

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 27 December 2020**

### **First Sunday after Christmas**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 27 December, the first Sunday after Christmas 2020.

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

**Music<sup>i</sup> –**            *Farewell to Stromness*  
                              composed and played by Peter Maxwell-Davies, from the album  
                              *Suite from "The Boyfriend", Suite from "The Devils" & Other Works*

**Call to Worship:**            Words from Psalm 148

Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above.  
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

**Hymn:**                        *Lord for the years* by Timothy Dudley-Smith  
                                      Huddersfield Choral Society and Joseph Cullen  
                                      from their album *The Hymns Album*

### **Prayers**

We pray

Lord, we gather once again – though not in your house. We come together in different places and at different times, one last time for 2020.

We thank you once again for the gift of Jesus, born at Christmas. Help us not to race away from Christmas too quickly. Help us not to be too eager to move on to fresh things, or to the next "same old thing". Give us grace to feed from the joy of the new-born Saviour and push back on the pressure and frustration of coping with the pandemic.

We thank you for all of your gifts to us. Things and people. Resources, opportunities, challenges. Families and friends. The Christian family, born out of Easter and yet focused on Christ's birth at Christmas.

At the end of the year we remember the things we have been able to do and also the plans we have not been able to complete. The challenges we have faced, the people that we have been. All of them we place in God's hands

Lord of the years, help us to thank you for the past year.

Lord of this year, forgive us for the things that we regret, and heal the wounds that we carry with us out of 2020.

Lord of every year, help us to build on the past, and to journey with you into the future, confident in your strength to support us, and following the path shown us by your Son, Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen

And as he has taught us we say...

### **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>:** Psalm 148

<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
praise him in the heights above.

<sup>2</sup> Praise him, all his angels;  
praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

<sup>3</sup> Praise him, sun and moon;  
praise him, all you shining stars.

<sup>4</sup> Praise him, you highest heavens  
and you waters above the skies.

<sup>5</sup> Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for at his command they were created,  
<sup>6</sup> and he established them for ever and ever –  
he issued a decree that will never pass away.

<sup>7</sup> Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,

<sup>8</sup> lightning and hail, snow and clouds,  
stormy winds that do his bidding,

<sup>9</sup> you mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars,

<sup>10</sup> wild animals and all cattle,  
small creatures and flying birds,

<sup>11</sup> kings of the earth and all nations,  
you princes and all rulers on earth,

<sup>12</sup> young men and women,  
old men and children.

<sup>13</sup> Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for his name alone is exalted;  
his splendour is above the earth and the heavens.

<sup>14</sup> And he has raised up for his people a horn,  
the praise of all his faithful servants,  
of Israel, the people close to his heart.

Praise the Lord.

### **Reflection (1)**

This is the psalm set for our reflection this weekend, but also one of my favourites. And it came to mind last week when we saw the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the sky, two

planets coming so close together they appeared as a single bright object... or they did for those who were blessed with clear skies.

Of course they are not close together at all. It just seemed that way from our point of view. And the constellations that to us look so much like a plough – the Great Bear, or a W – Cassiopeia, or a hunter with a sword doing star jumps – Orion, would look very different from a different place in the galaxy, and will look different from Earth in the distant future. For everything is in movement. Nothing is standing still.

Humankind has only understood this for the last few centuries. In the time of Jesus the heavens were deemed to move around the Earth and any interesting change in the sky was the work of God, and no further explanation was required.

It's as if this psalm was a catalogue of the aspects of Creation we have found out more and more about over the centuries. The sky, the stars and planets. Sea creatures in the depths. Animals wild and tame. Small creatures, that the psalmist never dreamed would include organisms too small for the human eye to see. Geology and meteorology.

Looking back over the podcast reflections that Erica and I have produced since the end of March, I know very well that I have repeated myself, often. I have realised that I come back to similar themes time and again. But the reason that we do this is that these themes are always true. And if we always look in our scripture for what it tells us of God, why would we be surprised if the major lesson is always the same? God is great. God is loving. God's Creation is infinitely varied and detailed and amazing.

