

Parish of Central Exeter

2nd Sunday in Advent

12 December 2023

'God the Deliverer' The message of John the Baptist.



Welcome everyone.

Our reflections this morning are by Chris Bryan and the Intercessions provided by Caroline. Many thanks to you both.

The Lighting of the Advent Candles

This period was first called Advent in the fourth century and quickly developed into a month-long season of preparation not just for the birth of Jesus, but also for his second coming. The lighting of candles is another ancient tradition – the advent wreath is nineteenth century from Germany. Each candle symbolises a different aspect of the purpose of this season.

The second candle is often called the candle of peace.

If you wish to light a candle at home, do so now with these words, and we all join in with you:

Jesus is the Light of the world
A light no darkness can ever put out

We light this candle as a sign
that heaven and earth may pass away,
but the word of God will be present in the world for ever and for ever.

Call to Worship

We come to prepare the way;
The way for Christ –
the hope of Christ, the peace of Christ –
to enter our world,
to enter our hearts.
We cry out together in the wilderness:

The kingdom of heaven has come near.

We come to be part of the light—
the light that shines in the darkness.

(written by Joanna Harader, and posted on Spacious Faith. <http://spaciousfaith.com/>)

Gathering Hymn of Praise

Jubilate Everybody. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nukqkr29DP8>

Confession

The voice of one comes
crying out in the wilderness
... prepare the way of the Lord.

A messenger prepares the way,
transforming us like the refiner's fire
... calling us to account.

For the prophets of old have spoken,
announcing the breaking open of the dawn
... guiding our feet in the way of peace.

Merciful God forgive us...
Forgive us when we are quick
to point the finger at someone else.
Forgive us when we put our heads down
and ignore the cries of injustice.
Forgive us when we presume to understand
the complexity of issues that divide and distract
the peoples of the land your feet once walked.

Merciful God...
forgive us, heal us,
encourage us and speak through us,
that we may be transformed through the refiner's fire,

and the offerings of our hands and our hearts
may prepare the way for the Christ child
to be welcomed among us in peace.

*(originally posted on the Monthly Prayers page (now Weekly Worship) of
the Christian Aid website.)*

We are forgiven

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Your sins are pardoned.
The penalty is paid.
Thanks be to God.

The collect for 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 us
in great humility;
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
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.



Collect for the second Sunday in Advent

Almighty God,
purify our hearts and minds,
that when your Son Jesus Christ comes again as
judge and saviour
we may be ready to receive him,
who is our Lord and our God.

Worship song

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree; sung here by the Ensemble Altera. The lyrics were originally written in 1784. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qATg4xk9oSY>

Old Testament reading

Isaiah 40: 1-11 Comfort for God's People

40 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever.”

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
“Here is your God!”

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Gospel Reading Mark 1 1-8

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” -

³ a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with ^[e] water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”



John the Baptist

Leonardo da Vinci c 1514

Louvre Museum, Paris

Reflections on the Gospel reading

Our readings from Scripture this morning are all, in one way or another, about God acting to fulfil God's promises: which is to say, they involve what has historically been the second of the great themes of Advent: God's Judgment. They speak of this judgment through the One of whom John the Baptist says that he is "more powerful than I," and adds that "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." (Mark 1.7). They speak of God's judgment through Jesus Christ—something in which we as a church regularly declare our belief when we proclaim in the words of the Nicene Creed that we believe in "one Lord, Jesus Christ" who "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

But what do we mean by that?

The first thing we must do if we are to understand the *biblical* idea of a Judge and Judgment is to think of the Judge as a *deliverer* who comes to rescue people—like Saint George coming to rescue the princess from the Dragon in the old stories, or Robin Hood saving the poor people of Nottingham from the Wicked Sheriff, or the Lone Hero in the old Western movies who rides into town wearing a white hat and rids the citizens of the Wicked Cattle Baron

who's trying to take over. *That's* what a biblical "judge" is like. That's what the judges in the Book of Judges are like: Samson, Jephthah, and all the others. They are *heroes* who *rescue* God's people.

Biblical "judgment", essentially, is not about condemning the guilty but about *vindicating the helpless*. It's about the sort of thing we mean when we talk of "justice for the poor" or "justice for the unborn" – in other words, justice for those who are not in a position to defend or protect themselves. *It's about delivering the helpless from what oppresses them*. *That's* what we mean, or at any rate what we ought to mean, when we say that we believe in Jesus Christ who will "come in glory to judge."

What, then, *are* the things that oppress us, from which we hope to be delivered? In biblical understanding, they are two. They are *Sin* and *Death*.

