

The Vine at Home

13th December 2020 - Third Sunday in Advent – Year B

Call to worship

Advent God, come amongst us.
God of hope, shine your light upon us,
Flickering, like a candle flame,
Advent God, we put our hope in you. Amen.¹

Hymn: 217 STF – Silent Night

Opening Prayers

Gracious God, “Drop Thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease...”

[Pause]

“Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.”

[Pause]

Take our busyness
Take our excitement
Take our impatience
Take our fears
Take our uncertainties

Take our confessions
and lead us to bring good news to the oppressed;
lead us to where broken hearts need binding;
lead us to where captives can be liberated;
lead us to where mourners yearn to be comforted;
lead us to proclaim the year of your favour. Amen.²

Let us now say the Lord’s Prayer

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 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;

²to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to 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.

⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing;^[a] I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹Their descendants shall

¹ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Phil Craine

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, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.³

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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

The Testimony of John the Baptist

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

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. **25** They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah,^[b] nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” **26** John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, **27** the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” **28** This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.⁴

Reflections on the readings

Today’s reflections come from Carolyn Lawrence, the current Vice President of the Methodist Conference.

Well what a year 2020 has been!

When we celebrated last New Year’s Eve none of us could have envisaged the changes that have happened during this year. If someone had told us back in January that we would soon be wearing masks, unable to sing in church, unable to cuddle our grandchildren and conducting all our services and meetings online we would never have believed them! I certainly never expected my year as Vice President to begin with a virtual induction, delivering a speech in an empty room to a camera and then conducting my District Visits on Zoom from my study!

Change is a constant in our lives. Some change is for good and other change can be destructive but like King Canute trying to hold back the tide, we often can’t control the changes happening around us and that can be scary.

^{3, 4} Bible Text is from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved

The lectionary passages for today all speak to us about change and transformation. As we reflect on the story of John the Baptist, preparing the way for the coming of Jesus, we remember that he was pointing to the light that was to come to transform the darkness in people's lives.

During Advent we again remember the promise that God is with us in Jesus and that we are never alone if we invite him to be part of our lives. Today more than ever, the world needs to hear that message of hope that is contained in the story of the incarnation. And as individuals, we too need sometimes to be reminded of the great and comforting truth of the presence of Jesus and his promise never to leave us or forsake us.

From these readings, the one that really resonated with me was the passage from Isaiah 61. Interestingly, in my Bible, this section is titled, 'The Year of the Lord's Favour'. It made me laugh to begin with as I considered the year that has passed, but on further reflection it really struck a chord with me.

This passage, which Jesus used to proclaim the nature of his ministry, speaks powerfully of the transformation that God can bring to individuals and communities. It declares that the poor will hear good news, the broken hearted will be bound up, the captives will be freed, those who mourn will find comfort and be given a crown of beauty in place of ashes, despair will be turned to praise and ancient ruins will be restored and rebuilt.

What a wonderful message of hope to us, especially after the way our world has been rocked this past year.

This year has been tough for us all and I know that many have experienced confusion, disorientation, loss, despair, grief, isolation and discouragement. Many have told me that they feel that they are living in a strange land and it can sometimes seem that we are now living amongst the ashes of our former way of life.

My husband and I were mission partners for a while in Guyana in South America, and before we moved overseas, we had some cross cultural training. We were taught that moving to a new culture could be like a bereavement process and that it would take time to adjust and adapt to a new way of living with different traditions and expectations. In fact, Psalm 126 was a real comfort to me at that time as we said goodbye to our families and we felt we were like the ones who went out weeping, carrying seed to sow and trusting God to bring good from a difficult season. In fact I can look back now and see God's hand on our time overseas and also remember the joy as we came home and adapted again to life in the UK.

This past year has been like living through a bereavement in many ways and all of us could have done with some cross cultural training to learn how to adapt to new ways of living and interacting as well as new ways of worshipping and being church.

Whilst walking on the South West Coast Path earlier this year, I came to a part of the cliff that had crumbled away into the sea and the path had had to be diverted further inland. This spoke to me about the current difficulties and I reflected that the path of our lives, which previously seemed secure, has crumbled away from underneath us and we are having to divert the path as we adjust to new ways of living.

I have been encouraged by hearing many stories of the creative and exciting ways that churches have been finding to enable worship to take place, to care for the vulnerable in their communities and to reach out with the love of Jesus in their villages, towns and cities.

Despite the difficulties, and the uncertainties, I truly have seen God bringing beauty from ashes.

My prayer for you today is that you will know the transforming power of God despite difficult circumstances, that you will know the comfort of the presence of God with you and that you will be given the garment of praise in place of a spirit of despair and walk forward in hope, faith and trust, safe in God's hands. Amen.⁵

Prayers of intercession

Heavenly Father, Saviour of all people

We pray you would bring comfort to those who are struggling and to those that mourn. We pray that you would bring healing to those suffering. Please give us compassion towards those that are hurting.

[Pause]

Loving Father, our Restorer

We pray that you would fill us with your love, so that we would long to share it and that others would come to know you. Bring transformation in people's hearts so they would have eyes to see and ears to hear what we have to share.

[Pause]

Faithful Father, Promise Keeper

We pray for thankful hearts, where we are able to rejoice and delight in life and in you. Give us the peace that comes only from you so we would be people of contentment. Help us to bring your peace into our families, into our country and into this world.

[Pause]

Father of all creation, our Shepherd,

We pray for our world and for breakthrough. We pray for those that are being persecuted. Help us to stand up for injustice and speak out.

*[Pause]. Amen.*⁶

Hymn: 169 STF – Come thou long expected Jesus

Blessing

May the promise and the hope of the Advent season fill our hearts and minds with the true spirit of giving and send us out to live and work for the good of all people. Amen.⁷

⁵ Reflection written by Carolyn Lawrence

⁶ Prayers of intercession written by Alice Young

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker