

Worship at home Sunday 24th December

Welcome to this short act of worship from the Plymouth & Exeter District. We invite you to spend time with God, knowing that other people across the District are sharing this with you. Today's service has been prepared by Bev Smerdon (Local Preacher with the Plymouth & Devonport Circuit.)

CCLI50389

This year we celebrate the 4th Sunday in Advent on Christmas Eve. So, the waiting, which is a familiar theme for Christians in this season, will be over sooner than other years. Let us begin our worship this morning by singing or reading **hymn 165 from Singing the Faith** and if you have been lighting a candle at home each week, you may like to light each candle as you read or sing the relevant verse.

Advent 1

Advent candles tell their story
as we watch and pray,
longing for the Day of Glory,
'Come, Lord, soon,' we say.
Pain and sorrow, tears and sadness
changed for gladness on that Day.

Advent 2

Prophet voices loudly crying,
making pathways clear;
glimpsing glory, self-denying,
calling all to hear.
Through their message - challenged, shaken –
hearts awaken: God is near!

Advent 3

John the Baptist, by his preaching
and by water poured,
brought to those who heard his teaching
news of hope restored:
'Keep your vision strong and steady,
and be ready for the Lord.'

Advent 4

Mary's gift, beyond all telling,
was to give Christ room.
She gave God a human dwelling
in a mother's womb.
Who could guess the final story?
– cross and glory; empty tomb!

Christmas Day*

Advent candles tell their story
on this Christmas Day.
Those who waited for God's glory:
they prepared the way.
Christ is with us: loving, giving,
in us living, here today!

Mark Earey (b. 1965)

*You may like to use this verse in your prayer time tomorrow.

Let us pray:

Forgive us, Lord, if we spend so much time preparing to enjoy ourselves that we forget those who will have no joy this Christmas. Forgive us if, as we decorate our homes, we forget those who have no home. Forgive us if, as we welcome the baby in the manger, we forget he was the man on the cross. Forgive us if, in the challenges of our lives, we forget to thank you and draw closer to you for sustenance and support.

Awesome God, born as a baby, lived as a human being, died to be our resurrected

Saviour that all might know how to live and how to know you in life and death. Thank you that, through the power of your Holy Spirit, you are indeed with us wherever we are. Inhabit our worship today, we beseech you, that we may praise and honour you and bring glory to your name. Amen.

In this Advent season as we draw ever closer to remembering and celebrating your birth in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. Draw closer to us in body, mind and spirit, we pray. Amen.

Hymn: StF 168

Come, Lord Jesus, come.
Come, Lord Jesus, come.
Come, Lord Jesus, come,
to this world of ours.

Lord, we need you now;
Lord, we need you now;
Lord, we need you now
in this world of ours.

Fill us with your peace;
fill us with your peace;
fill us with your peace
in this world of ours.

Francesca Leftley (b. 1955)

Bible Readings: Psalm 113

OT Reading: Zechariah 2: 10-13

NT Reading: Luke 1: 68-79

[Lectionary Readings are listed at the end of this service.]

Reflection:

Today's readings are an outpouring of praise to God from different generations. Psalm 113 is described as "a community hymn of praise" and is an introduction to the Passover story recounted in Psalm 114. What a great way to start our thinking about the coming of the Messiah by being

reminded of the Lord's compassion and love for the most vulnerable in our society: the poor, the needy and the childless. (Childlessness in the Jewish tradition was seen as God's judgement for wickedness). Some theologians think this Psalm dates back to King David (about 1,000 years before Christ) or even Moses (some 300 years earlier). How amazing that we can still read and hear their words (albeit in a different language) and recognise and echo their sentiments today.

The Book of Zechariah was probably written about 500 years before Luke's gospel and the coming of Christ. Care is needed not to confuse the OT prophet, Zechariah, with John the Baptist's father, Zechariah who's praise and prophetic words about his son we heard in today's NT reading.

It seemed to me, as I reflected on these readings, that they all stem from an intense experience or revelation of the truly overwhelmingness (if such a word exists!) of finding ourselves close to God. And that has everything to do with "the reason for the season" – Jesus came to earth to be with us and to draw us closer to God.

I am sure many of you will be familiar with that well-known Christmas song made famous by Johnny Mathis "*When a Child is Born*". Some of us have been fortunate enough to have experienced that sense of awe which people often describe when they have been near a very young baby: It is as if something of God's presence still surrounds them. There is a story regularly told about a young child saying to its newborn sibling, "Tell me what God is like, because I'm starting to forget".