Now, of course, there's a sense in which as Christians we are *already* delivered from Sin and Death. That's part of the good news of the gospel. Sin and Death are great lords in this world, but already, in virtue of our baptism, we wear the badge and livery of a different and greater lord, who is impressed by neither Sin nor Death – indeed, he has defeated them both. In virtue of our baptism neither Sin nor Death any longer has dominion over us. If we confess our sins, our Lord Jesus Christ has given power to his church to forgive them. And when we die, we die as those who have already died with Christ, and so will rise with him.

Yet although that is the *deepest* truth of our *being*, we all know very well that it is not the *manifest* truth of our *everyday experience*.

The Church herself, at the deepest level of her reality, is Christ's own, rooted in time and eternity, dreadful as an army with banners. But even the Church as we see her is also a human polity among other human polities: often confused, sinful, and divided. "Those Christians, how they love one another!" the ancient pagans are said to have said. If they did, then a glance at the New Testament will suggest that they were being more than a little romantic about us. The fact is, Christians were squabbling from the beginning about what they believed and how to live it (read Paul's Letter to the Galatians or Acts 15!) and we've been squabbling about these things ever since.

As it is with the Church, so it is with us as individuals. Yes, it is true that at the deepest level Sin and Death have no more dominion over us. Yet still we sin, and still we die, and still the earth groans with our injustice and our madness:

this week it is especially evident in Gaza and Ukraine, but it seems always to be evident somewhere. No one, perhaps, has put it better than Paul: “For the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in hope.” (Rom. 8.22–24a)

This then is what we hope to be delivered from by God’s judgment. We look for God to put Sin and Death finally and completely *behind us*. We look for Sin and Death to be put into our *past* – not proleptically, not as a promise, not as a hope, but utterly, definitively, and comprehensively. We look for Sin and Death to be cast into the Lake of Fire, the place of annihilation, as the Revelation to John says. And we look for God to wipe away *all* tears from our eyes.

Which is of course exactly what we want.

Or is it?

There is, alas, a streak in all of us that’s quite *attracted* by the things of Sin and Death—things such as Pride, Vainglory, and Wanting-to-be-as-God—the very things that, according to the Genesis story, we chose from the beginning rather than enjoying the delight and glory of Paradise.

But here’s the rub: such things as “us-being-like-God” simply can’t remain when the *real* God appears on the scene. So in the Last Judgment quite a lot of human—not to mention ecclesiastical—greatness is going to have to be done away with.

Or to put it another way, we are going to have to face the truth about ourselves. We’re going to have to admit that we have on the whole been extraordinarily unsatisfactory human beings. We are going to have to admit that there have been many occasions when we have been distinctly Dragonish rather than St. George-ish, only too pleased to be Wicked Sheriffs of Nottingham rather than Robin Hood, or Bad Cattle Barons rather than Lone Heroes, just so long as we thought we could get away with it.

And admitting *that*, openly and publicly before the eyes of angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, is not something we expect to enjoy. *We* prefer our self-deceptions and our self-righteousness. Unfortunately, however, they are lies, and since heaven can only

accommodate truth, they'll have to go. It will be a question of having one or the other: Saint George *or* the Dragon. We cannot forever have both.

But then again, if the saints are to be trusted (and I suspect they are) when the moment actually comes for our self-abandonment to Divine Providence, perhaps it will not seem such a very big thing after all – not once we have allowed ourselves to look properly into the eyes of our saviour. For then we shall know that we have found what we were *truly* looking for all the time, even in our most Dragonish moments, even in our times of greatest sinfulness and greatest folly. We shall see that the One who judges us is also our truest lover, and always has been. And in that moment the times when we wished to turn our back on God will seem like lovers' quarrels – the quarrels and difficulties between true lovers that only lead in the end to their marrying.

And that, of course, is the other image that goes in the Bible with the last Judgment: a Wedding. In the Book of Revelation, the day when the Church is judged is also the Church's wedding day, the day when she becomes Christ's bride. A wedding is the consummation and goal of what has gone before. The entire difficult, costly process of preparation, adjustment, and engagement that has led up to it. And yet, as any married person will tell you, a wedding is not therefore an end. Indeed, it is essentially a Beginning—the beginning of marriage, the beginning of a new life.

So it will be with us. We look for our Lord to come as judge and as bridegroom, so that life, our true life, with him and with each other, *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints, may begin.

That is what is promised us when our Lord comes to us in the Last Judgment.

Even so, come Lord Jesus. AMEN.

We pray (This is an extract from a poem called Voices by Heather Pencovel)

A voice
calling from the high place
God, God alone
is constant,
God speaks always
the word for the time
tender as a shepherd

when the lambs are weak
the ewes weary;
stern as the Judge
pronouncing sentence
for the squandering of creation.

