

twelvebaskets



ADVENT 3B

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Advent 3 - Year B
17th December 2023



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness OR

183 STF – Praise to the God who clears the way

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

58 STF – Lord, I come before your throne of grace OR

264 STF – Make way, make way, for Christ the king in splendour arrives

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Hymn:

180 STF – O come, O come Immanuel OR

457 STF – Author of faith, eternal Word

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

657 STF – You give rest to the weary OR

404 STF – God's spirit is in my heart

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

186 STF – Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! OR

504 STF – May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day

Blessing

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Call to worship

(You may wish to use your own liturgy for lighting Advent candles at this point in the worship).

Come and make yourself known to us, Lord God,
In the flickering candle flame and the Christmas carol,
In the eyes of those with whom we worship,
In the spoken word and the stillness,
In the time we share together.

Come by your Spirit, Advent God, we pray
Amen.¹

Hymn:

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness OR

183 STF – Praise to the God who clears the way

Opening Prayers

Light of the world,
This Advent season comes to us as an annual reminder that you are not a God of distance, of high-heavens and of power,
Rather, you are a God of presence, of earthly-ordinariness and of poverty.

God of the manger,
God of the shepherds,
God of the angels - we worship you this day.

We come before you, seeking the peace of an Advent God.
We stand with the angels.
We stand in the presence of God.

Today, we worship a God who came to a young woman in Nazareth, in unknowable ways, and who made the impossible possible and who made the incomprehensible happen, a God who became a tiny baby boy, who contracted infinite power and strength into a fragile, feeble and dependent human life. We worship a Christmas God.
We stand with the angels.
We stand in the presence of God.

The Christmas God who came, you are also the God who comes - today, now, into our lives.
We, like John the Baptist, look for ways we can prepare the way for you to come. We seek to know you more, and to do your will in the world around us.

We have failed, we have fallen short, but we know the peace, the acceptance, the warmth of the Advent God.

This day, we look to your coming Lord,
We stand with the angels.
We stand in the presence of an ordinary, extraordinary God.

Amen.²

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by All We Can – you can order an Extraordinary Gift for someone this Christmas at allwecan.org.uk/gifts

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Is there something you are particularly looking forward to at the moment?

[Invite people to share what it is for them].

Perhaps some of us are looking forward to the excitement of Christmas morning, perhaps others are dreading it or stressed about not being ready yet.

Whatever we feel about Christmas, and all the gifts and food and family meals and crackers and hats and Santa Claus and fairy lights – however we respond to that – Christmas only really exists because of the amazing Christian story that hardly ever makes it onto the front of Christmas cards anymore!

It is worth pausing, this morning, as the countdown to Christmas continues, to remember that and to recognise what it means for us. The most exciting thing, the real message about Christmas, is that God is interested in us, right here and now. That's what lies at the heart of the story of a little baby Jesus, born in a poor, refugee family and laid in a manger. The message is: God came and lived with us. And God continues to do that – perhaps not as obviously, perhaps not with all the fanfare of angel music and wise people travelling hundreds of miles...but God is here all the same.

Too often, the Christian message is presented as something that is about the 'after life', or what happens when we die. Christmas reminds us that God doesn't just wait in heaven to see us when our life here is over. Rather, God comes amongst us.

This year, as you get excited about the gifts and the family time, let's also remember the amazing miracle of Christmas – God became a human being, and walked around this world, like we do. God is not as far away as we might think.³

Hymn:

58 STF – Lord, I come before your throne of grace OR

264 STF – Make way, make way, for Christ the king in splendour arrives

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Hymn:

180 STF – O come, O come Immanuel OR

457 STF – Author of faith, eternal Word

Reflections on the readings

Each of the Sundays in Advent is connected to lots of different traditions and themes. This is an inevitable consequence of a Church celebrating the same rhythms and reflecting on the

³ All Age Talk written by Tim Baker

same stories every year for the best part of two millennia. This third Sunday in Advent has sometimes been called 'Gaudete Sunday', literally translating as 'rejoice Sunday' – and it is the Sunday on which we focus on 'joy' (during the other Advent Sundays we look at peace, love and hope). The Sundays in Advent are also traditionally attached to one of the figures in the Christmas story – today we look to John the Baptist.

At first glance, these two different traditions seem to run counter to each other: John the Baptist is usually depicted as a stern, grim and even a little bit grumpy. What does he have to teach us about joy?

Well, in John's gospel, John the Baptist is quoted as saying, in reference to Jesus and his growing popularity, "My joy is now full. He must increase and I must decrease." Perhaps this is where we can see the link between the grumpy Old-Testament-style prophet and the rejoicing of Gaudete Sunday: in his ability to be humble. It is in John's humility, and his letting go of responsibility and power, that he experiences joy.

This kind of joy is not always the way we think or act as humans, is it? We have a very complicated, and often unhealthy, attitude towards power and responsibility. Some of us are, of course, happy to avoid being given too much responsibility and are always looking to others to make big decisions. Many people, however, struggle with the opposite problem. We want a job to be done well, and we (usually naively or arrogantly) assume that the best way to ensure the job is done is to do it ourselves. So we stay in that volunteer role a year longer than we might have done, we insist that we do have time to take on that extra task, we get obsessed with ensuring we are represented at all the important conversations and meetings at Church. We turn the positive motivation to want to make a difference into a negative one that becomes about power, and our desire to hold onto it.

That very human tendency plays itself out on the national and global stage, but it happens in smaller and more localised places too. It is easier for us to criticise our politicians, church leaders and business CEOs than it is to notice the way we behave. I wonder: how would you describe your relationship to power or pride?

John the Baptist, who we heard about in the Gospel just now, practices humility in a helpful and hopeful way. A humility we can learn from and use in our own discipleship. The humility that John the Baptist shows us is not about beating yourself up or denying that you have anything to offer. In fact, he regularly acts with confidence and authority, but he never does so in a self-critical way. Many of us have, at some point, lived with a sense of inadequacy nagging away at us. The dangerous, unhelpful response to that inadequacy is pride, or power-grabbing. It may seem illogical, but it is often when we are least confident that we end up taking over. This then spreads our insecurities onto others and runs completely counter to the invitation of Jesus at his resurrection, where he says 'Peace to you', and invites us to live in shalom, in harmony.

John the Baptist's joy comes from his ability to always point away from himself. He is not obsessed with his own self-image and the power he can acquire to himself. Neither is he riddled with self-doubt and always filling the spaces in conversations and relationships with his own sense of inadequacy. Rather, he does not look at himself at all – he looks to Jesus. And he encourages others to do so too. He recognises his role as one called to prepare a way for the Messiah.

So, John the Baptist's invitation into joy is through humility. Through learning that most difficult of all lessons – how to point away from ourselves and towards Christ. Many of the great spiritual and religious traditions have sought to teach a version of this truth as a way towards joy: that it is our obsession with ourselves that brings us most sadness, pain and sin. If we can overcome the self, then grace truly will abound.

If we listen to John the Baptist's invitation to repent, we are invited to literally 'turn around'. To turn from all the things that we over-think and that consume us: the overwhelming desire that

we are taught from a young age to 'look after number one'. To turn from all that, and turn towards God, towards Christ, in whom all things hold together, and to discover that in that community of a communal God, there is a great freedom and great joy in the humility of the disciple.

At Christmas time, perhaps more than any other, those selfish desires and self-obsessed thoughts return again and again. Perhaps this is in the emotions the gifts we receive will bring up in us, perhaps it is worry about how the gifts we have bought for others will be perceived, perhaps it is in the relationships within families, or the sense of missing people who 'should' be there at the Christmas dinner table. Amongst all of these very 'human' concerns, perhaps we can take courage, inspiration and humility from the miracle of Christmas: the miracle in which God chooses to bring God's-self into the world as a human. Christmas is the story of how God engages with all of those human concerns of inadequacy, power, materialism, relationships, and self-doubt. God stands with us in those strange, paradoxical, confusing emotions of the human experience.

You could argue that the church exists to point to Christ – that is why we are here. At times over the last 2,000 years, we've got that right. As we sing our songs of joy and pray our prayers of lament today, this advent, over Christmas and on into the new year, can we do the same again?⁴

Hymn:

657 STF – You give rest to the weary OR

404 STF – God's spirit is in my heart

Prayers of intercession

Living God, we turn to you in prayer for your world, for people and situations everywhere that need to experience something of the Christmas magic this season.

As we move towards the final few days before Christmas, we invite you to come into a world crying out for a Prince of Peace, an Everlasting Father, a Mighty God, a Wonderful Counselor. Amongst the darkness, shine your great light.

We pause now to bring our own prayers for the world, this Christmas season...

[Quiet]

God of this Advent season, as the waiting time draws to a close, we commit to you our own lives, our families and friends, our loved ones and neighbours – all who we will encounter over the Christmas period. Move amongst us, that our conversation will be rich and spirit-filled, that our actions will show peace and love, that our revolution of hope can begin again, for the sake of your kingdom.

We pause now to pray for all those we will encounter this Christmas season...

[Quiet]

God who understands grief and pain, we offer to you all who will find the next few days especially hard – those living with loss, fear and doubt.

We pause now to pray for all who find Christmas difficult...

⁴ Reflection written by Tim Baker

[Quiet]

We bring this, and all our prayers, through Jesus Christ, Immanuel.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

Send us out Lord, to serve you and your world. Turn these gifts, and all of our time, energy and talents, into an unstoppable force of love that will flow out into a world in need.

Move us, by your Spirit we pray, Amen.⁶

Hymn:

186 STF – Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! OR

504 STF – May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day

Blessing

May the Christmas God open your eyes to see the presence of the divine amongst you,
Open your ears to hear the voice of the Spirit, whispering,
Open your hearts to the eternal love, that is yours,
and may blessing of God the Creator, the Christ and the Holy Spirit, be among
you, and remain with you always.

Amen.⁷

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker