

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 29 November 2020 - First Sunday in Advent, 2020

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 29 November, the first Sunday in Advent, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Bill and Nora for their help in preparing this week's edition.

As we gather to listen again, in separate places and at different times, locked down and kept from our churches, we can still come into God's presence through our shared offering of time to him, and be glad. Here are words for gathering, from Psalm 122, set to music by Hubert Parry. *I was glad*.

Music: *I was glad*, by Sir Charles Hubert Parry
Trinity College Choir, Cambridge, Richard Marlow & Philip Rushforth
From the album *Miserere - Choral Favourites*

*I was glad when they said unto me, we will go into the house of the Lord.
Our feet shall stand in thy gates, O Jerusalem*

Lighting an Advent candle

We begin the season of Advent this weekend. You may like to light a candle each week at the start of the podcast, evoking the Advent Crowns that our churches typically display. As candles are being lit, we pray:

We light our first Advent candle to lighten the darkness.
A wise person said that it is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.
May this candle flame inspire us each to be a light in a dark world.
Amen

We continue our worship with words from the prophet Isaiah who reminisced about the days when God's people would see him taking dramatic steps to put things right in his world...

Opening Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil - to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

Hymn: *Joy to the world, the Lord is come!* by Isaac Watts (1674-1748)
with the Hallé Choir and Hallé Orchestra,
conducted by Carl Davis
from the album, *Hallé Christmas Classics*

Joy to the world; the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness,
and wonders of his love.

Prayers

Let us pray,

Father God, Ruler of all, we praise and adore you,
Even in your awesome power and might, you call us to be one with you.
Just as you are always open to us, may we keep our hearts open to receive you; our lives
open and serving you; and our minds open to welcome you.

God of all time and all ages, in this time and this place help us to stay close to you and to
each other. Help us to be faithful and courageous even when we see signs of distress and
destruction all around us and we know that your people are suffering; in our city, our land,
and all over your world.

May we work to alleviate suffering and pain, making a difference and offering hope,
and drawing others to your coming kingdom of fulfillment and redemption.

Lord God,
when we prefer comfort to change, challenge us.
When we are distracted and not attentive, forgive us.
When we are feeble and not faithful, strengthen us.
And, at all times, help us to transform our dreams into your realities.
In Jesus' name.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

And now we pray together, in the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Mark 13.24-37

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Reflection (1)

Christmas is coming! If you are anything like me, then thoughts of the imminence of Christmas 2020 will bring you a mixture of emotions. The press have been speculating for months as to whether Christmas would be 'cancelled' and whether Boris Johnson would be 'the Grinch that stole Christmas'. At times I've wanted to shout at the radio – of course Christmas won't be cancelled! Easter happened! We managed to celebrate it despite church buildings being closed and collective worship in person banned. As I write this, we've just heard that three households can come together during the five days around Christmas Day and that they will also be able to sit together in church at Christmas. As a friend of mine immediately put it, 'three families can form a Christmas bauble'! I'm sure though that there will be a lot of head scratching and agonising going on, about just who will and won't be able to meet up. But as we enter – this Sunday – the season of Advent, there is no doubt. Christmas is coming.

So how should we approach Advent this year? The Christmas season proper begins now, with Advent Sunday, and the season of Advent is a season of preparation. The habit of

observing these four Sundays before Christmas as a special time seems to date from the 6th century. At first it was rather like Lent, a time of fasting, and preparation in the sense of getting yourself spiritually ready for the great celebration, not the sort of practical preparations that can dominate nowadays.

Lent, the period before Easter, is of course a time for repentance, a time to think of the sort of people we are, and perhaps to contrast our lives with the life that was given for us. We approach Easter in full knowledge of what it is, and what happened, knowing the biblical account of the last days of Jesus' human life, the crucifixion, and the resurrection.

We approach Christmas too, in the knowledge of what the Bible says. During the next few weeks we will hear again the story of the Angel coming to Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, the shepherds, the wise men, the baby in the manger.

So what should be our spiritual preparation for Christmas? Is there any reason why this should be different this year? What questions should we be asking ourselves, apart from the modern-day concerns, this year with a twist, about connecting with our families and friends; presents and cards; food and drink?

