

Worship for 29th November 2020
Winchester, Eastleigh & Romsey Circuit

Preparation

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1: 8)

This message to the exiled John is my favourite verse for spelling out the message of Advent. God was at the start of creation, is very much in the present and, in due time, will complete his work.

Prayer

We adore you, O God, for all that you are, even though you are always beyond what our minds can take in. So we thank you, O God, Creator, Saviour and Life-giver, that you spelt out in Jesus your character of love. Amen.

This hymn (MHB 254) is part of a long poem, complex and including some 'old' words but it can help us ponder the message of Advent: God in Christ will complete his work. (Sing it if you can but it might give you further insights if you also read it!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkeMTbilzXE>

Hark what a sound, and too divine for hearing,
Stirs on the earth and trembles in the air!
Is it the thunder of the Lord's appearing?
Is it the music of his people's prayer?

Surely he cometh, and a thousand voices
Shout to the saints, and to the deaf are dumb;
Surely he cometh, and the earth rejoices,
Glad in his coming, who hath sworn: I come!

This hath he done, and shall we not adore him?
This shall he do, and can we still despair?
Come, let us swiftly fling ourselves before him,
Cast at his feet the burden of our care.

Through life and death, through sorrow and
through sinning,
He shall suffice me, for he hath sufficed:
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.

(Frederic W.H. Myers, 1843-1901)

If you have Advent candles,
feel free to light the first one
now, if you haven't done so
already!



Prayer of Thanksgiving

Dear God, we thank you for everyone and every happening that stretches our mind and spirit – people who have different experiences and expectations than we have, happenings that force us out of our usual pattern of life – helping us to see wider horizons and to gain further resources for living in the present. **Amen.**

Confession and Forgiveness

Dear God, forgive us when we close heart and mind to what is happening and try to live as if nothing changes. Give us such trust in your love that will help us more freely to live and grow as your children, members of your global family. We ask it in the name of Jesus. **Amen.**

Collect for the first Sunday of Advent

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ
came to visit us in great humility:
that, on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

(Methodist Worship Book, p 523)

Here are the Bible readings for Advent Sunday:

Isaiah 64: 1-9

Psalms 80: 1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

Mark 13: 24-37

Reflection

“Be on guard! Be alert!” Jesus said to his friends in challenging times for him and for them, as they were thinking and talking about when God would wrap up everything to complete his purposes.

It’s a challenging time now for us, worldwide. ‘Wash your hands, mask your face, keep your distance’, is a common demand in the present pandemic, urging us to be on our guard and to keep alert. That’s on top of anything else going on in our lives that may call for our attention!

Chapter 13 of Mark’s gospel has been described as ‘the little apocalypse’. The word ‘*apocalypse*’ comes from the Greek ‘*apocalupsis*’, which means a ‘*revealing*’ or ‘*unveiling*’. The book of Revelation is a notable example in the Bible of that type of literature which speaks about ‘*the end of time*’, using picture language to describe what is beyond words and as a way of helping people who are going through dire times.

Chapter 13 of Mark’s gospel is another, much shorter biblical example of that kind of writing, though it also seems to include references to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in AD 70, with all the horror and massive change involved then for the civilian population.

Our reading from Isaiah (about six hundred years before the time of Jesus) is also from a time of change and uncertainty when Babylonian rule was being ended by the Persian Empire. Jews were beginning to move back from Babylon to Jerusalem, nearly half a century after their parents and grandparents had been forcibly removed from their homeland.

Amidst that sort of change, Isaiah calls out to God, “*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down... Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. You are the potter, we are the clay, we are all the work of your hand.*” We find a similar trusting appeal to God in Psalm 80 and I will use that in our prayers later: “*Restore us, O God, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.*”

Mark tells us that when Jesus and his disciples were talking about challenging times ahead of them, he warned “*Be on guard! Be Alert!*” That’s how many translations put it, though the 1611 Authorised Version gives us “*Take ye heed, watch and pray*”.

There is a similar piece of advice given by Jesus to three disciples who were with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew that he would soon be arrested and killed. He told them, “*Stay here and keep watch.*” He agonised in prayer for some time and when he returned later they were asleep. He told them “*Could you not watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.*”

Jesus knew for himself that praying is an important way of keeping watch. That’s true for us in these Covid times as in any other time of crisis and change. Prayer is a way of seeing our challenging changes in the light of eternity, our short-term human view in the context of God’s ages-long purposes and his help on the journey.

Isaiah knew this truth 2,600 years ago, as he looked to God: “*You are the potter, we are the clay...*” The psalmist knew it as he called out to God: “*Restore us, O God, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.*” Paul knew it and urged Christians in Corinth to keep trusting God, ‘*as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed*’.

There are other ways also of entering into that larger context. I think that my friend David tried to remind me of that when both of us were in our teens. He wrote in my Autograph Book: ‘*What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare...*’ In contrast to him, I was much more ‘*go*’ than ‘*be*’ and, sadly that resulted in burn-out and depression at various times, before I began to find a better balance for my life. Praying can help us to ‘*be*’, ‘*to reflect*’ as, in the presence of God, we seek to see things in the light of God’s purposes and to discover fresh resources to trust and serve him through everything.

The pandemic has reminded us that finally, we humans are not in charge of creation, a lesson that we may find frightening, even apocalyptic. Yet the final message of biblical apocalyptic, the good news of faith in God through Jesus, is that God is in charge and that we can trust him to complete his purpose of love.

As Jesus urged, we have to “*Be on guard! Be alert!*” But he also said, “*Watch and pray.*” Let’s be open to the one who is the Beginning and the End. Amen!

I'm grateful to Marilyn Pack for drawing my attention to this hymn. It seems to me that with these verses Maggie Dawn helps us to sense some of God's response and offer to us in our human need.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsjHf-IX8qo>

Hymn (StF 173)

Into the darkness of this world,
into the shadows of the night;
into this loveless place you came,
lightened our burdens, eased our pain,
and made these hearts your home.
into the darkness once again –
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love
To make us whole,
Come with your light to lead us on,
Driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Into the longing of our souls,
into these heavy hearts of stone,
shine on us now your piercing light,
order our lives and souls aright,
by grace and love unknown,
until in you our hearts unite –
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love
to make us whole,
come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come*

O Holy Child, Emmanuel,
hope of the ages, God with us,
visit again this broken place,
till all the earth declares your praise
and your great mercies own.
Now let your love be born in us,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love
to make us whole,
come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

*Come in your glory,
take your place.
Jesus, the Name above all names,
we long to see you face to face,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Maggie Dawn

Prayers for the whole Church and the World

Using a verse from Psalm 80 as our response, praying for others and for ourselves:

"Restore us, O God, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."

Dear God, we commend to you the friends of Jesus in every place, that we may catch his vision, be drawn closer to you and serve you wherever we are (thinking of some by name)

..... *"Restore us, O God, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."*

Dear God, we remember before you all who have influence and power, that your justice and compassion may infuse and guide their decisions for the wellbeing of everyone (thinking of some by name...)

..... *"Restore us, O God, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."*

Dear God, we remember before you those who are suffering in body, mind or spirit, and thank you for those who care for them and for medical scientists working behind the scenes (thinking of some by name...)

..... *"Restore us, O God, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."*

Dear God, we thank you for those who have gone before us and remember before you those who mourn and ask for your help to us all to live in the light of eternity ... (thinking of some by name...)

..... *"Restore us, O God, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."*

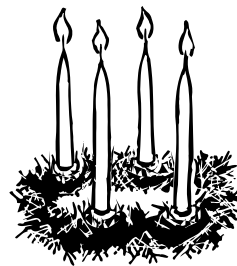
We sum up all our prayers for others and for ourselves in The Lord's Prayer ...

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.
Save us from the time of trial
And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are
yours, now and for ever. Amen.

Offering and Prayer of Dedication

Dear God, we thank you for your gifts to us and gladly offer to you our signs of commitment to serve you in the life of the Church and the world, that others also may catch glimpses of your love and alert them to your loving purposes for all your creation. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

If you lit an Advent candle earlier in the service, it may be as well to blow it out soon!



Our last hymn (StF 330) Read, pray, sing or listen.

I've often chosen this hymn by Isaac Watts for services on Advent Sunday. It's based on Psalm 98 and was published along with other hymns in 'The Psalms of David' in 1719. It was entitled, 'The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQxF-tsaJso>

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Prayer and Blessing

Sustain and nourish us all, dear God, through the work of your Spirit, in a growing awareness of the wonder of your love, and to you be glory and praise, now and for ever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This service was prepared by the Revd Eric Renouf.

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