

# Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit

Service at Home, 17th December, 2023

prepared by the Revd Eric Renouf

## Hello!

Preparing for Christmas is in top gear for many just now. It may not be for you, for one reason or another, but nevertheless Christmas is coming!

In Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, Christians prepare themselves for the 'end' of everything. Then at Christmas we welcome the Christ child, God present, to save us.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent, this process of preparation focusses on John the Baptist and his role in preparing the way for Jesus. Our first hymn echoes both the message of John the Baptist and the good news about Jesus.

## Hymn StF 171

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wwdKQfdR78>

Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,  
the Saviour promised long;  
let every heart prepare a throne,  
and every voice a song.

He comes the prisoners to release,  
in Satan's bondage held;  
the gates of brass before him burst,  
the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,  
the bleeding soul to cure,  
and with the treasures of his grace  
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,  
your welcome shall proclaim,  
and heaven's eternal arches ring  
with your beloved name.

Philip Doddridge (1702 - 1751)

## Prayer

Dear God, we thank you that you are for us and that you call us to respond to you. We ask that this time of worship will help us further in being more alert and responsive to you. Amen.

## Collect for the Day

God, for whom we wait and watch, you sent your servant John the Baptist to prepare your people for the coming of the Messiah. Inspire the ministers and stewards of your truth to turn our disobedient hearts to you; that, when Christ comes again in glory to be our judge, we may stand with confidence before him, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. **Amen.**

Our first reading, written some 600 years before Jesus was born, is a reminder that the Jewish people had looked in faith for someone who would come to make things good.

## Isaiah 61: 1-3, 8-11

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.*

*For I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.*

*I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the young plant come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.*

Hymn: StF 696

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Oi6d2sRUB1c>

For the healing of the nations,  
Lord, we pray with one accord;  
for a just and equal sharing  
of the things that earth affords.  
To a life of love in action  
help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead us forward into freedom  
from despair your world release,  
that, redeemed from war and hatred,  
all may come and go in peace.  
Show us how through care and goodness  
fear will die and hope increase.

All that kills abundant living,  
let it from the earth be banned;  
pride of status, race, or schooling,  
dogmas that obscure your plan.  
In our common quest for justice  
may we hallow life's brief span.

You, Creator-God, have written  
your great name on humankind;  
for our growing in your likeness  
bring the life of Christ to mind;  
that by our response and service  
earth its destiny may find.

Fred Kaan (1929 - 2009)

**Gospel:** John 1: 6-8, 19-28

*There was a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

*Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ'.*

*They asked him: 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'*

*John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*

*Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'*

*'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one in who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'*

*This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.*

**Sermon:**

On the third Sunday of Advent we think about John the Baptist and his role in preparing the way for Jesus. As in our gospel reading, John told his questioners that he was not one of the significant leaders and voices of the past; nor was he the Messiah for whom Jews longed and waited. John's role was to be a witness to the One who was yet to come and to prepare the way for him.

Luke gives us an insight into how John saw his calling. People were stirred by what he was telling them. His clarion call, *'change your mind and let stuff go'* was getting to them. Luke tells us what John said to various questioners.

*"What should we do then?" the crowd asked. John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors came to be baptised. "Teacher," they asked, "What should we do?" "Don't collect more than you are required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay." (see Luke 3: 10-14)*

John the Baptist, like prophets in earlier centuries, believed that God cares deeply about how we deal with each other in everyday life, especially in how we respond to those who struggle to make ends meet.

To follow that path is an integral part of how we 'prepare the way' for the One who comes to deal with our deepest needs. How we relate to each other and how we carry out our responsibilities, whatever they may be, is an essential part of our witness to Jesus.

This brings me to something that John the Baptist said about Jesus . . . how Jesus would do more than he could. *"I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I ... He will baptise you with Holy Spirit and with fire."* (see Matthew 3: 11,12)

That seems to link with a comment of Jesus about John and about those who respond to the good news of Jesus. No one is greater than John the Baptist, said Jesus, *'yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he'* (see Matthew 11:11)

Why would that be? John rightly emphasized that God requires fair dealing and called his hearers to 'repent', that is, to change their ways. Jesus also called for repentance but there was an essential plus. Mark puts it like this (see 1: 14, 15)

*'After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.'*

Good news! Jesus says that we are welcomed into a living relationship of trust and love with God. John knew that there was 'more' in Jesus than he could offer. Jesus, he said, would help us be open to God, the Holy Spirit, who enables us to live, grow and work as members of his family.

However, we have plenty to learn from John the Baptist and other prophetic voices, past and present. Thank God for people who, in song, poetry, writing, speaking, drama and action protest at the wrongs they see and who work for what will benefit others!

Jesus himself also challenged the status quo: healing on the Sabbath, turning over the tables of the temple money changers, speaking out against religious people who said one thing and did another, reaching out to people who were supposed to be untouchable.

So, as we get ready to welcome Jesus afresh at Christmas with the good news that God is 'for us', let's do what we can to help others catch their own glimpses of the sheer grace of God, who is for each and every one of us!

### **Prayer of Dedication**

Thank you, dear God, for being with us and for us in and through Jesus. In response to your sheer grace, we offer to you who we are and have, to trust and love you and to work with you, where

we are, in your life-giving and renewing work in the Church and in the world. **Amen.**

**Prayers** (leaving space for our own thoughts and prayers)

Thank you, dear God, for people who speak out against wrongs being done to others, who stand by people in their need, and who work for what is just in community, nation, and world..... We ask that they may they be strengthened in their costly service. Help us to do what we can to work for the good of all.

We thank you for all that truly makes life good in all its amazing variety. We remember before you especially those who struggle to find enough to eat and drink and a safe place for them and their families, .....especially asking that they will be given hope at Christmas.

We remember those dear to us and no longer with us, ..... leaving them in your care, and asking that we also in the here and now, trusting your love for us, may discover strength, hope and joy both for living and for serving.

We ask it all in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**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 forever. **Amen**

Our last hymn is some verses from a long poem by Frederic W. H. Myer, with the title 'St Paul'. The hymn begins and ends with what Paul once wrote to fellow Christians, how God re-assured him when Paul was going through difficult times. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is*

*made perfect in weakness."* (see 2 Corinthians 12:9). The hymn also quotes part of God's word to the Apostle John who was in exile: *"I am the Alpha and the Omega...who is, and who was, and who is to come."* (see Revelation 1:8). That perfectly sums up the message of Advent!

**Hymn:** Hymns & Psalms 236

<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 quickly 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)

**Benediction**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

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