

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 6 December 2020 Second Sunday in Advent**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 6 December, the second Sunday in Advent, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Jill for joining in the preparation of this week's edition.

### ***Lighting an Advent candle***

This weekend sees the second Sunday in Advent.

As candles are being lit in houses and churches after the end of our month-long lockdown, we pray:

We light our second Advent candle for peace - a flame of peace to spread around the world as good triumphs over evil.

Lord, may this candle flame guide us and inspire us each to play our part to promote peace in your world.

Amen

Music as we begin worship is a setting of words from the prophecy of Isaiah, in chapter 40: a chorus from Handel's *Messiah*.

**Music<sup>i</sup>** – *And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed*  
from *Messiah* by Handel, Trevor Pinnock with the  
English Concert and the English Concert Choir

### **Call to Worship:**

This is our Advent message: *The glory of the Lord **shall** be revealed.*

This is the only time of year that our hymn is likely to get an outing, unless you have a Christmas music album stuck on repeat. Listen as Coventry's own St Michael's Singers bring us a sumptuous arrangement of *O come, O come Emmanuel*.

**Hymn:** *O come, O come Emmanuel*  
sung by St. Michael's Singers & The Coventry Singers  
from the album  
*The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... Ever!*

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel,  
that mourns in lonely exile here,  
until the Son of God appear.  
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel*  
*Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free  
thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
from depths of hell Thy people save,  
and give them victory o'er the grave.  
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, Thou Key of David, come  
and open wide our heav'nly home;  
make safe the way that leads on high,  
and close the path to misery.  
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
our spirits by thine Advent here.  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
and death's dark shadows put to flight.  
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, O come thou Lord of might,  
who to thy tribes, on Sinai's height,  
in ancient times didst give the Law  
in cloud and majesty and awe.  
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

## **Prayers**

Lord God, in this time of Advent, this season of waiting, show us what we are waiting for.

Not for a big meal and turkey on the table, where enough folk are allowed to gather to eat it, but for a fresh understanding of the meaning of your Son's coming among us.

Not for something special on television, but for someone special born to be one of us, born in a humble outbuilding used for overflow accommodation.

Not for a choice between red wine and white, port or sherry, but a fresh chance to choose your way, shown to us in the growing up of Jesus and accessible through the Gospel.

Lord God, in this time of Advent may we look not so much to fill our larders but to empty ourselves of all that is selfish and neglectful of others.

Forgive us when we fall short of our potential to do good to your people and your Creation, when we close our curtains on the needs of others. Your will is that all of the human family should share fairly in the resources you have given us – forgive us when we fail to deal justly with those who have less than we do.

And yet we want to celebrate. When you come again in the Christmas story. The Word made flesh is worth our wonder. Help us to find the right way to express it in these Covid times, and to explore through our worship the fulfilment of the promise you made to your long-ago people.

In the name of the Christ child we offer you our words and our worship, and as taught by Christ the man we pray...

## **The Lord's Prayer**

*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.*

Listen for the Word of God as Jill brings us a reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:** Isaiah 40.1-11

“Comfort my people,” says our God. “Comfort them!

<sup>2</sup> Encourage the people of Jerusalem.

Tell them they have suffered long enough  
and their sins are now forgiven.

I have punished them in full for all their sins.”

<sup>3</sup> A voice cries out,

“Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord!

Clear the way in the desert for our God!

<sup>4</sup> Fill every valley;

level every mountain.

The hills will become a plain,

and the rough country will be made smooth.

<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,

and all people will see it.

The Lord himself has promised this.”

<sup>6</sup> A voice cries out, “Proclaim a message!”

“What message shall I proclaim?” I ask.

“Proclaim that all human beings are like grass;

they last no longer than wild flowers.

<sup>7</sup> Grass withers and flowers fade

when the Lord sends the wind blowing over them.

People are no more enduring than grass.

<sup>8</sup> Yes, grass withers and flowers fade,

but the word of our God endures forever.”

<sup>9</sup> Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain

and proclaim the good news!

Call out with a loud voice, Zion;

announce the good news!

Speak out and do not be afraid.

Tell the towns of Judah

that their God is coming!

<sup>10</sup> The Sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power,

bringing with him the people he has rescued.

<sup>11</sup> He will take care of his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs together

and carry them in his arms;

he will gently lead their mothers.

### **Reflection (1)**

Even in a time of Covid, we see the start of a celebration of Christmas before Advent has really got properly under way.

In a normal year we'd have seen concerts, office and school parties beginning, the restaurants with their Christmas menus.

Shops usually start gearing up as soon as they have got Halloween out of the way. And I am not sure that Covid has made a difference – perhaps it has brought things forward even more. Certainly some of our neighbours were putting decorations up last weekend.

And after all this preparation, we get to Christmas, and it's not a surprise any more, is it? Will Christmas with a kind of lid kept on it be more stressful than usual, or less? Time will tell.

