

Dorset South & West Circuit written service
Jan 2nd 2022 **Rev David Reep**

Call to Worship

Sing hymns of praise to the Lord, play music on the harp to our God. He spreads clouds over the sky; he provides rain for the earth. and makes grass grow on the hills. He gives animals their food and feeds the young ravens when they call. His pleasure is not in strong horses, nor his delight in brave soldiers; but he takes pleasure in those who honour him, in those who trust in his constant love. (Psalm 147:7-11 GNB)

Hymn 127

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| 1. Sing to the great Jehovah's praise; all praise to him belongs; who kindly lengthens out our days demands our choicest songs. | 3. Father, thy mercies past we own, thy still continued care; to thee presenting, through thy Son, whate'er we have or are. |
| 2. His providence has brought us through another various year; we all with vows and anthems new before our God appear. | 4. Our lips and lives shall gladly shown the wonders of thy love, while on in Jesus' steps we go to see thy face above |
| 5.. Our residue of days or hours thine wholly thine, shall be and all our consecrated powers a sacrifice to thee. | |

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Prayer Meditation O Lord our God, on this first Sunday of a New Year we come before you with mixed emotions. Strange pandemic experiences filled this past year and we dare to hope for a better and healthier world in the months ahead. The celebration of Christmas was a reminder that the fact of your coming cannot be separated from the purpose for which you came. The babe of Bethlehem becomes the Man of Galilee and the Saviour of the World. Help us, Lord, to rejoice in your coming for us and to us as individuals. Fill our hearts with your spirit of forgiveness, love and hope, and grant us courage as we step out on the threshold of this New Year.

Another year is dawning;
Dear Master, let it be,
In working or in waiting,
Another year for Thee. Amen

Readings: *(Selected verses from Jeremiah Chapter 31. The nation had been through a very troubled period and endured much suffering. Here is a flavour of the joy that comes with the prospect of happier times ahead).*

People of Israel, I have always loved you, so I continue to show you my constant love. Once again I will rebuild you. Once again you will take up your tambourines and dance joyfully. Once again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria, and those who plant them will eat what the vineyards produce.....

I scattered my people, but I will gather them and guard them as a shepherd guards his flock,

I have set Israel's people free, and have saved them from a mighty nation. They will come and sing for joy on Mount Zion.....

People will live in Judah and in all its towns, and there will be farmers and shepherds with their flocks. I will refresh those who are weary and will satisfy with food everyone who is weak from hunger.....

John 1: 14-17 The Word became a human being, and full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son. John spoke about him. He cried out, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, "He comes after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born". Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another. God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:13-14 And you also became God's people when you heard the true message, the Good News that brought you salvation. You believed in Christ, and God put his stamp of ownership on you by giving you the Holy Spirit he had promised. The Spirit is the guarantee that we shall receive what God had promised his people, and this assures us that God will give complete freedom to those who are his. Let us praise his glory!

Sermon

I feel I must have been in a bit of a 'down-beat' mode when I was finishing off my 'round robin' letter which we send out with our Christmas cards. Here is what I wrote: *"We live in strange challenging times ecologically and politically as well as religiously. Out of all this turmoil we pray that a sustainable future will be available to our children and children's children. Perhaps even more than usual, the phrase "Happy New Year" will be poignant and heartfelt."*

What I had in mind was: (i) ecologically - climate change with extreme weather conditions, global warming and its repercussions on food supplies and natural habitats, (ii) politically - leaders across the globe having to cope with humanitarian crises – pandemics, refugees and asylum seekers, hunger and glaring inequality between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' and (iii) religiously, God forgive us, even in the name of religion sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing and mindless terrorism and even in Christianity historic and contemporary examples of manipulative sexual and child abuse.

Just afterwards I began my preparation for this service by consulting today's lectionary readings. I wasn't particularly looking for anything optimistic but that's exactly what rushed out to greet me. Let me share some of my reflections.

Imagine you were a citizen of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah. You were there when a foreign army lay waste the city and destroyed probably its largest building the Temple. You were among the lucky (or unlucky?) ones who were carted off into Babylon. You may well have been homeless but you weren't rootless. You knew where you belonged. You had what the Welsh call 'hiraith' a longing for the home-land. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion". What joy then for them to hear the words of Jeremiah quoted in today's Old Testament reading. (Have a look at them again through their eyes!)

The Gospel reading takes us to the first chapter of John who sets the coming of Jesus against an eternal backdrop."The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out" (v 6 GNB) "God sent his messenger John who came to tell people about the light. He himself was not the light. This was the real light - the light that comes into the world and shines on all mankind" (vv 8-9 GNB).

He came to his own but his own did not receive him.. However, some did and believed in him. In our secular world I guess it is easier to side with those who rejected or ignored him. But I would urge you not to dismiss the reasonableness and truth revealed in wholesome religion.

In his 1939 Christmas message (in the dark days at the beginning of World War 2) King George VI quoted words from Louise Haskins: “And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown’. And he replied:’Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God, That should be to you better than light and safer than a known way”.

Older people will remember the ‘wayside pulpits’ where Bible texts and uplifting slogans were on display often on outside chapel notice boards. I remember one which said “Don’t worry – it may never happen”. Encouraging us to be brave is a noble sentiment, but we also need a faith for when it does happen! “Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord”. Jesus, the Light of the World, accompanies us even in our bleakest moments. Trust him to hold our hand and guide us through. “Fear not, little children, it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”

The letter to the Ephesians is an example how there developed the need to express in writing what it means to follow Christ. You became God’s people when you heard the message that brought you salvation . . You are set free but you must live lives that show the fruits of the Spirit. The first Sunday in the New Year is traditionally ‘Covenant Sunday’ in the Methodist Church, where we are invited to renew our pledge to serve and follow Jesus. Interestingly, later in the same chapter of today’s Jeremiah reading we have his words which are quoted in the Covenant service. “The Lord says “The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.....The new covenant I will make with Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.....”

For me, verses from hymns can often express so well what we believe and also strengthen us in the Faith. Let Joseph Hart (1712-68) speak for us still:

‘Tis Jesus, the first and the last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We’ll praise Him for all that is past,
And trust Him for all that’s to come. Amen

Prayers of Intercession (from the Covenant service)

As God’s servants and witnesses, let us pray for the Church and for the world

Loving God, hear us as we pray for your holy catholic Church

make us all one, that the world may believe

Inspire and lead all who govern and hold authority in the nations of the world

establish justice and peace among all people

Have compassion on all who suffer from any sickness, grief or trouble

deliver them from their distress

We praise you for all your saints who have entered your eternal glory

bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.

Let us pray in silence for our own needs and for those of others....

Lord our God, you have helped us by your grace to make these prayers, and you have promised through Jesus Christ our Lord that when two or three agree in his name you will grant what they

ask. Answer now your servants' prayers according to their needs; in this world grant that we may truly know you and in the world to come graciously give us eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Jan 6th marks the Feast of the Epiphany when we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men to Jesus. We close our service with three verses of the well-loved carol inspired by that event).

Hymn 224

1. As with gladness men of old
did the guiding star behold
as with joy they hailed its light,
leading onward, beaming bright,
so, most gracious Lord, may we
evermore be led to thee.
2. As with joyful steps they sped,
Saviour, to thy lowly be,
there to bend the knee before
thee, whom heaven and earth adore,
so may we with willing feet
Ever seek thy mercy seat.
3. As they offered gifts most rare
at thy cradle rude and bare,
so may we with holy joy,
pure, and free from sin's alloy,
all our costliest treasures bring,
Christ, to thee, our heavenly King.

William Chatterton Dix (1837-1898)

Closing Prayer: As did they, so may we. Amen

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all and all whom we love, through this coming year and for evermore. Amen.

(Service based on and around the Lectionary readings:
Jeremiah 31: 7-14; Psalm 147: 12-20; Ephesians 1:11-14; John 1: 10-18)J