

11th December, 2022

The paper-version Service



The Good
Shepherd
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable

place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing,

the song from this Sunday's Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

O Holy Night!

The stars are brightly shining

It is the night of dear Saviour's birth!

Long lay the world in sin and error
pining

Till he appeared and the soul felt its
worth.

A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious
morn!

Fall on your knees

Oh hear the angel voices

Oh night divine

Oh night when Christ was born

Oh night divine

Oh night divine

Led by the light of Faith serenely
beaming

With glowing hearts by His cradle we
stand

So led by light of a star sweetly
gleaming

Here come the wise men from Orient
land

The King of Kings lay thus in lowly
manger

In all our trials born to be our friend

Fall on your knees ...

Truly He taught us to love one another
His law is love and His gospel is peace
Chains shall He break for the slave is
our brother

And in His name all oppression shall
cease

Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus
raise we,

Let all within us praise His holy name.

Fall on your knees ...

Sermon by Timothy James: God has arrived

Read Matthew 11.2-11

Why is there so much attention on John Baptist during Advent?

John is the **forerunner**. Jesus is quite clear about that. John is the last old covenant prophet, and the only one whose message became not “Messiah is coming” but “Messiah is here”. God has arrived.

So **the important one** is not the forerunner but the one who comes after – every time John is mentioned, he (and the gospel writers) make this clear. (I discovered this when I preached on him from John 3 in May 2021).

Advent is about Jesus’ coming (both in Bethlehem and in the future), and John points to Jesus’ (first) coming and demands that God’s people be ready. One commentator says that “Advent is meant to help us get our spiritual lives tuned up so that we’re ready when he comes back for good, for real, to conquer sin, death, hell, and the devil once and for all.”

But what does John actually say, apart from “God has arrived”?

My commentator went on to say that “John and Jesus preach the same message, the message that **Jesus is the agent of the coming kingdom of God**”.

Fundamentally, John called people to repentance and **conversion**. Advent is a season of conversion (*metanoia*, “mind-changing”) in preparation for Jesus’ coming. It has been said that “Advent is supposed to be a season of changing our minds so that our hearts will change also... Each Advent is an opportunity to journey further on that path of conversion”.

So what was John’s difficulty with what Jesus was doing? Tom Wright, in *Matthew for Everyone*, likens this to a play where the leader actor goes off script. I know what that feels like. I had a friend at my church in Birmingham who was a talented actor, but who couldn’t be bothered to learn his lines. So he would improvise. His improvisation would always be true to the story, and was always natural and extremely convincing. The trouble with acting with Richard was that you didn’t get your cue. He finished speaking, and looked at you, but you weren’t certain what you were meant to say next. So you stumbled and hesitated, and everybody thought that you had not bothered to learn your lines!

John isn’t sure of his cue. “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” Is Jesus playing the part that John was expecting him to play?

Well, no, because Jesus is one jump ahead of where John thought he should be. John is, effectively, Elijah returned, calling Israel back to faithfulness to God: “If the Lord is God, then follow him” (I Kings 18: 21). He is somewhat fire-and-brimstone and “flee from the wrath to come”, emphasising the consequences of continued unfaithfulness in judgment.

But what was the Messiah coming to do? More than even the prophets, and John, the culmination of the prophets, could see.

Jesus is giving a new understanding of God’s timetable: everything that has gone before, from Adam and Eve to John the Baptist, has been preparation; now the new era, the era of God’s direct intervention, has begun.

The work of the prophets is complete – not finished as a failure, but finished as an achievement. What they were prophesying, the one they were looking forward to, is here. God has arrived.

By telling the people (and us) about John’s importance, Jesus is by implication telling us about himself.

In Isaiah’s prophecy, which we heard today, the prophet says that “your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you”. This is just before the lines about the opening of the eyes of the blind, which Handel included in his *Messiah*. Even the Messiah’s coming in judgment was to save his people, and this is perhaps missing from John’s message.

But Jesus, although he is coming for judgment, stated his purpose as salvation: “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” (John 3: 17). He comes to bring healing and good news to the poor (cf. Luke 4:18).

We once more live in a time of preparation, and Advent reminds us of this every year. Jesus has come, but we still await his coming. We look forward to the final completion of Jesus’ mission as Messiah. But we are “greater than John”, because we already live in the new age.

What that implies is the mission to spread the Kingdom of God, in the terms set for it by Jesus’ earthly mission, until he comes again. What Jesus describes to John – “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” – is what the Kingdom looks like. As the redeemed, we walk in the Way of Holiness described by Isaiah. We prepare for the second coming by doing what Jesus did, which is to display all the saving power of God at work in the world, now.

Tom Wright sums it up in this way: “mercy was at the heart of Jesus’ messianic mission, just as it remains at the heart of the church’s work today”. That is the script we need to follow.

Prayers: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* (Philippians 4:4-6)

- Pray for this day, and the coming week.
- Pray for justice, mercy, peace, and hope.
- Pray for individuals, neighbours, and for family & friends.
- Pray for the Church.



Collect: Third Sunday of Advent

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you: grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; for you are alive and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **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. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

The Notices: We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat & Bowls: Wed. 18th Jan. at 2pm, Church Hall and Church.
- Coffee and Questions: 25th Jan at 11am in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise: TBA
- COGS Tots: 2nd Mondays. COGS Tinytots: Monday mornings.
- Messy Church: Second Sundays of the month.