God we hear you
in the dark, desolate place
in the quiet intimate place
on the high hill and deep in the heart
crying out
comforting
calling
challenging
we hear you
we hear you.
Amen.

Intercessions

In his reflections Chris has reminded us that Judgement is a key Advent theme. This is picked up by other Gospel Readings and if you go to the Book of Common Prayer and look at the reading there appointed for this Sunday (different to that in Common Worship) you will find these words: *'And there shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars; and upon earth distress of nations with perplexity'.*

'Men's hearts failing them for fear and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth'.

Father God, we hear the echoes of these words in our troubled world today. As your children, let us pray for all humanity in their conflicts and anxieties.

Dear Lord, first we pray for all those who are suffering the loss of family and friends in the wars in Gaza and in Ukraine; for those who have lost their homes, are displaced and living on the edge of despair. We hold in sorrow, grieving parents, the old and the very young.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

Gracious God we pray for all those who seek to bring comfort, aid and medical help. Many who do this work risk their own lives. Give them the courage and resilience they need and let their voices be heard as they see with their own eyes the outcome of the situation in which innocent victims of war are placed.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

Creator God, the leaders of the world have gathered at Cop28 to discuss ways forward to restore our broken world. We pray that they will have vision and strength of purpose to effect real change beyond the rhetoric. This earth we are destroying, through greed and thoughtlessness, is the world you have given us to call home. Teach us all to take better care of it, and of each other.

Lord in your mercy Hear our prayer

Almighty God, we once again await to celebrate the arrival of the babe who became our Saviour. He also was born into a troubled world, his earthly family knew how it was to be refugees. But he became our exemplar, our teacher, our redeemer paying the ultimate price on a Cross. We pray that we have the courage to follow Him more nearly and never give up the hope of redemption that he has set before us.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

Let us journey on through Advent trusting in the Light which will dispel all darkness.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen



Nativity 2022 Irena Yurchuk

Irena Yurchuk was born in Ukraine during World War II but raised in central New York, where he still resides. Nevertheless his painting reflects the bitter reality of life amid ruins faced by many people not least in Ukraine and the Holy Land.

Affirmation of Faith

Jesus taught us to speak of hope as the coming of God's kingdom.

We believe that God is at work in our world
turning hopeless and evil situations into good.
We believe that goodness and justice

will triumph in the end
and that tyranny and oppression cannot last forever.
One day all tears will be wiped away;
the lamb will lie down with the lion,
and justice will roll down like a mighty stream.

True peace and true reconciliation are not only desired,
they are assured and guaranteed in Christ.

This is our faith.

This is our hope.

(20th century South African creed.)

Worship song

'Do you hear what I hear? Sung by Hayley Westenra. Words are below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vV97HE6evNw>

Said the night wind to the little lamb,
Do you see what I see?
Way up in the sky, little lamb,
Do you see what I see?
A star, a star,
Dancing in the night,
With a tail as big as a kite.
With a tail as big as a kite.

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear?
Ringin' through the sky, shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear?
A song, a song,
High above the tree,
With a voice as big as the sea.

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,
Do you know what I know?
In your palace wall, mighty king,
Do you know what I know?
A child, a child,

Shivers in the cold,
Let us bring him silver and gold.
Let us bring him silver and gold.

Said the king to the people everywhere,
Listen to what I say!
Pray for peace, people everywhere,
Listen to what I say!
The child, the child,
Sleeping in the night,
He will bring us goodness and light.
He will bring us goodness and light.

The Peace

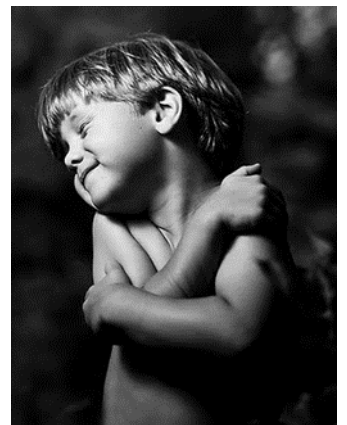
If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise,
share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer
ourselves in
penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified,
we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even
when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to Bless the Lord, my soul, from St David's Choir. Many thanks, Nigel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRLpRLaZb7E>



Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

Father in heaven,
who sent your Son to redeem the world
and will send him again to be our judge:
give us grace so to imitate him
in the humility and purity of his first coming
that, when he comes again,
we may be ready to greet him
with joyful love and firm faith;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commission

Lord,
we have pulled out the Advent wreath,
the Christmas tree, the poinsettias.
We dusted off the hymns, unsung for a year,
and unearthed the words of your prophets.

