

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 13 December 2020 Third 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 13 December, the third Sunday in Advent, 2020.

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

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

This weekend sees the third Sunday in Advent.

As candles are being lit in houses and churches amidst such preparations for Christmas as we can make, we pray:

We light our third Advent candle for remembrance.

We think of those no longer with us, who are missed acutely at this season. May this candle flame help us each to cherish those memories but to live for today, even as we look forward to the light of Christ coming into the world.

Amen

Music as we begin... Good advice in the shape of a jolly tune, *Chasing sheep is best left to shepherds*

**Music**<sup>i</sup> – *Chasing sheep is best left to shepherds* by Michael Nyman  
from the soundtrack album of the film,  
*The Draughtsman's Contract*

**Call to Worship:** Psalm 126 vv1-3.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.

Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,  
'The Lord has done great things for them.'

The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.

A verse from a hymn by Philipp Nicolai, a late 16<sup>th</sup>-century Lutheran pastor who is responsible for the original versions of some of the anthems relevant to this season we sing or hear each year. Including *How brightly shines the morning star* and this one: *Wachet auf! – Wake, O wake!*

**Hymn:**           *Wake, O Wake with tidings thrilling*  
                           sung by the choir of Wells Cathedral, from their album  
                           *Advent Promise - Songs and Music for the Season of Advent*

Wake, O wake! With tidings thrilling  
the watchmen all the air are filling,  
arise, Jerusalem, arise!  
Midnight strikes! No more delaying,  
'The hour has come!' we hear them saying,  
'where are ye all, ye virgins wise?  
The Bridegroom comes in sight,  
raise high your torches bright!  
Alleluia!  
The wedding song swells loud and strong:  
go forth and join the festal throng.

## **Prayers**

In prayer we offer our time, our reflection, our thoughts, our words and our music to God.

Lord God as we gather without gathering, join together at different times to hear your word through different devices and perhaps simply to read it, accept this strange sacrifice of our praise and our thanks for all that you are and all you have done.

Every day, every week seems to bring fresh worries and strains. And yet every day and every week are evidence of your care, your motive power that initiated all that we have and all that we can do. Where we fail to show appreciation and gratitude, forgive us.

We thank you for signs of hope and progress in the global struggle to cope with and combat the pandemic. For doses of a vaccine newly available, administered for the first time here in our city. For acceptance and accreditation of other vaccines here and overseas.

We thank you for the science and the scientists, the skills and patience of all who are involved in healthcare. Where we or our fellow-citizens fall into insularity and self-centredness, believing we somehow have prior right to resources over other citizens of your world, forgive us.

Lord, your Son came to be one of us and to share the highs and lows of human life. Help us to believe that he is with us and within us as we try to cope with the prospect and the experience of Christmas. And where we resent the honest efforts of those looking for a way to regain the old normal, forgive us once again and send us your Spirit to be our strength and our guide through difficult days.

In the name of Jesus we pray, and in his words we join our prayers with the whole Church:

## **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.*

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:**

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
<sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion –  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness  
instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
instead of a spirit of despair.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
a planting of the Lord  
for the display of his splendour.

<sup>4</sup> They will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and restore the places long devastated;  
they will renew the ruined cities  
that have been devastated for generations.

<sup>8</sup> 'For I, the Lord, love justice;  
I hate robbery and iniquity.  
In my faithfulness I will reward my people  
and make an everlasting covenant with them.  
<sup>9</sup> Their descendants will be known among the nations  
and their offspring among the peoples.  
All who see them will acknowledge  
that they are a people the Lord has blessed.'

<sup>10</sup> I delight greatly in the Lord;  
my soul rejoices in my God.  
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation  
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
<sup>11</sup> For as the soil makes the young plant come up  
and a garden causes seeds to grow,  
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness  
and praise spring up before all nations.

**Reflection (1)**

As you'll probably know very well, scholars who study ancient texts believe that rather than being the work of one writer, one prophet, the book we know as Isaiah came together from three different sources and spread over quite a timescale. Chapters 1 to 39 from the 8<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus, the next section up to chapter 55 and then the last eleven chapters. These corresponding to periods before the exile to Babylon, during it, and then after the Persian king had conquered the conquerors and the Jews were allowed back. This

passage that Margaret has read comes, therefore, from the last section, when the people are restored but of course they are still a vassal state and not in charge of their own destiny.

This passage is very special to us as Christians and not just as a subject for literary criticism and analysis. Not just for putting in its original historical context, valuable as this is. This is the passage that Jesus chose as his keynote statement in the synagogue in Nazareth. His manifesto, that staggered the people who heard him speak:

[Luke 4.16-30]

<sup>16</sup> *He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,* <sup>17</sup> *and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

<sup>18</sup> *'The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,*  
<sup>19</sup> *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

<sup>20</sup> *Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.* <sup>21</sup> *He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'*

There is nothing odd or wrong about one prophet repeating another prophet's words – politicians and others pick up on good sound bites all the time. But the hearers of Jesus were accustomed to hearing these words as the prophecy of someone from around 600 years previously. After the exile, things had gone a bit better for Jews, who were able to come together in worship in their holy places again. There had been reforms of religious practices gone bad, the rebuilding referred to in verse 4 had had some effect. But to the Jews of Jesus' time this was as remote from them as... as Henry V is from us:

*Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;  
Or close the wall up with our English dead.*

*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
Cry God for Harry, England and St George!*

Ok, I've conflated two speeches there and two battles in 1415, and I can't say St George does much for me or any of my fellow Glaswegians. But sometimes we lean on cultural resonances of long ago – past glories, you might say – and then we move on and make the best of today. Jews could have done that with the words of Isaiah, bringing God's promise of better times to a bruised and battered nation.

And yet here in Jesus was someone saying that it was all coming true. No wonder the people in Nazareth were flabbergasted. This was the big reveal of what had been foretold by John the Baptist. Someone special had come into the world.

In a couple of weeks we will hear the traditional stories of Christ the baby in the manger come to be among us. In that gift we see something of God's nature, and that is why we worship, to find out, to clarify, to find out more and more. In the words of Christ, the words of Isaiah we see it all snap into focus. God sent his son to bear witness to what he, God,

was and is like. He loves justice. The prophet said so [v8]. God's Son showed us. And we should remember him with the same wonder that those in the synagogue must have felt.

From a 4<sup>th</sup> century liturgy and translated and paraphrased by the Victorian clergyman Gerard Moultrie, here is a musical expression of wonder at the coming of Christ: *Let all mortal flesh keep silence.*

**Hymn:** *Let all mortal flesh keep silent*  
 sung by the Scottish Festival Singers  
 from the album *The Hymn Makers – Best Loved Hymns 2*

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,  
 and with fear and trembling stand;  
 ponder nothing earthly-minded,  
 for with blessing in his hand,  
 Christ our God to earth descendeth,  
 our full homage to demand.

Rank on rank the host of heaven  
 spreads its vanguard on the way,  
 as the Light of light descendeth  
 from the realms of endless day,  
 that the pow'rs of hell may vanish  
 as the darkness clears away.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,  
 as of old on earth he stood,  
 lord of lords, in human vesture,  
 in the body and the blood;  
 he will give to all the faithful  
 his own self for heav'nly food.

At his feet the six-winged seraph,  
 cherubim with sleepless eye,  
 veil their faces to the presence,  
 as with ceaseless voice they cry:  
 "Alleluia, Alleluia  
 Alleluia, Lord Most High!"

**Scripture:** John 1.6-8, 19-28

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

<sup>19</sup> Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. <sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'

<sup>21</sup> They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?'

He said, 'I am not.'

'Are you the Prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

<sup>22</sup> Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."'

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

<sup>26</sup> 'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

## Reflection (2)

When we prepared our podcast for last weekend, there was a very similar passage from Mark's Gospel. An equivalent description of John the Baptist and an equivalent assertion by him that someone else was going to come along, someone greater, someone better, someone unexpected.

Wynne read us a little teaser from my favourite Christmas passage, the very beginning of the lesson.

*There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

Ok. We get it. John isn't the light of the world, he is a forerunner, a witness, a herald. And the rest of the passage gives us an idea of how he did it. He went baptising, in the Jordan, challenging the people to change their ways. And when he was drawing the crowds the authorities had him in for questioning.

We are told that he didn't shrink from admitting that he was getting things warmed up for someone else. *I am not the Messiah.* The interrogators seem to have got a little bogged down with closed questions. Are you Elijah? No. Are you the prophet? No. There is a prophet who was said to be coming after Moses, and together with Elijah and the Messiah individuals whose coming the Jews were looking out for. So not the prophet.

But someone was coming. A surprise for the authorities but no surprise for us. I want to pick up on a phrase that is **not** in Mark's Gospel, or Matthew or Luke.

*'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'*

***among you stands one you do not know.***

That's the extra little nugget that you don't get in the other Gospels. And of course it is completely consistent with the prologue to **this** Gospel:

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.*

This is a great passage, and even though this sentence is not the climax of our Christmas reading, it still tells us so much. *Though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.*

Just every so often I have been at a church function dressed – shall we say – a bit casually, and I have been challenged for my behaviour. No one has actually said, so who do you think you are then, the minister? But it has come close. A minister dressed in jeans and a jumper is one thing, but the saviour of the world, God's son, co-equal and part of the godhead since before the world began looking like any other traveller Jew? I think we have to forgive the top people – everyone – not spotting him.

But in this there is a lesson not just for the Jews of around 2000 years ago but for us too. And like all good lessons from scripture we can get it in multiple places. If the righteous in the last days, in that story of the sheep divided from the goats, can't remember having helped Christ when he was hungry or homeless, sick or without clothes, it's because they managed to express love to others without judging them.

If ***among us stands one we do not know***, then two things can happen. One, we behave as if Christ isn't watching. We act as though the teacher isn't in the room. We neglect our obligation to love each other.

Or two – if ***among us stands one we do not know*** then we take care of each other and live for each other and don't think anyone unworthy of the name of neighbour.

And that's when we get to make straight the way for the Lord. Or at least, in our own small way, make it a little straighter.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

We turn again to God in our prayers.

Lord, as we approach Christmas, help us to remember.

Help us to remember those in the world much less fortunate than we. Those in the world whose choices do not include which member of the family to eat a large meal with but may involve nominating which member of the family gets to eat at all. Those in the world whose thermostats are permanently set on outside ambient temperatures because they have nowhere to call home. Those who don't understand what a vaccine is but do understand that people they know are falling ill to a strange new disease.

Lord, as we journey closer to the manger and the child within, help us to remember.

Help us to remember our purpose on earth as Christians, the reason we have churches, our mission to live in your image and serve as Christ's body. Help us to seek the right opportunities for now, and to break down the barriers of tradition that hold us back from trying something new.

Lord, as we decorate or opt for the plain, as we plan special food or a simple menu, as we look out Christmas jumpers or leave them in the drawer this year, help us to remember.

Help us to remember our diversity and to celebrate it. Help us to look for the good in others even if they are somehow not like us. Help us to remember those who are working to keep us safe, to look after us when sick, to maintain security and to keep looking for new answers and the best way forward.

Lord, as we let the tide of Christmas finally start to break through our Advent observance, remember us.

Send us again your Spirit to inspire and guide, and to show us how to offer the right word, the most appropriate action. For we want to be like you. We want to be like Jesus.

In his name we pray.

Amen

There have been bereavements in three of our church families in recent weeks. As we lit our candle this week, we remembered those we have lost. In our Advent scripture we revisited themes of looking forward. The Christian hope is of eternal life in the presence of God – a theme which our hymn repeats.

## **Hymn**

*Be still, my soul*  
[Choir of Trinity College, University of Melbourne]  
from the album *50 Best-loved Hymns*

Be still my soul: the Lord is on your side;  
bear patiently the cross of grief and pain;  
leave to your God to order and provide;  
in every change he faithful will remain.  
Be still my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend  
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end

Be still my soul: the hour is hastening on  
when we shall be forever with the Lord,  
when disappointment, grief and fear are gone,  
sorrow forgotten, love's pure joy restored.  
Be still my soul: when change and tears are past,  
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

## **Blessing**

May we remember as we are remembered, love as we are loved and act for Jesus to show God to the world.

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...**

It is odd to think, now, of a time when I didn't know where most of the churches of the Coventry and Warwickshire District were. By the end of the 80s I had preached in all of them, but back 36 years ago I only knew a few. So, in late October 1984 I took my new sermon on 'Sonship', no doubt prepared as an assessment for the Lay Preaching course, to the evening service at Foleshill Road. Not really knowing where Foleshill Road was. I would have approached from the Bell Green direction, along Old Church Road, in the dark, and after parking my old Cortina would have gone in to introduce myself.

It is also odd now to think of a time when I had not met any member of the Barker family, or Roy Robinson, or the late Muriel Burden whose father had been much involved in the church and who I think was Church Secretary when I first preached. Everyone was very kind. I say that, not because I remember the occasion but because they inevitably would have been. There were some Scots members who always appreciated the odd remark with a Scots flavour – always a bonus.

Over time I was back on various occasions with perhaps an annual visit before I was ordained. In those days lay preachers were a bit more plentiful than they are now, and there were stalwarts of an earlier generation still very active – Phil and Les Warner, Cecil Hayden, Albert Simmons, Ralph Lee. And of course more ministers around, to take more services at their own churches.



In the late 80s I was District Chairman and was invited to open the Christmas Fayre at Foleshill Road. A speech from the stage – good practice for future votes of thanks and good training in thinking of something to say on such occasions that wouldn't upset anyone, miss anyone out or take up too much time. I guess I survived, and I was flattered and honoured to be accepted as an Interim Moderator by the church in 2007. This gave me an insight into the way the church works – superb teamwork punctuated by near-anarchy. I've been lucky to have another dose of it in the last five years as minister, and look forward to yet more as a member. I'm a lucky man.

**Music:**            *Ashokan Farewell*, by Jay Ungar  
performed by Nicola Benedetti, Rory Macdonald and the  
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra  
from the album *Homecoming – a Scottish Fantasy*

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**

*Chasing sheep is best left to shepherds* by Michael Nyman was taken from the soundtrack album of the film, *The Draughtsman's Contract*

*Wake, O Wake with tidings thrilling* was sung by the choir of Wells Cathedral, from their album *Advent Promise - Songs and Music for the Season of Advent*

*Let all mortal flesh keep silent* was sung by the Scottish Festival Singers from the album *The Hymn Makers – Best Loved Hymns 2*

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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 New International Version, Anglicised Edition.