

worship notes

from the United Reformed Church



6th December 2026
Advent 2
The Revd Andy Braunston

Call To Worship

Comfort, comfort O my people!
Come and experience God's tender love,
who speaks to us through nature's noise, and earth's calm!
We prepare the way!

Come and set aside your tiredness and trauma,
your disappointments and dejection,
for God longs to meet us here!
We prepare the way!

Come, even though, like grass, you feel withered,
even though, like old flowers, you feel you have faded
for God will gather us like lambs and gently lead us.
We prepare the way!

Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Grace

We come, O Most High,
to find, in Your presence, comfort and peace,
balm for our souls, healing for our pain,
and tenderness in a world of bitterness and gall.
We come with our longing and yearning for a better world,
for warfare and terror to cease,
for the poor to be enriched,
and the rich humbled before You.
We long for justice to flow even as evil flourishes.
We wonder why You delay
as our planet cries for renewal.

We come, Lord Jesus,
conscious of our own needs, pain, and failure.
We know You will forgive our iniquity,
pardon our sin,
and revive us.

We know You are patient,
and yearn for all to change their lives,
embrace love and justice,
and turn to You.
Give us grace, Lord, to recognise our failures,
and time to turn our lives around.

We come, Most Holy Spirit,
knowing You long to find us at peace,
without spot or blemish in Your sight.
In Your presence faithfulness and truth meet,
justice and well-being kiss,
truth springs from the earth,
and justice looks down from above.
help us then, to accept the blessing of forgiveness You bring,
and to be blessings to others,
and to the earth,
as we prepare the way. Amen.

Advent Candle Lighting

O Most High, may our lives, like these candles,
enlighten the gloom,
that we may be Your messengers,
preparing the way in the wildernesses of our world,
spreading Your light, love, and liberation. Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

Prepare the valleys of our hearts and minds, O God,
that as we hear Your Word,
You may straighten a highway within us,
that we may know, understand, and follow Your way,
now and always, Amen.

All Age Activity

[This All Age activity](#) from the URC Youth and Children Team focuses on the idea of gentleness found in the Isaiah reading

Readings

Isaiah 40:1-11 | Psalm 85: 4 -13 | 2 Peter 3:8-15a | St Mark 1: 1-8

Isaiah

Richard Clifford, SJ in JBC21 notes that 30 or so years after the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple, imprisoned the king, and carted off the upper classes into exile, a Jew whose name is unknown to us came to the conclusion that the divine judgement of Israel which saw its overthrow and ruin was the start of a period of purification. So strong was his conviction he began to preach that the process of purification had reached its aim. Those words are recorded in the middle section of what we know as the Book of Isaiah and spans chapters 40 – 55. The earliest part – chapters 1 – 39 - by Isaiah of Jerusalem, deals with a threat from Assyria some 200 years earlier. Our unnamed prophet's work was added to that work and today's famous passage is one of hope and joy at Exile's end. This was not just a political opportunity but a national vocation. Christians have read this section of what we now call Isaiah and used it to explain the extraordinary events of Jesus' life and message. Our Gospel passage quotes this section of Isaiah to show that, in Christ, a new Exodus was underway. Clifford notes that Paul uses this section of Isaiah a lot as it invites Christians of every era to engage in our own journey from slavery to freedom. We put aside the idols of our time in order to journey towards an encounter with God. John Goldingay in NIB adds that chapters 40-55 are sited in the changing political fortunes of Babylon when its power was eclipsed by Persia. He notes that this section is addressed both to Jews in Babylon and those who were left in Israel. Specifically on today's passage Clifford notes the prophet's words were hard to accept. His simple goal was to persuade the Jewish people to return to Israel – a place of ruin. The prophet must speak honestly to the people about God as they are so traumatised by defeat and exile they can no longer trust or hope. v 6-8 is actually a conversation between the prophet and a heavenly being but this isn't clear in most translations. It helps to set it out, for the reader, as script:

- Voice 1: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...A voice says, "Cry out!"
Voice 2 Another asks: "What shall I cry? All flesh is grass;...their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers; the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass...
Voice 1 The grass withers; the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever...