The Psalmist knew this in his way. We have evidence of it that he never had. But our response should be the same. With all his Creation, let us praise the name of the Lord.

We are still in the season of Christmas, and hear a song now reflecting on Jesus coming to Earth. Originally a Gaelic song and linked to the tune named after a village on the Isle of Mull, *Bunessan: Child in the manger*.

**Hymn:** Child in the manger, infant of Mary  
sung by the St. Michael's Singers and The Coventry Singers  
from *The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... ever!*

Child in the manger,  
infant of Mary;  
outcast and stranger,  
Lord of all;  
Child who inherits  
all our transgressions,  
all our demerits  
on Him fall.

Once the most holy  
Child of salvation  
gently and lowly  
lived below;  
now as our glorious  
mighty Redeemer,  
see Him victorious  
o'er each foe.

Prophets foretold Him,  
infant of wonder;  
angels behold Him  
on His throne;  
worthy our Saviour  
of all our praises;  
happy forever  
are His own.

**Scripture:**

Luke 2.22-40

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord'), <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: 'a pair of doves or two young pigeons'. <sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

<sup>29</sup> 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.  
<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel.'

<sup>33</sup> The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup> Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

<sup>39</sup> When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

**Reflection (2)**

There is no doubt that we all do a lot of waiting. This is true in any normal year but now are added to the list waiting for the latest pandemic statistics. Waiting for a move from Tier 3 to – wherever. Waiting for a vaccine, waiting for our appointment to **have** the vaccine.

Simeon was waiting. Our Bible says that he was waiting for Israel to be saved.

We don't know anything else about Simeon except what we read in this part of Luke's gospel. The same goes for Anna. But here in the temple, Mary and Joseph encountered these two faithful people.

What were Mary and Joseph in the temple for? They had come to make the obligatory sacrifices following the birth of a child, and the birth of a boy, come to that. Ancient Jewish Law laid down certain rules – and there just isn't time to go into them just now. But we do know from the Gospel that Mary and Joseph opted for the cheapest sacrifice they were allowed.

And then they met Simeon. There isn't really a modern Christian parallel for this sort of encounter, or this sort of man. If our churches were like the temple, open all the day through,

all week long, and if it were a place for debate and for the settlement of court cases and a place where people came to do all sorts of other things as well as attend worship, and if this was all going on all the time, you might imagine one day that I may be baptising a child, and just afterwards some bloke the parents have never seen before wanders across, grabs the baby, and starts foretelling the child's future.

We'd be inclined to call the police, wouldn't we? Safeguarding would kick in. Other times, other customs. If you ever see an Old Masters painting of Simeon - you'll probably see him depicted as an old man. We don't know that. He had, however, been promised by the Holy Spirit - that is, he himself was utterly convinced - that he would not die before he saw the Lord's promised Messiah.

Young or old, Simeon was waiting. And he was satisfied that the promise to him had come true. There's again an assumption that he had not then got long to live, but we don't know. Anna's condition was more explicitly defined for us. Depending on your interpretation of the numbers, she had been a widow for more than fifty years. She is described as a prophetess - not a title that the Jews would give anyone lightly. She too recognised the special thing that had happened. In a sense she too had been waiting. Which was even more for Mary and Joseph to wonder at.

We all spend a great deal of time waiting. Perhaps not explicitly waiting for God to do marvellous things in our lives, but waiting for things to happen. And in contrast to those folk who we have heard waited with a calm assurance that all would be well, we are not very patient, these days. There's something about today's world that means we're not very good at waiting. We are accustomed to quick fixes, to speedy solutions and instant answers.

We seem to be different. Part of the reason for this lies in the fact that we actually get so many things instantly these days. You turn on the light switch, and normally you get instant light. You haven't had to work for it. You turn the tap, you get water. Even the more tricky technical problems these days produce solutions in months or years these days where previously they took generations. Look how quickly science produced new vaccines this year. From decade to decade the things we treat as normal change enormously. And we want even the basically good things to be better, and for this to happen as soon as possible.