The key to the old-fashioned observance of Advent seems to have been the idea of looking forward, not to celebrating Christ's coming among us, but his **second** coming.

Now there's a thought that probably doesn't feel to fit well with our habitual Christmas celebrations. The second coming. In traditional services of Communion, there are the words "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again". It is part of our faith, usually implicit, unspoken, that Jesus will come again. It is there in the creeds, the statements of belief that we subscribe to but in our tradition rarely recite, that Jesus Christ will come again "to judge the living and the dead"

So we are living our lives and practising our non-conformist faith against a background that includes the expectation of the second coming. We just don't focus on it very much. But it's an image that is sometimes brought out at this season of the year - *if* Christ came again, as an underprivileged, marginalised child, born of an unmarried mother, would we be among those who welcomed him? We are sometimes challenged to think, would we be someone who turned Mary away, **not** offering the spare bedroom, the sofa bed in the lounge, whatever we had?

But if those thoughts occur to us again, and even if we resolve to be more open to other people, more willing to recognise God's people even among those who are not like us, maybe we should have yet another thought. Are we ready? - Ready for the second coming of Jesus?

The passage we heard from Mark's gospel was undoubtedly taken by the early church as a warning always to be ready for Jesus coming again. And many of Paul's letters too, which date from before the writing of the Gospels, reveal just how imminent he thought the second coming was. In Romans he wrote, "*The night is nearly over, the day is almost here.*" And in a parallel reading from Matthew, Jesus predicted the surprise that would be felt, saying: "*As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.*"

People are doing the normal stuff, the everyday things that fill their lives, and they are taken by surprise. Well, doing all the everyday things that it **used** to be normal for people to do.

And let's face it, if Jesus came in anything like the way he did the last time, it **would** be a surprise! One thing's for sure - when Jesus **first** came, everyone had the chance to say yes. He made his message very public indeed. Everyone had the opportunity to listen, to hear, to respond. They just didn't all make a good job of it.

The first Herod was too concerned with his own position on the throne to stop and think that there might be some good in the birth of a new king, which the wise men told him about.

The later Herod, interviewing Jesus at the time of his trial, wanted to see some miracles. He didn't take Jesus terribly seriously, it seems, looking for a sort of magic trick rather than any thoughts of salvation for himself or for the world.

The chief priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, the people we often think of as the villains. They didn't know who they were talking about, or talking to. And they don't seem to have been ready to be influenced by the words of Jesus - at all. They didn't believe it could be possible that he was the Son of God, so they refused to open their minds to the evidence there in front of them.

All these people who feature, from Advent to Easter, in the story of Jesus, should have been ready to listen. Are we ready, as we approach Christmas yet again?

As we think on that, here is an Advent hymn that reflects on the promise of the coming King:

Hymn: *Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes* by Philip Doddridge (1702-51)
sung by The Choir of Chichester Cathedral,
with Timothy Ravalde & Sarah Baldock
from the album, *50 Classic Christmas Carols*

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long!
Let every heart prepare a throne,
and every voice a song.

He comes, the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace,
to enrich the humble poor.

He comes, the prisoners to release,
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

Our glad Hosannas, Prince of Peace,
thy welcome shall proclaim;
and heaven's eternal arches ring,
with thy beloved Name.

Reflection (2)

So are we ready? I'm not asking the question, are you ready for Christmas? This year, if you're anything like me, you'll still be undecided about how much of the normal stuff to try to do. Should we endeavour to hold on to as many of the usual activities as possible, or is this our big chance to do things differently? Maybe to do much less? I've often longed for the chance to keep Christmas simple, so maybe Covid-19 has presented me with that opportunity. And I'm not asking the question, are you ready to meet your maker? That's not my style at all.

I think it's a different question - are we ready for Jesus to come again? You know, there's no set plan of what needs to be done before he does.

We can't say, we know that Jesus can't come this year or next, because such-and-such a condition hasn't been met yet.

We can't say, Jesus can't come back tomorrow because we think the world isn't ready for him. And we can't say that God wouldn't send his son to a world that didn't deserve him. He's done it before! And maybe just now we need him more than ever.

So what makes us ready? Paul has the answer in the letter to the Romans, the passage I referred to earlier on.

