

Circuit Zoom Service for Sunday 5th December, 2021, the Second Sunday of Advent

Prepared by the Revd. Alan Haine

Call to Worship: Through the prophet Malachi, God said: “I am about to send my messenger to clear a path before me. Who can stand when he appears?” As we worship this morning, may we be inspired to listen to Your messengers and to stand firm so that we may clear a path for Jesus to come into our lives, into our Churches & into our neighbourhoods.

Hymn: 171 (Singing the Faith) Hark the glad sound!

<p>1 Hark the glad sound ! The Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long ; let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song.</p> <p>2 He comes the prisoners to release, in Satan's bondage held ; the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.</p>	<p>3 He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure, and with the treasures of his grace to enrich the humble poor.</p> <p>4 Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, your welcome shall proclaim, and heaven's eternal arches ring with your beloved name.</p> <p>Philip Doddridge (1702–1751)</p>
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Prayer of Adoration and Confession:

Come, Lord Jesus: come to us right now as we worship our Father God. Help us to show that we want You to be with us in this service by the love that we have for You and for each other.

Come, Lord Jesus: come to us at Christmas-time as we celebrate Your birthday once again. As we are so busy making all our other preparations for Christmas, help us not to forget the most important thing of all: help us to make time to think about Your birth and about the difference that makes to us and to all the world.

Come, Lord Jesus: come to us in all sorts of ordinary ways. Come to us when we see someone in need of help and we understand that in helping them, we are helping You. But come to us also when we ourselves need assistance and someone else gives us the love we require: help us to see You in that person and to know that their love is Your love.

Come, Lord Jesus: come to us at the very end of time, whenever that may be, tomorrow or centuries ahead: come in a way that we cannot begin to imagine and bring all of the world's history to a great and glorious and loving conclusion.

Lord Jesus, You are ready to come to us in all these different ways, but often we are not ready for You at all: indeed sometimes You draw near to us and we are so busy thinking of ourselves that we fail to realise that You are there and so we fail to walk in Your Light as You intend.

Forgive us for that and enable us to change, so that we may be better prepared for You to come to us and to our world and may actually want You to change us. All this we ask in Your Name, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Declaration of Forgiveness: The Lord Jesus says to each one of us: “Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lighting of the Advent Ring may happen at this point. If no other words are being used, the following could be used: “Today is the second Sunday in Advent and so we light two candles on the Advent Ring. The first candle reminds us that we are part of God's people (*1st candle is lit*). The second candle helps us to remember the need to get ready for Jesus to come into our world and change us. (*2nd candle is lit*). The prophet said and John the Baptist later repeated this message: ‘Clear a road through the wilderness for the Lord, prepare a highway across the desert for our God.’ Father God, this

Advent may we prepare the way for Jesus to come into our lives, into our Churches and into our neighbourhoods. Amen.”

Talk: St. Nicholas

Have you ever heard of the country called “The Netherlands”? We sometimes know it as Holland. I wonder if any of you have ever been there? I had a very happy time in its beautiful capital city, The Hague, a few years ago. In Holland, they don’t give presents on Christmas Day, but instead will be doing that tomorrow, December 6th, because that is St. Nicholas’ Day, or Sant Niklaus as the Dutch call him. That may remind us of one of the names of Father Christmas, Santa Claus.

St. Nicholas was actually a bishop in a city called Myra, in the south of what we now know as Turkey. He lived about 300 years after Jesus. He

was a wonderful Christian and all sorts of stories were told about him, some of them rather unlikely. But one of the stories which is likely to be true is that he heard about a poor man who had 3 daughters. In those days husbands expected to be given money by the father of the bride when they married, yet this family was so poor that the father could not afford to pay anything.

So when St. Nicholas heard that the first daughter wanted to get married and needed money to be paid to her future husband, he came round to their house in the middle of the night in secret and put a large amount of money through the front door, so that she was able to marry.

Later the second daughter wanted to marry too, so Nicholas did the same for her. Last of all Nicholas heard that the third daughter was hoping to marry, so he helped her too.