Yet, in your eyes,
these efforts are for nothing without the regular, persistent,
deep pursuit of justice for all people.
Our efforts are hollow without consistent work toward peace,
reconciliation, and participation in your mission for creation.

In our hearts, we do long to be your people,
to carry out your mission, to be lights in the darkness—
proof that no darkness can overcome your truth.

Awaken us to action.
Stir us to courage.
Rouse us to prepare a way in the wilderness for your coming,
clearing the brush of oppression, racism, injustice, and hopelessness—
so that all may see your light and perceive your coming.
Amen.

(written by lutheranjulia, and posted on RevGalBlogPals.)

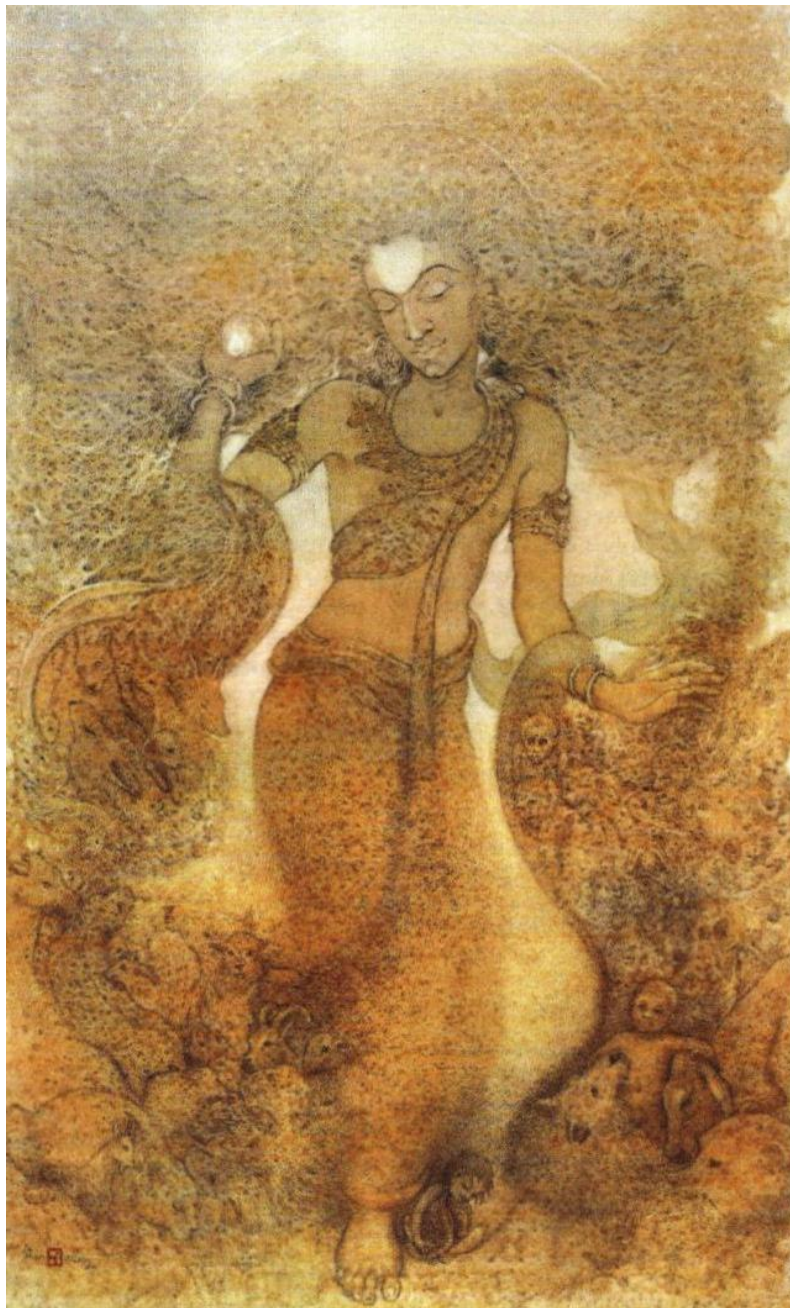
Benediction

Wherever on life's journey the Spirit has brought you to:
walk in boldness, as a beloved child of God
walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High
walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with you. Amen.

Closing Music

Gaudete! (Rejoice! – if your Latin's rusty.) Sung by the King's Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQyrD7U5aNE>



The Promise of Peace
Frank Wesley 1994.

Frank Wesley (1923–2002) is one of the twentieth century's most celebrated Indian Christian artists.

Painted in warm brown earth tones and based on Isaiah 11:1–9, it shows an Indianized Jesus ushering in the peaceable kingdom of God.