

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 5 December 2021 – 'God's Activist' - by Revd David Cuckson

Advent Liturgy

An Advent Liturgy has been prepared for our local churches this year, and the theme for this week is 'Peace'. Here it can be a means of becoming part of the wider fellowship – possibly with your own candle at home.

Today we light a candle of peace. Not just the kind of peace built on avoiding the real issues or ignoring the conflict in the world but real peace which comes from God. As we light the candles we take a moment to think of those places and situations where hatred and anger, war and troubles, keep out the peace that people long for.

Light candles and be quiet for a moment

Remind us all this Advent of the peace of God which is beyond our understanding. A rich deep peace, that starts within us as come to know God's love for us, and which grows with our increasing love for God.

Lord, we come to you, reminded of that special peace you offer. Teach us to be channels of that peace so that others may know your presence this Advent season. Amen

HYMN Singing the Faith 180 (*Latin, 18th century, translated by John Mason Neal*)

1. O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

Prayer

God of love and mercy, we come before you knowing that we are in need of forgiveness. We have sinned against you in our speaking and in our silence; in our thinking and in our thoughtlessness; in our actions and in our inaction. We have sinned against you, in not loving you with our whole heart and soul and strength; in not loving our sisters and brothers in Christ. Grant us, O Lord, your forgiveness, restore us in the image of your Son, and lead us along the way to your kingdom, to the glory of your name. Amen.

Hear the good news! Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. (*Romans 8.34*)
So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (*2 Corinthians 5:17*)
We are promised God's gift of forgiveness and to be at peace.

Eternal God, who longs for us to know all good things and to walk along a peaceful path, open the eyes of our hearts that we see the way to life, open our ears that we may hear the truth and open our lips that we may praise you, this day and all our days, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke 3:1-6 (NRSVA)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

Reflection

Luke seems to have gone a bit over the top in his list of rulers etc as the now-grown-up John the Baptist appears on the scene in the Gospel story. We start with the Roman emperor, followed by Pontius Pilate, who is going to play a significant role in the ensuing events, Herod as ruler of Galilee, where Jesus was going to spend much of his ministry, and Philip and Lysanias as rulers of neighbouring regions, plus the two key characters in the Jewish community. Think of all the power that is represented by these names. And then we come to John, whose only claim to fame is that he is 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness', in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah. The contrast is startling, and that must have been part of Luke's intention here. No fine clothes for John – wild in appearance, even scruffy. No gold ornaments, no well-equipped armies at his disposal. All he had that made him stand out was the message that he repeated again and again as he walked through the region around the River Jordan, to call the people, including their rulers, to a more moral way of life, and to prepare the way for a new Messiah who would bring salvation for everyone.

Today John may well have been labelled an 'activist', the promoter of a cause but not one with direct earthly power. Many contemporary causes have as their primary objective the raising of funds, for research perhaps into new cures or treatment for diseases, or for maintaining charitable institutions, but behind the call for money is the highlighting of the particular issue that is being addressed, the relief of suffering, the care of the ill or the needy. The messages are promoted through the media, television and radio and the press, or through social media. And the most successful campaigns rely heavily on key individuals, the 'activists', who go round spreading the message, or who carry out amazing challenges that capture the imagination of the public. Some campaigns, on the other hand, are not primarily about raising money from individual members of the public – the cause is too big for that. Of these the most striking example of our generation concerns climate change. The changes needed have to be addressed not just by individuals but on an international scale, by governments, and the effort put in to achieve the necessary changes in

government policies has been huge, over many years. It was striking at the recent COP 26 that some of the most vociferous campaigners in Glasgow included government representatives, from some of the countries, especially the small island nations, who had the most to lose from the effects of climate change and the smallest resources to be able to effect the world-wide transformation required.

John the Baptist was a ‘voice in the wilderness’, with just a few followers to help him. But even he was able to make a difference, as folk flocked to be baptised by him in the River Jordan. However, even this was as nothing as compared with the one whose coming he proclaimed, whose followers now circle the globe. And the spreading of the message of Christ, the Gospel, has depended on a whole succession of ‘activists’ down the centuries, and will continue so to depend for ours and future generations.

One final thought, prompted by the ongoing climate change campaign. Apart from the leaders of nations two names have stood out in particular, Sir David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg. Greta Thunberg is still only 18 years old, from Sweden, not one of the most powerful nations in the world, and yet think how much she has achieved in galvanising support from the public and in pushing world leaders to change their perceptions and, ultimately, policies. Sir David Attenborough has been around a bit longer and has done so much, especially through his use of the media, in promoting the message of trying to save the planet from the worst of the damage that man has inflicted on it. And he is still campaigning, at the age of 95. So there is no excuse for not being an activist ourselves. There is always something that we can do.

John the Baptist came to ‘prepare the way of the Lord’ and he acted as ‘God’s activist’. May we, who profess to follow that way as disciples of Christ, also find ways to be ‘God’s activists’ ourselves.

HYMN Singing the Faith 182 (*John Chandler*)

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| 1. On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings from the King of kings! | 4. To heal the sick stretch out your hand.
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth, and let your light restore
earth’s own true loveliness once more. |
| 2. Then cleansed be every life from sin;
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there. | 5. To God the Son all glory be
whose advent sets his people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore. |
| 3. For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge, and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay. | |

Prayers

Father, we praise you, great above all earthly greatness, loving beyond all earthly love. From you comes everything that is good; your mind thought of it, your word brought it into existence. We thank you for our life, and for the centuries upon centuries of human history

and achievement that we inherit. Especially we remember today the legacy of John the Baptist and the whole Jewish tradition that, we believe, has led towards Jesus.

Yet something has gone wrong, Lord. We started out so well. In man's infancy, his vigorous self-assertion is matched by his dependence on others. Why can we not recover that balance in our maturity? As it is, the factiousness which keeps erupting among people threatens to destroy all the good which their frail co-operation is trying to build. In despair we begin to prepare for the worst instead of for the best.

Father, when in our short-sightedness we miss our footing, and our selfish bias begins to topple us towards the chasm below, save us and set us right. Prepare us to make the next new stage of the journey, not one by one but together. And then, if there are places where the route is hard to find, help your task-force of Christians to make it clearer for people to follow. Let us be well known for opening up possibilities in the name of Jesus.

Renew our respect for all whom in any way you have put on the alert for signs of your presence and your will. Recall us, with your whole church, to the task of making the world fit for you to live in – you and your family. Amen.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

The Blessing

Let us go out into the world as God's activists, knowing that the blessing of God, the source of life, of Jesus Christ, the way to life, and of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of life, is with us today, tomorrow and forever. **Amen.**

[Prayers taken and adapted from the 'Service of the Word' published by the United Reformed Church and More Contemporary Prayers published by SCM]