So the idea of Santa Claus bringing presents in the night may come from this story about Nicholas. Yet at Christmas we don’t just remember St. Nicholas bringing gifts, but, even more important, we remember God giving the best gift of all: the baby Jesus. That reminds us that we should all be people like Nicholas who try to give to others what we can when we can. Not all of us can afford to give money, but we may be able to give others some of our time and some of our love. For, as we give to others, we are also giving to God as a way of saying “thank you” for all God’s love. And by doing that we are helping both ourselves and other people to get ready for God to come into our lives and our area. So, as Christmas gets nearer this year, let us all do our best to make way for God to arrive as we celebrate Jesus coming to us and to our world.

Hymn: 264 (Singing the Faith) Make way!

<p>1 Make way, make way, for Christ the King in splendour arrives ; fling wide the gates and welcome him into your lives. <i>Make way (Make way), make way (make way), for the King of kings (for the King of kings) ; make way (make way), make way (make way), and let his Kingdom in.</i></p> <p>2 He comes the broken hearts to heal, the prisoners to free ; the deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance, the blind shall see.</p>	<p>3 And those who mourn with heavy hearts, who weep and sigh, with laughter, joy and royal crown he'll beautify.</p> <p>4 We call you now to worship him as Lord of all, to have no gods before him, their thrones must fall !</p> <p>Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)</p>
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OT Lesson: Malachi 3, verses 1 to 4

--Here the prophet speaks of a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord’s coming. Christians have always seen John the Baptist as this messenger who came to prepare a path for the Lord.

Responsive Reading: 792 (Singing the Faith) “Benedictus”: The words of John the Baptist’s father Zechariah when John was born.

- 1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel,
who has come to his people and set them free.

- 2 **He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of his servant David.**
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old
to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all that hate us,
- 4 **To show mercy to our ancestors,
and to remember his holy covenant.**
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham :
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
- 6 **Free to worship him without fear,
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.**
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
- 8 **To give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of all their sins.**
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
- 10 **To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.**

Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit ;
**as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

From *Common Worship*

Epistle: Philippians 1, verses 3 to 11

--Paul is in prison and writes to the church in Philippi, praying that they may be free from blame on the Day of Christ: i.e. the day when Jesus returns to this world.

[Hymn: 182 \(Singing the Faith\) On Jordan's bank](#)

<p>1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh ; awake and hearken, for he brings glad tidings from the King of kings !</p> <p>2 Then cleansed be every life from sin ; make straight the way for God within, and let us all our hearts prepare for Christ to come and enter there.</p> <p>3 For you are our salvation, Lord, our refuge, and our great reward ; without your grace we waste away like flowers that wither and decay.</p>	<p>4 To heal the sick stretch out your hand, and bid the fallen sinner stand ; shine forth, and let your light restore earth's own true loveliness once more.</p> <p>5 To God the Son all glory be whose advent sets his people free, whom, with the Father, we adore, and Holy Spirit, evermore.</p> <p>John Chandler (1806–1876)</p>
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Gospel: St. Luke 3, verses 1 to 6

--St. Luke tells of the start of John the Baptist's ministry and makes it clear that this is a momentous date in history as John is preparing the way for Jesus who will come soon to bring God's salvation to the whole human race.

Sermon: Get Ready for God

The text is Luke 3, verses 1 and 2: “It was the 15th year of the rule of the Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the territory of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was ruler of Abilene, and Annas and Caiphas were high priests. At that time the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.”

The composer Sir Arthur Sullivan wrote the tune for the old hymn “Onward Christian soldiers” and always wanted to be known for his religious and serious compositions. But nowadays he is best remembered for his comic operettas which he wrote to words by W.S. Gilbert. And of those the best known is probably “The Mikado”, about the Emperor of Japan and the town of Titipu where the operetta is set. Ko-Ko is the most comic character in the story and he has recently been appointed Lord High Executioner and so he sings a song about the little list he has of people he could execute and who never would be missed. Nowadays that song is sometimes brought up to date to include the names of modern politicians and personalities who also “never would be missed”. But in the original song one group that he has on his list that are never to be missed includes “people who are up on dates and flay you with them flat”. Well, I’m afraid that I have to put my head on the block this morning and say that I have always been interested in dates (and I don’t mean dates you may eat at Christmas time: no, not the fruit dates, but historical dates). Perhaps that is one of the reasons why I chose to study history when I went to university. However, I should point out that nowadays the study of history is more than just about dates like 1066 (the Battle of Hastings) or 1805 (the Battle of Trafalgar). Instead it is about trying to see why things happened as they did, about the reasons that wars happened or that the leaders of nations decided to follow a particular path.

In fact nowadays many historians see history as not just about kings and queens and prime ministers and presidents and the years they were in power, but also about ordinary people in the past and what they did and what they believed. Many experts now frown on the idea that history is mainly about dates and when things happened: their interest is much more in why things happened as they did.

Yet having said all that, I personally still believe that dates are important and that that is so especially when we study the Bible and particularly the New Testament as it presents us with the figure of Jesus Christ. For some opponents of the Christian faith are eager to say that the Bible doesn’t matter or even that the Lord Jesus doesn’t matter. Some claim that the Bible is either false in what it says or that it is irrelevant to life in the 21st century or both. Enemies of the Christian faith have even tried to say that the Lord Jesus did not really exist at all and that he was a figure invented by the early Christians. Well, if anybody tries to tell you that, you can tell them straightaway that what they are saying is nonsense. For apart from the Bible, we have been passed down evidence from the Roman authorities in the time just after Jesus that clearly refer to Him as someone whom they knew to have existed. These documents were often written by people who would have loved to have shown that Jesus did never exist as that would have been a great help to them in stamping out the Christian faith. But they couldn’t do that. I expect you have heard of the Roman Emperor Nero in the mid 1st century A.D. Like several of his successors he wanted to wipe out Christianity and it would have assisted him to do that if he could have proved Jesus never lived. But, in fact, however much they hated the Christian faith, the Roman authorities never denied that Jesus existed or that He was crucified under their own Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

Yet if we Christians are to make a good case for Jesus not only existing but being the special person we claim Him to be, it would be helpful if in the New Testament we could find the exact dates for Jesus’ life, so that it would be easier to place Jesus against the background of His time. That would help us to show even more clearly that Jesus was a real figure in history who really lived, that He came to this world at a particular moment of time and that in Jesus we see not just an ideal, but someone who really did share in the life of this world and whose life shows us what it means to be truly human.

It would be helpful if the New Testament gave us some dates so that we could do all this, but unfortunately, when you look through the New Testament carefully, you find hardly any dates at all. There are none in the letters of Paul or in the Gospels of Mark and John. In a sense that is not surprising because as Paul, Mark and John wrote they wanted to preach the Gospel and help people believe in Jesus, rather than show Him as a figure in history.

Matthew in his Gospel does tell us that Jesus was born when King Herod the Great ruled over Palestine and we know from sources outside the Bible that that King Herod died in the year we now think of as 4

B.C. So, as Matthew suggests that Herod died fairly soon after Jesus was born, it seems likely that Jesus was born in about the year 6 B.C.

But of all the writers in the New Testament Luke in his Gospel is the most helpful in giving us at least a few dates to help us see Jesus against his historical background. In fact nowadays we often refer to Luke as “Luke the historian”. Luke tells us that when Jesus was born Quirinius was the governor of Syria and that at that time a census was taken. Unfortunately it is not clear exactly when Quirinius was governor of Syria or when the census was held, so this is not a great deal of help now, but presumably it must have been about 6 B.C., if Matthew is right in what he says.

But in the words of our text Luke gives us a far more helpful date as he actually specifies a whole number of rulers who were in office when God’s word came to John the Baptist and John began his ministry. And we only need to know the first ruler that Luke mentions to find out what year it was that John began his ministry, which was not long before Jesus began His ministry too. Our text says that the word of God came to John when the Roman Emperor Tiberius was in the 15th year of his reign. We know that he became Emperor in 14 A.D., so that means the 15th year of his reign would have been about 29 or 30 A.D. So Luke helps us to know exactly when John and Jesus began their work. But the fact that he mentions all those other rulers and that Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests underlines how important this date was and that it was a date that not only mattered to the future of the Jewish people, but also to the future of the whole world. That is why Luke mentions not only who was in charge in Palestine, but also the Roman Emperor who was in charge of so much of the known world. So when the word of the Lord came to John, it was a word not just for the Jews, but for everyone. And what was this word that John brought? As we heard he called on the Jews to repent, to turn away from their sins and then, as a sign that they were making a new start, to be baptized. But the reason the Jews and people everywhere needed to repent was that God the Lord was coming and they needed to get ready for Him. John quoted words of the prophet that we find in Isaiah chapter 40 about the need to prepare the way for the Lord. In the ancient world when a great king was going to travel anywhere, his men would level the road before him so that his journey would be smoother and more comfortable. So John sought to prepare the way for God to come and to get ready the whole human race to see the salvation that God was about to send. For God was going to come to this world in the person of His Son Jesus.

