

## **Dorset South & West Written service for 29<sup>th</sup> November 2020, by Revd Brenda Stephenson**

### **Advent liturgy – First Sunday in Advent.**

Today we light the first candle of the Advent wreath.  
This first candle is for HOPE.

*The candle is lit.*

*(Psalm 33:20)*

*We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.*

Let us pray.

Eternal God, as we await the coming of our saviour, give us the courage to hope.

Give us grace to see your plans of redemption for our lives, for this community, and for the world.

**Through Jesus Christ, the source of our redemption and hope. Amen.**

### **Hymn                      Hark the glad sound the Saviour comes**

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

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

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,  
your welcome shall proclaim,  
and heaven's eternal arches ring  
with your beloved name.

Philip Doddridge 1702-1751

### **Prayer of approach**

*On this first Sunday in Advent we begin to look forward to the birth of Jesus Christ among us. Take a moment to remember the loving God in whose presence you are, and whose love overflows into our world.*

Loving Lord God, we come to you now, trusting in your love for us and the whole creation.

Thank you for the ways in which your love overflows into our lives:

in the wonder and order of creation itself;

in your desire to reach out to men and women down the centuries;

in coming among us in the birth of Jesus;

in all the ways in which your Spirit still interacts with our lives.

May our remembering give us strength for today,

and hope for tomorrow.

We ask it in the name of Christ, Amen.

### **Introduction.**

We now share our Old Testament reading – read it aloud and dramatically if you can.

A gospel reading will come later.

### **Reading    Isaiah 64:1-9**

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

2 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!  
3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
4 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.  
5 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.  
6 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.  
7 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.  
8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
and do not remember iniquity forever.  
Now consider, we are all your people.

## **Sermon**

### **O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!**

When did you last tell God it was time he came and sorted everything out?

Even if we don't put this into words I'm sure we've all had times when we wish this could happen. At the moment the possibilities of chaos seem much greater than usual. (NB I'm writing this almost 3 weeks before it's due to be used.) Covid, the US Presidential election, the world refugee situation, global warming. And you may well have some in your own personal life as well.

However God doesn't do that. It's not the way the world, indeed the universe, has been made. There's nothing wrong in wishing this could be and of expressing this to God, as Isaiah did. Nothing wrong in doing so vehemently according to how strongly our emotions are running. But we also need to listen to what God says to us in response.

For people at the time of Isaiah this was a cry to their God from exile to hear them and take action. Where was he hiding? Had he gone to sleep? Had their sin required such a dreadful punishment? They could remember when he had acted on their behalf. Would he not remember that too and the special relationship he had with them? In time exile did end, though perhaps not as soon as they hoped. Or quite as they'd imagined. The people were able to return to Jerusalem though it was a ruined city. They had to rebuild it, together with their sense of community as God's people.

For us God speaks first and foremost through Jesus Christ. We may feel like the people of Israel but we have heard and seen something new and different. In Jesus we have come to know that God's power is expressed in love. It is the power of love at work in the world.

Think for a moment or two about how you treat those you love?

Or how you brought up your children lovingly to become mature adults? (If you don't have children, I'm sure you've been close to those who have.) The answers may help us understand a little more of the way God works.

When children are small their parents could use force to make them obey. Sometimes that may be necessary but if you used too much strength you could be charged with abuse and cruelty. As a child grows you can add reason to strength and explain why certain things have to happen, or not. By the time your son or daughter is old enough to be able, physically, to refuse what you ask, they have reached the age when they need to make their own decisions, get things wrong, learn from what happens and take responsibility for their actions. (I don't pretend it's as smooth going as that sounds but I hope you get the point.) And parents have to let this happen, or their children will not mature. Finally, they become adult and are fully responsible – most of them, most of the time.

That cannot be an exact analogy but it gives us a picture to help think about how God relates to you and me and to the world at large. And it's worth asking yourself the question: where are you on that spectrum, in your relationship to God?

- Do you expect God to use his strength over against you? To force things to come right?
- Do you hear him reasoning with you, through Scripture and in times of listening?
- Does he expect you to take responsibility for your actions? (That means he cannot take over or overrule you.)
- Does he hold back so that you and all people may mature, as human beings, and in your friendship with him?

I've stopped using the word "almighty" to refer to God because I think it is misleading. It sounds as if he can do anything he likes whenever he wants. But as a God of love is that so? I don't think so. If he were to do so we would be less than human. We would be more like puppets. We would have to stay small children who are not given room to grow up. Does all this mean that God is remote and uncaring? You could come to that conclusion. But the coming of God among us in Christ proves the opposite. He cares enough to empty himself in human form that is taken and hung on a cross. This is love that did not turn back from the ultimate sacrifice. And we also believe this is a love that broke through death and is without end. This shows that God can turn life around for good – with the cooperation of human beings like ourselves.

Yes, our world often seems to be in chaos. But don't wait for God to come and sort it all out. That is our responsibility as human beings, however we may be able to do it, in however small a way we think we have anything to contribute. The template is there for us in the life of Jesus Christ. It is a pattern of loving acceptance, generosity, wisdom, courage and sacrifice. The closer we are to God the more we are able to catch the quality of his love – no social distancing here! He wants to share with us those characteristics we need to live as his people in his world. Often when we have to wait, for peace, for justice, for practical help, we are waiting for other people to act and make a difference. Thank God that something quite small can do just that. When you think about it, that also means that other people also wait – for us to make a difference, with the inspiration and the power God's Spirit makes available to us.

### **Reading Mark 1:9-11**

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

### **Hymn Like the murmur of the dove's song**

Like the murmur of the dove's song,  
like the challenge of her flight,  
like the vigour of the wind's rush,  
like the new flame's eager might:  
come, Holy Spirit, come.

To the members of Christ's body,  
to the branches of the Vine,  
to the Church in faith assembled,

to her midst as gift and sign:  
come, Holy Spirit, come.

With the healing of division,  
with the ceaseless voice of prayer,  
with the power to love and witness,  
with the peace beyond compare:  
come, Holy Spirit, come.

Carl P Daw Jr b.1944

**Prayers of concern** (please add in particular needs at the end of each line of dots.....)

Amazing God, there are times when your unconditional love, seen in Jesus, comes home to us and we are moved to silence, humility or tears. All that you have done for men and women down the years is beyond knowledge and beyond value. So as we begin to focus on Jesus' birth as the climax of your reaching out to us, we give you our deepest thanks.

And your love moves us to bring to you those people and places that so need to hear your good news.

We bring you the earth itself, so much in need of healing and care.....

We bring you the nations of the earth and those in authority over them.....

We bring to you those working to alleviate hunger, homelessness and sickness.....

We bring to you our own nation, its government and Parliament.....

and especially at this time the National Health Service and all carers.

Finally we bring to you those for whom we want to pray, giving thanks for those who give us hope, and asking your help for those in particular need.....

We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus and with the prayer he has taught us:

**The Lord's Prayer** Our Father in heaven.....

**Hymn      Lo he comes with clouds descending**

Lo, he comes with clouds descending,  
once for favoured sinners slain;  
thousand thousand saints attending  
swell the triumph of his train:  
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,  
God appears on earth to reign.

Those dear tokens of his passion  
still his dazzling body bears;  
cause of endless exultation  
to his ransomed worshippers:  
with what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture  
gaze we on those glorious scars.

Sing amen, let all adore thee  
high on thine eternal throne;  
Saviour, take the power and glory,  
claim the kingdom for thine own:  
come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus!  
Everlasting God, come down.

Charles Wesley 1707-1788

**Blessing**