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Paul echoes the ancient Law and says, Love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus said; Love one another as I loved you.

From love flows peace, in so many different ways, and both love and peace are a part of God's purpose for his world. I believe it's true. If the world had love and peace as its targets, its ambitions, then maybe it would be ready.

At this point in the church year, and in many ways this is the beginning of the new year as far as the Church is concerned, we should ask ourselves what we are looking forward to.

But when **will** we be ready for Jesus?

We will be ready for Jesus, not when the work is done. Not when the swords are beaten into ploughshares. Not when the armies of the world have no more usefulness. Not when all turn to God and follow the path of love and peace, not when the work is done. But we'll be ready when we are all minded to get on with the work. When we are all pulling together **towards** that goal.

That's when we'll be ready. That's when we can truly say we'll be ready for Jesus to lead us again.

This Advent, in a time of preparation, let's not worry about the things we usually do that have had to be cancelled or changed beyond recognition. Let's think instead about what we are really preparing for.

Come, Lord Jesus. Through the story of the Bethlehem baby. Through your spirit in our hearts. To all the people of the world, so that they may prepare in love for your coming.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving Creator, sometimes, when we look at your world, we wonder where you are.

We see warfare, injustice and oppression
We see hunger, homelessness and poverty

And wonder where you are

Creator God, Loving Father, alert us to your presence in the lives of those who struggle in your world and also struggle to be visible against the pandemic backdrop. Alert us to your hands at work among those agencies and individuals who are working to bring about a better and fairer world.

Caring Saviour, sometimes, when we look at people's lives, we wonder where you are.

We see cruelty, immorality and indifference
We see illness, sorrow and death,

And wonder where you are.

Caring Lord Jesus, alert us to your presence alongside those who suffer in body, mind and spirit. Alert us to the potential for change that you showed in those you encountered and encouraged in people that others called 'sinners'. Alert us to the work waiting for the Church to do, the Body of Christ on Earth.

Renewing Holy Spirit, sometimes when we look at ourselves we fail to see you anywhere.

We see division, apathy and stagnation; shallowness and lack of vision

And wonder where you are

Renewing Spirit, alert us to your presence in those who are united by love and in the service of love, and those who are both seeking and seeing truth and eternal life. Alert us to opportunities to share our vision, our purpose.

In this pandemic time with its challenges to everyone, we pray for those around us in our community, for our families and our friends, for those making decisions who to visit and who must miss out this Advent, this Christmas.

Give us strength, give us hope, help us to find joy this season and purpose in our proclaiming of the coming of the Christ child.

In his name we pray
Amen

Our last song looks forward to the coming of Christ, and for some of us evokes a certain *March for Jesus* through central London about 30 years ago!

Hymn: *Make way, make way* written and sung by Graham Kendrick
 from the album *Make way for the King of kings*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript.]

Blessing

As we prepare for Christmas in the coming days, may we always be mindful of both our privileges and our obligations, as members of your family.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us, and remain with us, today and always. Amen

Music: *Rondo in D for Horn and Orchestra*, K. 514 by Mozart performed by Barry Tucker and the English Chamber Orchestra and taken from their album, *Mozart, Four Horn Concertos*

Thank you for listening to our podcast.

We always welcome feedback, suggestions, and volunteers to read.

A full archive of all of our podcasts since March is on our website [<https://revdbill.uk>].

Credits

I was glad, by Sir Charles Hubert Parry, was sung by the Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge, with Richard Marlow and Philip Rushforth, taken from the album *Miserere - Choral Favourites*

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! was sung by the Hallé Choir with the Hallé Orchestra, conducted by Carl Davis, from the album, *Hallé Christmas Classics*

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes was sung by the choir of Chichester Cathedral, with Timothy Ravalde & Sarah Baldock from the album, *50 Classic Christmas Carols*

Make way, make way was sung by Graham Kendrick, and taken from the album *Make way for the King of kings*

Rondo in D for Horn and Orchestra, K. 514 by Mozart was performed by Barry Tucker and the English Chamber Orchestra and taken from their album, *Mozart, Four Horn Concertos*

For our opening music we had to make a choice of versions of the song. Here's the track that lost out to the Hallé Choir, courtesy of Aretha Franklin...

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ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition