thank You; for this we praise You!

Institution

Before He was given over to betrayal, torture and death,

Jesus shared in the simplicity of a meal with his friends.

During the meal he took some bread, said the ancient blessing,
broke it, and gave it to His disciples saying:

“Take this all of you and eat it, for this is my body, broken for you.”

After Supper he took the cup filled with wine,

said the ancient blessing, and, giving the cup to his friends, said

“Take this all of you and drink from it,
this is my blood given for the forgiveness of sins,
do this in memory of me.”

So let us proclaim the mystery of our faith:

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Epiclesis

Holy One,

as we remember Jesus’ life, death, and new life,

send Your Holy Spirit on these simple things of bread and wine

that they may be for us the communion with the body and blood of Christ.

Gather us into heaven with You,
that as we eat and drink we may encounter our risen and ascended Lord
as both guest and host at this table.

Send Your Holy Spirit on us,
that our lives, both simple and complex,
may be signs of Your coming kingdom,
breaking into our world, turning lives around,
and reminding us of the proper order of things.

And so, through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus,
with the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is Yours,
O Most High, for ever and ever, Amen!

Post Communion Prayer

O Lord our God,
make us watchful and keep us faithful
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord;
that, when he shall appear,
he may not find us sleeping in sin
but active in his service and joyful in his praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Blessing

May the One who yearns for peace and justice,
the One who proclaims the coming Kingdom,
and the One who calls us to action,
bless you with a hunger and thirst for righteousness,
that you may be ready when Christ comes again.
And the blessing of Almighty God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Eternal Majesty, Enfleshed Word, and Enlivening Spirit,
be with you all now and always, Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Make Way	141	279	264	457
On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry	134	334	182	538
Isaiah the Prophet Has Written of Old		241		
When Out of Poverty Is Born		291		
Bread of the World In Mercy Broken	443	318		
Come Thou Long Expected Jesus	138	472	169	102
Hark the Glad Sound, the Saviour Comes	137	277		210
Alleluia, Hurry, the Lord is Near		280		
Wait For the Lord		276		
Wild and Lone the Prophet's Voice			189	
All Over the World The Spirit Is Moving				18
Christ Is Coming Let Creation		475		
Hear the Call of the Kingdom			407	1282
Long Ago, Prophets Knew			178	
May the God of Hope Go With Us Every Day			411	256

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

Other Ideas

Find a [recording](#) of Prepare Ye from Godspell to open worship with.

This hymn Now the Heavens Start To Whisper works very well to the Welsh tune [Suo Gan](#)