The Church didn't have Christmas at all until around 400 years after the time of Christ.

And with the idea of Christmas came the idea of Advent – a period of preparation and fasting leading up to the big celebration. Not, you'll notice, a period of celebration and eating. The idea of Advent is really what has changed over the years. Christmas Day these days has too much of the feel of a finishing line, at which you collapse exhausted as if you've just finished a long race. We need to work hard to retain some of the idea of Christmas being a fulfillment.

There is no doubt that the first Christmas represented a fulfillment, that it was the end of something, certainly, but the end of something that had taken rather more than four weeks to work up to. Christmas was the climax of a process that had taken place over all time. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. and the Word was God...etcetera. The first Christmas represented something that had started a long time previously, and the "something" is described in the Old Testament as much as in the New.

I am thinking today about the way the Old Testament shines a light forward into New Testament times, and to the coming of Jesus.

This weekend's reading from the Old Testament dates from a period when Israel was in trouble. It's generally believed that Isaiah, or this part of Isaiah, dates from the time of the exile, when Jerusalem was conquered, and a large number of its people were forcibly relocated to other parts of the conquering nation. A sort of ethnic cleansing in reverse.

But Isaiah, in up-beat mood, points to a future time when there will be great changes. This sort of passage could not help but strike a chord with the early Christians, especially those who were converts from Judaism, even before Christmas itself began to be marked.

*Speak 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.*

This would strike such a chord with people who had been forced to leave Jerusalem, who had seen foreign armies destroy a lot of what they held dear.

*A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every 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. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed..."*

A much better time is coming, when everything will be easy, our metaphorical journeys through life will be less strenuous.

And who is it that is coming? Someone who will take special care of us.

*He 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.*

I think that if we read this kind of passage with a Christian light shining on it – with the benefit of Christmas hindsight, you might say, then in this passage we find something we can still be

looking forward to, especially at Christmas, that says something different from the conventional story of the child in the manger.

Isaiah is describing an idealised time of perfect peace, a time when the ills of the world have been swept aside, and elsewhere he suggests that even lions, bears and snakes will have set aside their apparently vicious natures and become somehow docile.

A time when people lose the vicious side of their natures, when people do the right thing by other people, when they use love and justice and peace as the basis for their decisions – that's a future worth looking forward to.

Just to push the point home, here is a musical paraphrase of another Isaiah passage, in chapter 2. Another vision of a better time.

**Song:** Paraphrase of Isaiah 2.2-5  
*'Behold the mountain of the Lord'*  
Scottish Philharmonic Singers & Ian McCrorie  
from the album *Psalms of Scotland*

*Behold! the mountain of the Lord  
in latter days shall rise  
on mountain tops above the hills,  
and draw the wondering eyes.*

*To this the joyful nations round,  
all tribes and tongues, shall flow;  
up to the hill of God, they'll say,  
and to his house we'll go.*

*No strife shall rage, nor hostile feuds  
disturb those peaceful years;  
to ploughshares men shall beat their swords,  
to pruning-hooks their spears.*

*The beam that shines from Zion hill  
shall lighten every land;  
the King who reigns in Salem's towers  
shall all the world command.*

*No longer hosts, encountering hosts,  
shall crowds of slain deplore:  
they hang the trumpet in the hall,  
and study war no more.*

*Among the nations he shall judge;  
his judgements truth shall guide;  
his sceptre shall protect the just,  
and quell the sinner's pride.*

*Come then, O house of Jacob! come  
to worship at his shrine;  
and, walking in the light of God,  
with holy beauties shine.*

**Scripture:** Mark 1.1-8

This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> It began as the prophet Isaiah had written:

"God said, 'I will send my messenger ahead of you to open the way for you.'

<sup>3</sup> Someone is shouting in the desert, 'Get the road ready for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel!'"

<sup>4</sup> So John appeared in the desert, baptising and preaching. "Turn away from your sins and be baptised," he told the people, "and God will forgive your sins." <sup>5</sup> Many people from the province of Judea and the city of Jerusalem went out to hear John. They confessed their sins, and he baptised them in the River Jordan.

<sup>6</sup> John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> He announced to the people, "The man who will come after me is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to bend down and untie his sandals. <sup>8</sup> I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

## Reflection (2)

I said that when people do the right thing by other people, when they use love and justice and peace as the basis for their decisions – that's a future worth looking forward to. And this is all bound up in making this behaviour part of our response to God – it's not just about *calling ourselves* Christians, it's about **behaving** like Christians.

John the Baptist thought so, too. His idea of baptism involved a wholehearted repentance, and nobody could rely on their heritage as the chosen people of God to save them, if they didn't pull their socks up.

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

*And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

Before his arrest John got stuck in to the religious establishment of his time – they were not performing.

John was looking forward as well as Isaiah – he had an idea that the time was near when the Messiah that the whole of time, the whole of the Old Testament had been looking forward to, would come.

