

At Home Service 6th December 2020

Light your second Advent Candle

A gathering prayer with candle lighting

People went to deserted places to hear what was most important.

As I gather with others in homes across the area today, I light a (second) candle as a symbol of my pilgrimage towards the things that will last for ever: righteousness, loving-kindness, peace and an eternal home in you, O God, who calls all things towards the fullness of life. Amen.

The Preparation – Isaiah 40:3

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'

Singing the Faith 182 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry – John Chandler (1806–1876)

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| 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! | 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. |
| 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. | 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. |
| 5 | To God the Son all glory be
whose advent sets his people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore. | | |

Prayers

God, you called and prepared your people through John, a strange man in a strange place. May I, sometimes strange, sometimes not, join others to worship you, O God, who calls all kinds of people to gather together, turning towards the eternal Word that does not fade, that welcomes all, making strangers friends for ever. Amen.

I have heard your call, coming from strange places.

I have received your gift, calling me into unexpected connections.

I have been nurtured by your invitation, making friendships along the way.

I approach you now with a humble heart and an expectation, knowing you welcome all – stranger and friend. Amen.

I have looked at the rough, and judged it for not being smooth.

I have looked at the valley, and thought it could not be raised.

I have observed the mountain, believing it would be unscalable, and in so doing, I have become complacent. Forgive me, God, for my complacency and my judgements. Make me see with the eyes of a pilgrim, knowing that you who have called me on this way, will make a pathway before me. Amen.

God, you have comforted your people, making paths where there seemed no path.

You have lifted up valleys, relieved droughts, and made high places low.

You have gathered your people in the eternal place of love.

You speak to our hearts, and you forgive us for our wandering ways.

Your light and love and faithfulness and work are true, ever true, always lasting.
We praise you, for the goodness you are, and the pathways you make before us. Amen.
God of all holiness, your promises stand unshaken through all generations and you lift up all who are
burdened and brought low: renew our hope in you, as we wait for the coming in glory of Jesus Christ, our
Judge and our Saviour, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without
end. Amen.

Isaiah 40.1-11

- ¹Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.
³A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness ³prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.
⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground
shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth
of the LORD has spoken.'
⁶A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is
like the flower of the field.
⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the
people are grass.
⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.
⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'
¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in
his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Singing the Faith 663 I the Lord of sea and sky

I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry. All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save. I, who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright. Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send? <i>Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.</i>	I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne my people's pain; I have wept for love of them. They turn away. I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone. I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send? <i>Here I am, Lord.....</i>	I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame. I will set a feast for them. My hand will save. Finest bread I will provide till their hearts are satisfied. I will give my life to them. Whom shall I send? <i>Here I am, Lord.....</i>
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Mark 1.1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight”’,

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and

were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean

countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river

Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist,

and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I

am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will

baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

Reflection

You will know that my favourite gospel is Mark with its shortness and directness but also with its hidden depths. All books and films need a first line that you won’t forget. ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’ grabs the attention and so does the start of Mark’s gospel, ‘the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. There can be no doubt that what follows has a claim to make that should be of interest to all people.

Mark chooses to start the story of Jesus with the coming of John the Baptist – the one who prepares the way. The voice crying out in the wilderness ‘prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’. It is a repeat of what the prophet Isaiah says where things are levelled out and the pathway is no longer rough but easy to travel for God. The way is prepared for the coming of the Messiah as John asks the people to repent from their sins in preparation for Jesus to come into their lives.

As we prepare for Christmas in this season of Advent is there now also a burden on us to ‘prepare the way for Christ’s coming’? To level out the valleys and the mountains that exist in this life. I have been struck, wherever I have travelled, by the poverty that exists in our world, often surrounded by affluence and wealth. As a child I was fortunate to go abroad on holiday. The package tours took us to lovely resorts with beautiful beaches, but my parents used to take me on walks, and I can still remember the open sewers where children played in one European resort back in the 1960s. Ever since then I have wanted to go ‘behind the scenes’ and see how the real people live and I have learned from each experience.

So, I remember the fear of the people in communist regimes, the lack of schooling for the majority in some Commonwealth countries (unless you have the money), the veterans begging on the streets of San Francisco, and the list goes on. These to me are examples of the valleys which need to be lifted up by each one of us so that the love of God can be seen at work.

I also remember the great wealth that I have seen in mansions open to the public which indicate the terrible imbalance in society. Sadly, this is also reflected in churches and temples where wealth is flaunted, offerings are made to God or another named deity whilst injustice is seen outside as people struggle to survive.

True repentance sees a change in lifestyles, something that the poor seem more able to do than the rich, if the gospel story is anything to go by.

Disciples of Jesus must learn from him the way of life that shows that we have changed in our outlook. Where wealth has become a ‘god’ to us we need to ‘sell all that we own and give to the poor’, where it hasn’t become a ‘god’ we still need to be generous in our giving to the most needy in our society and across the world, especially where the difference is most marked.

As we approach Christmas and prepare ourselves then I hope that we will be less focussed on ourselves and what we want and more focussed on what is needed to prepare for the coming of Jesus. How do we show that the birth of Jesus makes a difference to people's lives in our modern day?

My challenge to you this Christmas is to make a difference in someone's life, to lift them out of the valley and to support them as the ground levels and your mountain comes down. Who around you needs that support? But also consider how you can make a difference to the lives of people somewhere else in the world. But remember this change in what you do should not just be for Christmas but for life.

Intercessions

Faithful God, I trust in your promise that one day your kingdom will come and so I pray for those who suffer unjustly ...

God of justice, I look for a world where justice is at home and so I pray for those who are anxious ...

God of peace, I look for a world where peace is at home and so I pray for those who feel unloved ...

God of love, I look for a world where love is at home. God of justice, peace and love, may your kingdom come; and may it be seen in us, as we live for you day by day, through Christ our Lord. **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 for ever. Amen.

Offering and prayer of dedication

God of all goodness and grace, receive the gifts I offer; and grant that my whole life may give you glory and praise; through Christ my Lord. **Amen.**

Singing the Faith 418 We have a gospel to proclaim

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| 1 | We have a gospel to proclaim,
good news for all throughout the earth;
the gospel of a Saviour's name:
we sing his glory, tell his worth. | 2 | Tell of his birth at Bethlehem —
not in a royal house or hall,
but in a stable dark and dim,
the Word made flesh, a light for all. |
| 3 | Tell of his death at Calvary:
hated by those he came to save,
in lonely suffering on the cross,
for all he loved his life he gave. | 4 | Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
that we might share his victory. |
| 5 | Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
by all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his Church
to live for him, the Lamb who died. | 6 | Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel-message we proclaim:
we sing his glory, tell his worth. |

Edward Joseph Burns (b. 1938). Words: © Canon Edward J. Burns

A sending out prayer for children

Lord Jesus, John the Baptist spoke up and made a straight path so that people were ready to welcome you.

May I speak up and make straight paths for people to meet you. **Amen.**

Blessing

May the blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, remain with me always. **Amen.**

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