Jesus came that we might remember all over again: That people would see Him and remember and recognise God. But that couldn't be true only for people who were alive in 1st Century Palestine, that has to continue to be true today, which is why Jesus' everlasting gift to every one of us is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. So, when Johnny Mathis said, "the world is waiting" he was right: the world is waiting but, perhaps it is waiting for each of us to live out the presence of God in our lives. Not through our own efforts but through our willingness to live lives inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So, on this Christmas Eve Advent Sunday, let us look forward to celebrating the coming of Christ, not simply with nostalgia or regret over Christmases past, not with over-indulgence or deprivation of Christmas present, not even with expectation or trepidation of Christmases future.

The poet Christina Rossetti asked for all of us, "What can I give him, poor as I am?" In her answer: "what I can I give him, give my heart", the heart represents not just love but a person's entire being. As the adult Jesus reminds us in Mark 12:29-30, the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The coming of the Christ child reminds us again that He is with us to help us, encourage us and enable us. May we choose to embrace the Christ child once again this Christmas.

Hymn: StF 178

Long ago, prophets knew
Christ would come, born a Jew.
Come to make all things new;
Bear his People's burden,
Freely love and pardon.

*Chorus: Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring!
Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing!
When he comes, When he comes,
Who will make him welcome?*

God in time, God in man,
This is God's timeless plan:
He will come, as a man,
Born himself of woman,
God divinely human.

Chorus:

Mary, hail! Though afraid;
She believed, she obeyed.
In her womb God is laid;
Till the time expected
Nurtured and protected.

Chorus:

Journey ends! Where afar
Bethlem shines, like a star,
Stable door stands ajar.
Unborn Son of Mary,
Saviour, do not tarry!

*Chorus: Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring!
Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing!
Jesus comes! Jesus comes!
We will make him welcome!*

Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)

Prayers of Intercession:

As we pray for others today, we pray for them in the name of Jesus, the Christ who came: the unrecognized incarnation of the Trinity, heralded by angels, loved by Mary and Joseph, worshipped by shepherds.

In memory of the angels, we pray for those who are unaware of your love, who have not heard your name heralded by others, who have been damaged by a religious or manipulative form of Christianity and whose lives have not been touched with Christian love and fellowship.

We pray for all (including ourselves) that we may be a better witness in the world.

In memory of Mary and Joseph, we pray for those who cannot find love in their lives. We pray for families, homes, workplaces and nations torn apart by hatred, bitterness and resentment.

We pray for all (including ourselves) that we would follow the ways you show us to bring your light into the lives of others.

In memory of the Shepherds, we pray for those who are discriminated against by the society in which they live: considered outcast or "less than" because of some aspect of their lives: belief, disability, sexuality, gender or addiction.

We pray for all (including ourselves) that we will learn to listen better, with patience and empathy instead of judgement and condemnation; remembering that we can never know all the realities of someone else's experience.

In memory of the manger, we pray for those living in poverty, especially children and young people for whom even their basic needs are unmet and whose hopes for the future are crushed and warped.

We pray for all (including ourselves) that we will be part of the change needed in the world to increase hope and opportunity for lives lived well.

And as we look forward once more to being surprised at the wonder of the Christ child, we pray for those for whom Christmas is not a time of joy but a time of hardship and hurting and painful memories. We pray they may find something of your peace, which passes all understanding.

[Take a few minutes to pray for specific people, situations and circumstances known to you.]

And as we remember before You all the ways in which people are suffering. We thank you for everyone who is part of relieving suffering wherever it is found around the world.

We pray for all (including ourselves) that we will bring the Holy Spirit of Christ into every part of our Christmas this year. Amen

Prayers for ourselves:

Jesus, you taught us that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. Help me to love myself in the way you mean that. Help me to understand the difference between selfishness and self-care, between useless worrying and prayerful reflection, between following my will and discerning your will for me.

[Take a few minutes to reflect on your situation and circumstances and add any other needs and concerns for yourself.]

I bring all my prayers to your manger and the foot of your cross saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven.....

Choose to sing or read 1 or more of your favourite Advent hymns.

Closing Blessing:

May you be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination of the magi, and the peace of the Christ child. In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen

Lectionary Readings:

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Magnificat (Luke 1:46b-55) or Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26; Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1: 26-38.