What is the Gospel message this morning? The episode in the temple seems to set the seal on the Christmas story, and we then see Joseph and Mary returning to Nazareth - setting the scene for later. After no doubt welcoming the wise men next week, before too long we will be beginning to look at the story of Jesus the man, his baptism, calling his disciples..... It'll be Lent before long - Easter is on 4 April next year so Lent starts on February the 17th.

But let's not rush, for the message today is probably one of patience. Just because nothing seems to be happening, it doesn't mean that nothing will happen. We all have a duty to try and discern what we can do to bring God's kingdom closer. Sometimes the answer is "nothing" - or "nothing yet". As John Milton wrote, "They also serve, who only stand and wait."

And the message today is one of hope. Like the rest of the Christmas message. Out of nothing, out of very little, came Jesus. From the family so poor that they had to opt for the cheap alternative when making sacrifices. Pigeons, as a lamb was beyond their budget. From this humblest beginning came Jesus, God's salvation, "a light to reveal his will to the Gentiles and bring glory to Israel."

**Music:** *Nunc dimittis* by Geoffrey Burgon  
Trinity College Choir, Cambridge, Richard Marlow & Silas Standage  
from the album *Miserere – Choral Favourites*

*Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.  
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all  
people.  
To be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Ghost  
as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be  
world without end*

*Amen*

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Our prayers are punctuated by a short song, words from Psalm 62: *On God alone I wait  
silently; God my deliverer, God my strong tower. [...a setting by John L Bell, sung by the Wild  
Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community, from their album Psalms of Patience, Protest  
and Praise]*

Dear Lord, like Simeon and Anna we are waiting. We are waiting for better times. We are waiting for light to dawn after a dark year in our lives and in the life of the world. Like these faithful people of long ago, help us to realise that our hope is already with us, our deliverer came at Christmas, and the momentum of the Gospel of Christ can still influence the world – your world – for good.

*On God alone I wait silently; God my deliverer, God my strong tower*

Dear Lord, we are waiting for other good news, of ever more effective treatments for the virus which has caused such loss, such hurt. We pray for inspiration for those trying to manage the science and to keep ahead of the variations and mutations that will inevitably come. We pray for strength for those in the health service and all their support functions and suppliers who have worked tirelessly to serve and to save others this year, and for whom the New Year brings continuing pressure.

*On God alone I wait silently; God my deliverer, God my strong tower*

Dear Lord we are waiting to see what we can do. Help us not just to wait but to seek out opportunities to help, to support, to give and to share. Not just to wait for someone else to make the first move.

*On God alone I wait silently; God my deliverer, God my strong tower*

We remember those who are ill and have been ill. Those who have died and those whose mourning has been constrained and incomplete. Those who are waiting for an opportunity to come together with loved ones after such a long period without contact. Give us all patience to deal with our own frustrations and compassion to help others, each experiencing this time in a unique way.

*On God alone I wait silently; God my deliverer, God my strong tower*

We offer our prayers to you, Lord, we listen for your call and we wait in confidence for your Spirit to guide and strengthen us in all we do.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

## Hymn

*Love divine, all loves excelling*  
sung by the St Michael's Singers  
from *The best Hymns Album in the World, ever!*

Love divine, all loves excelling,  
joy of heav'n, to earth come down,  
fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
all thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesu, thou art all compassion;  
pure, unbounded love thou art.  
Visit us with thy salvation;  
enter ev'ry trembling heart.

Come, Almighty, to deliver,  
let us all thy life receive.  
Suddenly return, and never,  
nevermore thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
serve thee as thy hosts above,  
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,  
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish, then, thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love and praise.

## Blessing

As we wait, may we not be without hope, for God is great and loves his Creation enough to send his Son to us, to die for us and teach us how to live, loving God and our neighbour.

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 I completed my lay preaching training, the convention of the day was that I was then authorised to administer the sacraments throughout Coventry and Warwickshire. It was on the evening of 13 April 1986 that I presided at communion for the first time, and also visited Holyhead Road URC for the first time. It was also the first time I had ever walked into a vestry and been advised – possibly by Hazel Hier – where **not** to stand in order to avoid any risk of falling plaster.

While the new church building was in construction the congregation was hosted by friends at Radford URC. When I led the joint service in November 1987 the two Junior Church contingents had not yet agreed at which point in the service they left for their own activities and some of us remember Les Warner trying to turn back a stream of youngsters. Like King Canute, but with less success.

The new church was dedicated just after our daughter was born and with Tasha we moved from our Bell Green church home to Holyhead Road, joining around Easter 1990. We've both been Elders and Church Treasurers, I've been an off-and-on musician depending first on my lay preaching engagements and later on my ministry commitments. I remember sitting in the church watching the workmen installing the organ, after I'd been convenor of the group working out which make and model to spend the Organ Fund on. The church has also had my bagpipes inflicted on a couple of Burns Suppers.

I was ordained in Holyhead Road in July 1996. By then Tasha was bigger, though still had to stand on a chair to put a stole round my neck as part of the service. The church was packed, with the screens pulled back and extra chairs. It was also sweltering – just the day for a cassock...

My first role in the ministry was five years in the then North West Coventry Group, with first Tim Huc then Peter Stevenson as colleagues. Different men but each becoming dear friends. The Group was changing and our Radford church closed, while Keresley joined. I took on a more roving role in the Area, looked after training of Lay Preachers and also helped to assess those candidating for the ministry at Regional and National level.

In this in-between period and before coming back into more mainstream pastoral ministry I was very ill for a time in late 2009. Erica and I have always been grateful for the prayers and support we had from friends at church and across the Area then.

I returned to share oversight of the new North Coventry Group in 2015, in partnership with Tim Lowe until his move to Leeds in October 2017. It was good to have Debbie join us two and a half-years later, and I am sorry our own shared ministry has had to be conducted mainly on the internet and the telephone. But through it all I have been conscious of support in the ups and downs of these 24 years of ministry from God and from our close friends – two of whom we were privileged to have read for us today.

The story featured Tasha one more time, and it was a happy and proud Dad who married her to Mac at Holyhead Road, in front of the Christmas tree, in January 2019. One of many good memories.

**Music:**            *Land of the Mountain and the Flood (excerpt) by Hamish McCunn*  
performed by Alexander Gibson & the Royal Scottish National Orchestra  
from the album *Scottish Overtures*

Thank you for listening to our podcasts.

As I am retiring from the pastoral ministry and from oversight of this Group of churches, this is the last podcast of the series.

The archive on our website will remain available until Easter, and after that depending on licensing conditions.

#### **Credits**

*Farewell to Stromness*, composed and played by Peter Maxwell-Davies, is taken from the album *Suite from "The Boyfriend", Suite from "The Devils" & Other Works*

*Lord for the years* by Timothy Dudley-Smith, one of Tasha's wedding hymns, was sung by the Huddersfield Choral Society and Joseph Cullen, from their album *The Hymns Album*

*Child in the manger, infant of Mary* was sung by the St. Michael's Singers and The Coventry Singers on the album *The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... ever!*

*Nunc dimittis* by Geoffrey Burgon, originally written as theme music for the BBC TV Series *Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy*, was sung by Trinity College Choir, Cambridge, with Richard Marlow and Silas Standage, from the album *Miserere – Choral Favourites*

*Love divine, all loves excelling*, one of our wedding hymns, was sung by the St Michael's Singers from *The best Hymns Album in the World, ever!*



and the last four minutes of the overture, *Land of the Mountain and the Flood* composed by Hamish McCunn was performed by Sir Alexander Gibson conducting the Scottish National Orchestra from their album *Scottish Overtures*

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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.