In this exchange the prophet is saying why he cannot just glibly announce salvation to a shattered traumatised people. Like short-lived grass the people are exhausted and can't comprehend such news. The people are demoralised because of the breath of the Lord has chastised them. The heavenly voice concedes this is the case but says now the Lord's breath will restore them – this extra piece of news is something, Goldingay notes changes things. Shore-Goss and Melcher in CEJL note the plentiful allusions to nature in the text – God's transformation comes from the wild places – from nature. God's power will be manifested through nature "every valley shall become level and the rough places a plain" and the transformation of the wilderness will be sign of God's presence and power. Metaphors from nature also show the inconstancy of humanity and our fleeting lives – all

those words about grass. Finally, the passage offers us a vision of God's care for nature even as God cares for humanity "he will feed his flock like a shepherd..."

A forsaken, traumatised people are offered hope, told to prepare a way of return, and to see in the natural world signs of God's presence and purpose. A message which is hard for a devastated people to accept will be made possible by the hope-giving breath of the Lord.

Psalms 85

Konrad Schaefer, OSB, in the JBC21 notes this poem is a communal lament which moves from thanksgiving in vv2-4, through a petition for restoration in 5-8, to a prophecy of fulfilment in the final verses. What God has done in the past is hope enough for a promise of future rescue. God's peace fans out to the whole created order with righteousness looking down from heaven uniting with earth's faithfulness. Rolf Jacobson in NIB holds the poem is a liturgy which both offers petitions to, and receives assurance from, God whilst C S Rodd in OBC notes that, as with most Psalms, there's no real historical or liturgical context for the piece. Some interpreters place it after the Exile and think it echoes the content of Isaiah 40-55 – no doubt why the Lectionary editors set it to accompany the Isaiah 40 passage. As such it reflects the hardships the returned exiles faced which were so different from their hopes. Others think it belongs before the Exile and the salvation referred to was the Exodus from Egypt. Others note the difficulty in interpreting tenses from Hebrew and wonder if the whole Psalm is a lament. Compare, for example, the NRSV's "Lord, you were favourable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin" with "O ETERNAL One, You will favour Your land, restore Jacob's fortune; You will forgive Your people's iniquity, pardon all their sins." from a version by the Jewish Publication Society. Shore-Goss and Melcher note the Psalm was written in a time of crisis and represents a plea for restoration, and the Psalmist personifies nature in v11 and v13. Shore-Goss and Melcher ask which qualities in a restored nature around you might represent the promised salvation in this Psalm?

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Terrance Callan (JBC21) notes this is a testamentary letter where the writer, approaching death, bade farewell to people he knew and offered advice. The writer knew of Paul's letters (see the last verse of today's passage) which might indicate they'd been gathered together into a single volume; this means the letter might date from around the year 100 (when the first references to a grouping of Paul's letters appear). The letter purports to come from Simon Peter, but most contemporary scholars think this is unlikely as it was written too late for Simon Peter to be alive (he died in the mid 60s); the language and literary style are unlikely to have come from a simple Galilean fisherman whose first language would not have been Greek. Today's passage is from a longer chapter where the writer refutes the claims of those who think nothing has changed since the beginning of creation; he understands that this claim is based on the fact they longed for second

coming of Christ had not yet happened and so observes that time is differently experienced by God than humans. The quotation from the Psalm about “a thousand years is as a day” fits neatly into this idea. We can’t, the writer notes, say that God has delayed as our perception of time is totally different to God’s. Further the writer notes the Second Coming had not yet happened to give further opportunities for repentance. God’s patience is not to be understood as a delay – and since no one knows the day nor the hour it’s not possible to say it’s been delayed.