At the moment as Christians we are preparing to celebrate Christmas and to remember Jesus’ first coming to this world as a baby in the stable at Bethlehem. But John’s mission began 30 years or so after that as he called on the men and women of his day to get ready for God to come because Jesus’ ministry was shortly to begin amongst them: something that was to happen very soon after John began his preaching.

And if we and our world are truly to get ready for God to come amongst us this Christmas, then we must make thorough preparations. But the most important ways of preparing for Christmas are not the ways we usually think of. We usually act as though to be truly prepared for Christmas we have to get all the cards and presents on our list, we have to buy all the food for the celebration and perhaps we have to put up all the decorations. And so we rush around doing all those things. Don’t get me wrong: I am not saying that we shouldn’t do all this: it is good to enjoy Christmas and to give enjoyment to others through cards and the gifts we send or the food we offer. But if Christmas is really about preparing for God to come amongst us through Jesus Christ, then there are other preparations we need to make that are even more vital. For we must obey John the Baptist’s call and repent: we must turn our backs on our sins and selfishness and make our lives ready for Jesus to come into them anew and change us. We have to make room for Jesus to come into our hearts and lives or else we will miss the central point of Christmas. Nor is it enough for us to get ready for God to come just to ourselves: no, we must also help those around us to get ready for that too because God wants to come not only to those like us who already know something of Him and who are already seeking to love Him, but also to everyone else as well, even to those who at the moment are very far away from God or who do not even believe that God exists. God’s will (as we heard in the Gospel) is that the whole human race should see God’s salvation that comes through our Lord Jesus. So we must use every opportunity we can to show those we meet that God is real, that His Son Jesus Christ was and is a real person and that Jesus wants to come into their lives to bring them as well as us more of His light and love.

That means that today, 5th December 2021, is a date that is just as important as that date in our text when John began preaching. For today is a day when God is bringing His word to you and to me and then through us offering that same word to the people we meet: the word that God's salvation is definitely coming and that we can find it in Jesus. The clear message is that we can get ready for God at Christmas-time or at any time, yet that ideally we shouldn't put off that preparation, but do it straightaway: in fact that this very day, if we haven't already, we should ask Jesus to come into our hearts and stay with us there and that we should seek to bring those we meet to consider doing the same.

So today as we come together in worship, let us use that as one way of preparing for God to come to us to change us and renew us. As we worship and share in fellowship together, may that help us to get ready for Jesus to come to us in every possible way.

Let me close by bringing our text right up to date, so that we can see more clearly that today the word of God is calling us to prepare for His coming amongst us in Jesus just as John summoned those people to do the same thing nearly 2,000 years ago:

“It is the 70th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II; Boris Johnson is Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Joe Biden is President of the U.S.A., whilst Justin Welby is Archbishop of Canterbury and Sonia Hicks is President of the Methodist Conference. At this time the word of God is coming to the congregations of the Basingstoke and Reading Methodist Circuit, the word that bids us get ready because in Jesus Christ God is coming to us and to His world. May we accept the urgency of this message and the importance of today's date in history and may we respond to the message as we prepare ourselves and others for God's arrival.

For this is the date that matters more than any other as it is no ordinary date, but a date with God and the time to welcome Him into our lives and into our world.

[Hymn: 154 \(Hymns & Psalms\) Thou didst leave](#)

<p>1. Thou didst leave thy throne And thy kingly crown When thou camest to earth for me, But in Bethlehem's home Was there found no room For thy holy nativity: O come to my heart, Lord Jesus! There is room in my heart for thee.</p> <p>2. Heaven's arches rang When the angels sang, Proclaiming thy royal degree; But of lowly birth Cam'st thou, Lord, on earth, And in great humility: O come to my heart, Lord Jesus! There is room in my heart for thee.</p> <p>3. The foxes found rest, And the bird its nest, In the shade of the cedar tree; But thy couch was the sod, O thou Son of God, In the deserts of Galilee: O come to my heart, Lord Jesus! There is room in my heart for thee.</p>	<p>4. Thou camest, O Lord, With the living word That should set thy people free; But, with mocking scorn, And with crown of thorn, They bore thee to Calvary: O come to my heart, Lord Jesus! Thy cross is my only plea.</p> <p>5. When heaven's arches ring, And her choirs shall sing, At thy coming to victory, Let thy voice call me home, Saying, 'Yet there is room, There is room at my side for thee! And my heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus, When thou comest and callest for me.</p> <p><i>Emily Elizabeth Steele Elliott (1836 – 97)</i></p>
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OR Hymn: 172 (Singing the Faith) Hills of the north, rejoice!

Prayers of Intercession & Thanksgiving:

Leader: Coming Lord Jesus

Response: Help us to prepare for Your arrival.

First, Lord Jesus, we pray for the world: a world as unready for Your coming now as it was when You were born 2,000 years ago: for still there are wars and rumours of war; still there is hatred and falsehood, violence and murder; yet we thank You that Your love is also the same as ever it was. We pray that that love may be shown in the words and actions of Christians and all those of goodwill. We think of the unrest in so many parts of the world and of the refugees trying to get to this country and others, often at terrible risk to their lives. We pray for a more Christlike way of treating refugees and other victims of the world's problems. We pray for the victims of global warming and for those countries where life is getting progressively more difficult as a result of climate change. May the leaders of the world be ready to take more effective action to help avert disaster.

We pray for these and for every area of tension and violence that men & women everywhere may get ready for You to come back to Your world by seeking harmony and reconciliation.

Leader: Coming Lord Jesus

Response: Help us to prepare for Your arrival.

And then Lord, we pray for our own land which needs Your presence just as much as anywhere in this world. Here too so often men and women are far from prepared for You: we give thanks for those who throughout the pandemic have put others' welfare before their own, but we know that sometimes people have been selfish and inconsiderate. We know how much every person in this land needs to come to You to find the right values in life: the need to tell right from wrong, but also the need to stand up for what is right and speak out against what is wrong. We pray that whenever we see evil going on, whether it be on the television screen or in the street, we will not pass by on the other side, but act with the justice and love that You, Lord Jesus, come to bring:

Leader: Coming Lord Jesus

Response: Help us to prepare for Your arrival.

Then, Lord, we pray for Your Church. We give thanks for the way You have worked through the Church over the last 2000 years and for the way You have come to men and women through the witness of ordinary humble Christians. But we ask that that task may continue today not least in our own area, through all the Christians of this Church and of other Churches in our neighbourhood and Circuit.

We pray for us all that in these weeks leading up to Christmas we may not appear to see the celebration as only a matter of what we buy or what we eat or what we are given, but as a time to receive Your love and to show Your love in the same sacrificial way that You did when You were here on earth:

Leader: Coming Lord Jesus

Response: Help us to prepare for Your arrival.

Next, Lord, we remember those who want You to come to them because they are sick or sad: *(names may be included here)*

Lord, we pray for all whom we know who are sick or recently bereaved or in any sort of need. May You come to them and bring them wholeness in body, mind and spirit. Give them relief from their suffering or at the very least give them strength to cope with their difficulties in faith. But come to them also through us and through the compassion we show:

Leader: Coming Lord Jesus

Response: Help us to prepare for Your arrival.

Finally, Lord, we pray for ourselves. May we not be those who are taken aback by Your coming because we are so unprepared for it. Instead may we be amongst those who stay close to You all the time, those who share in fellowship with You here on earth so that one day we may be fit to share still closer fellowship with You in heaven. So, Lord, make us ready for You whenever You come and wherever You come:

Leader: Coming Lord Jesus

Response: Help us to prepare for Your arrival.

We bring all our prayers in Your Name, Lord Jesus. **Amen.**

Hymn: 330 (Singing the Faith) Joy to the world!

<p>1 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.</p> <p>2 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.</p>	<p>3 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.</p> <p>Isaac Watts (1674–1748)</p>
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The Blessing: So, Lord God, let us go out to bring more of Your joy to the world because in Jesus Christ You are coming to stay with us always; and may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, abide with us always.

Amen.