*John 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.*

*I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."*

Strong words, but this is the thinking that the Old Testament should be encouraging us toward.

I admit it takes an effort during the run up to a twenty-first-century Christmas, even more effort this particular year. But maybe we should try, as we look forward to Christmas, to look at ourselves and see whether we need to join John the Baptist in calling for a change, or if in fact it is us that he is calling to.

Amen.

Advent is a time of looking forward to the coming of the light in the dark that was Jesus. We will punctuate our prayers with a wee song we've used before from the Iona Community Wild Goose Worship Group [taken from their album, *Heaven shall not wait*]: *Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.*

## Prayers of Intercession

*Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.*

Lord God, shine a light this Advent

Shine a light on our world. In the dark pandemic time we thank you for the approach of the glow of hope in vaccine developments in this country and others. We ask for grace to be generous in sharing and in waiting, in considering the needs of others and in remembering how precarious some lives are in your world, even when there is no pandemic.

Shine a light into the hearts of decision makers and planners, politicians and scientists, shine a guiding light ahead of them to show them too the way, the best way, your way.

*Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.*

Lord God, shine a light on our Church. The whole Christian Church, the Body of Christ. Inspire us with new ideas and refreshed priorities. Where we have to abandon or suspend the old ways, show us new ways.

Shine a light for the local churches we know and love. Bless those who have to decide what is best in each fellowship. And give us strength to maintain the communications we have developed this year, to leave no one in the dark.

*Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.*

Lord God, shine a light on us, our families and friends. Keep us safe.

We think of those who wait indoors for better times. And we ask a blessing on those called to serve in our communities – in our shops, in our schools, in hospitals and in other key areas of our society. As we rely on them may we all rely on you and look for your light everywhere, nurturing each spark into the flame of the Spirit – and sharing it with everyone.

*Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.*

In the name of Jesus we pray

Amen

I wanted to include this song in our podcasts again before the end of the year and this week I wanted to finish with a song that sought to inspire action. A win-win, then, with *Heaven shall not wait*.

**Hymn**                      *Heaven shall not wait* by John L Bell and Graham Maule  
   sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group  
   from their album *Heaven shall not wait*

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

## **Blessing**

May we seize the opportunity to make God's path straight, this Advent, and prepare properly for the coming of the Christ-child.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever

Amen

### **A pre-retirement word...**

After this weekend there remain just three more until I retire from pastoral ministry and cease my share in the oversight of the North Coventry Group after just over five years. Of course my association with churches in the Group goes back rather longer than that. For example it was on the 27 May 1984 that I first led a service at our Potters Green church. I preached a sermon on Paul's letter to the Galatians. I had been leading worship as a trainee Lay Preacher for just under a year and a half. More amazing, looking back, is the fact that I had been married to Erica for just over a fortnight. We had moved into a house not far from Potters Green and were still finding our feet.

Over the years I have many fond memories of friends at Potters Green and of course have been back many times. I looked after their then joint pastorate as Interim Moderator in the period after Rowena Francis left the District and before Yvonne Stone came to Coventry. I didn't know then that I would become the minister in 2015. For me one highlight of recent times has been helping the church to celebrate its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in June 2016. We had the old Sunday School banner unrolled and displayed – our Charles took some photos of it and a large framed print is on the church wall. We collated material about the history and published a booklet. And we hosted a full church to celebrate and heard the Moderator and the Lord Mayor. I played the organ. Equally good fun has been simply gathering in the church of a Sunday morning, not such large numbers but big in the Spirit, enjoying a natter before and after the service. For a few years I have played the piano for my own services and it's been a privilege to be not just the minister but also the musician. Speaking of which, where's Erica with her flute?

**Music:** *Tambourin* by François-Joseph Gossec  
played by James Galway, with  
Charles Gerhardt and the National Philharmonic Orchestra  
from the album *Celebrating 70: a collection of Personal Favourites*

Thank you for listening to our podcast. The last in this series will be on the weekend of Sunday 27 December; there will be a special edition with carols and readings for Christmas Eve, and a shorter one on Christmas Day. The archive on our website will remain available until Easter, and after that depending on licensing conditions.

### **Credits**

*And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed*, from *Messiah* by Handel, was performed by Trevor Pinnock with the English Concert and the English Concert Choir

*O come, O come Emmanuel* was sung by St. Michael's Singers & The Coventry Singers, from the album *The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... Ever!*

*Behold the mountain of the Lord* was sung by the Scottish Philharmonic Singers & Ian McCrorie from the album *Psalms of Scotland*

*Heaven shall not wait* by John L Bell and Graham Maule was sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group from their album *Heaven shall not wait*

*Tambourin* by François-Joseph Gossec was played by James Galway, with Charles Gerhardt and the National Philharmonic Orchestra, from the album *Celebrating 70: a collection of Personal Favourites*

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<sup>i</sup> All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> Bible passages are taken from the Good News Translation.