St Mark 1:1-8

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark offers no account of Jesus’ birth. Lawrence M Wills in JANT notes the word “Gospel”, meaning “good news”, was not used in the first Century Israel to describe a book - but the news of God’s coming deliverance. (Though C M Tuckett in OBC notes that the use of the word here probably helped add a new, literary meaning to the term “Gospel”.) In the Roman world *euangelizomenos* or the “announcement of good news” would refer to the news of peace brought by the emperor (and peace always came at the cost of the subjugated.) Wills notes both meanings – peace and deliverance would have reverberated in the minds of those who heard these words – Jesus’ identity as messiah “anointed one” or, in Greek, *christos* uses terms normally applied to the King of Israel, the high priest, a prophet or even the King of Persia in Isaiah 45.1. Wills notes that the OT never uses the term to a future Davidic king, but Stephen P Ahearne-Kroll in the JBC21, thinks some groups in this period envisioned a royal messiah who would save the people from Roman tyranny. “Son of God” could be understood as a royal title (see Ps 2:7, 89: 26-7) and is used outside Judaism in Egypt and in Rome where Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Ceasar and called himself *divi filius* “son of the god”. Tiberius, the adopted son of Augustus, used a similar title of himself “...son of the deified Augustus”. Mark clearly uses these titles to make some political statements about Jesus. Preaching the Kingdom of God in contrast to the temporal Roman empire was different – but perhaps Mark was seeking to redefine what a kingdom was. The second part of Isaiah (40-55) was one often quoted by both Jews and early Christians, but the quotation attributed to Isaiah is, actually, from Malachi (3:1)! Matthew and Luke correct this in their works. The idea of “preparing your way” and “preparing the way” have resonances with Acts 9 where the earliest Christians called themselves, simply, as those “belonging to the way”. The Way, Wills notes, might mean a community or religious movement but also suggests a new exodus. Just as the Jews were released from slavery in Egypt, so they may now be released from Roman oppression. Wills notes this was a common rallying cry for other Jewish preachers in the period. Turning to John the Baptist and baptism, Wills notes water purification rituals in in the OT (Lev 13:6, 15: 5-10) but a strong interest in them at the turn of the Common Era. Judith 12:7-9 – written about 100 years before Christ – notes a bathing purification. A “baptism of repentance” would have been such a ritual to effect forgiveness of sin. CM Tuckett in OBC notes that whilst there is a theme in Mark where Jesus tells people to keep quiet about his powers, there’s no secrecy in these opening verses – the truth is clear with the next few verses complementing today’s passage making Jesus’ identity clear.

Weaving the threads

Imagine a pastor wandering war torn Gaza amid the devastation of forced movement, genocide, starvation, and war crimes, announcing hope! Imagine a priest wandering in no man's land on the borders of Ukraine and Russia, amid deserted towns with drones flying overhead, and thousands injured each week, proclaiming peace! You start, then, to get a sense of the difficulties in Isaiah's ministry. Proclaiming hope and peace to a people living with trauma is hard; getting people to look up from their pain is a challenge; yet this was Isaiah's ministry. What might this task mean for us as the pain of our lives and our world can cause profound trauma meaning people have no time for hope and no belief in peace. The Psalmist's call for salvation is one which rings down the ages but what might salvation mean for us? Is it more than an assurance of eternal life? Biblical writers were very grounded in their views of salvation – liberation from Egypt and Babylon, living in peace with justice. What might salvation look like for you, as a preacher, if, like the Psalmist, you personified it in nature. Clean rivers and streams freed from human waste? Plastic free seas cleared of humanity's detritus? As we continue to wait for the Lord's return we live with 2,000 years of knowledge the Church has waited for that eventual salvation. We may want to see the Second Coming as myth or pious hope, yet every time we share Communion we proclaim "Christ will come again". What do we wait for? For what do we yearn in that Second Coming – the writer of 2 Peter, echoed (perhaps unknowingly) Revelation's dream of a new heaven and earth where "righteousness is home." As we wait, of course, we seek to work for that state of affairs in the here and now. Mark calls us to prepare – prepare for the Good News of God's coming deliverance in Christ, prepare the way for Christ and to prepare to be people of the way – a way of freedom, a way in contrast to the ways of the world, a way taken with others who follow Jesus.

Commentaries:

<i>JBC21</i>	Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21 st Century, T&TC Clark, 2022
<i>NIB</i>	The New Interpreter's Bible, Abingdon Press, 2010
<i>CEJL</i>	Canterbury Earth Justice Lectionary, Canterbury Press, 2026
<i>OBC</i>	The Oxford Bible Commentary, Oxford University Press, 2001
<i>JANT</i>	The Jewish Annotated New Testament (2 nd Edition)

Affirmation of Faith

We believe the Most High
prepares a way in the ruins of our world
even in the wastelands, battlefields,
and abandoned towns of our time;
a way which offers peace and justice,
dignity and freedom, to all people.

We believe that Jesus Christ,
will come again bringing a new heaven and earth,
a place where all creation will flourish,
the hungry will be fed, the poor will be enriched,
and where rivers will be clean
and the seas freed from humanity's contamination.

We believe that the Holy Spirit,
prepares our hearts, minds, and lives
to proclaim a coming Kingdom,
in contrast to the governments and leaders of our age;
a Kingdom where God dwells, righteousness reigns,
and all will be well, for ever and ever, Amen.

Offering

To prepare God's way requires time, talents, and treasure. We set about the work of living and proclaiming the Gospel with our hearts, minds, and lives. We proclaim as we spend time listening to another's pain, as we offer a helping hand, as we use our gifts and skills in a range of charities, we find, in the community of the Church both comfort and inspiration as we use our gifts to build up a community which is an echo of the coming Kingdom. We offer thanks for all that is given in our churches; gifts of time and tenderness, gifts of talent and tenacity in the face of indifference and ignorance of Christ's life and claims, and gifts of treasure and toil. Let us pray:

All things come from You, O God,
and of Your own do we give You.
Help us to use these gifts wisely,
to prepare Your way,
 in our hearts,
 in our lives,
 and in our world,
that, when he comes again,
Christ will find us ready. Amen.

Holy Communion

As we gather at this table,
we remember that Jesus was born of Mary;
he lived our common life on earth;
he suffered and died for us;
on the third day God raised him from the dead;
and he is always present with us through the Holy Spirit.
In his presence, and in the company of all the people of God,
past, present, and to come,

we celebrate the Supper of the Lord
and listen to his words in the Book of Revelation:

‘Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.’

URC Worship Book, Third Order of Holy Communion

Hear again the words of institution of this feast as they are given by the Apostle Paul: For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also after supper, saying ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:23-6

The Lord be with you **and also with you.**

Lift up your hearts **we lift them up to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God, **it is right to give God thanks and praise.**

Loving, all-powerful and ever-living God,
we do well always and everywhere
to give You thanks through Jesus Christ our Lord.
When he humbled himself
to come among us as a human,
Jesus fulfilled the plan You formed long ago
and opened for us the way to salvation.
Now we watch for the day,
hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours
when Christ our Lord will come again in his glory.
And so, with all the choirs of angels in heaven
we proclaim your glory
and join in their unending hymn of praise.

(1970 Roman Missal Preface for Advent)

The Skye Boat Song Sanctus

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**Holy, most holy, all holy the Lord,
God of all pow’r and might:
Heaven and Earth with your glory abound**

**wrapped in eternal light.
Blessed is he, he who has come,
come in the Father's name,
Servant and Lord, Saviour and Judge, making his royal claim.
Holy, most holy, all holy the Lord,
God of all pow'r and might.
Now with hosanas and jubilant praise,
earth and the heav'ns unite.**

We give thanks to you, O God,
that from the earth you cause the grain to come
for the making of bread
and that you cause the vine to yield fruit.
We praise you for Christ,
the bread of life and true vine,
whose body was given for us,
and whose blood was poured out for us.

By your Holy Spirit sanctify us
and these your gifts of bread and wine,
that the bread which we break
may be the communion of the body of Christ,
and the cup which we bless
may be the communion of the blood of Christ.

As we share the sufferings of Christ,
so give us grace to know the power of his resurrection,
that we may be made one and evermore abide in him,
to your praise and glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

URC Worship Book, Third Order of Holy Communion

The body and blood of Christ, given for us.

Post Communion Prayer

Strengthen for service, Lord,
the hands that have taken holy things.
May the ears that have heard your word
be deaf to clamour and dispute.
May the eyes that have seen your great love
shine with the light of hope.
May the tongues that have sung your praise also speak the truth.
May the feet that have walked in your house ever walk in the light.

May the bodies that have tasted your living body
be restored to newness of life.
Thanks be to God for his gift beyond words. Amen.

*from the Malabar Liturgy
as rendered in the URC Worship Book*

Blessing

May the One who delivers,
the One whose way is prepared,
the One who brings renewal,
deliver you from all that drags you down,
give you time to prepare the way,
and renew your hearts and minds,
and the blessing of Almighty God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
or the Eternal One, the Enfleshed Word, the Enlivening Spirit
be with you all, now and always, Amen.

Music

See the Advent hymn grid on the Worship Notes Page.

Why not start worship with *Prepare Ye* from Godspell?