

WHEN GOD REIGNS THERE IS ROOM FOR DIFFERENCE

It's Advent.

Not yet Christmas.

It's not just time for you and me to prepare.

It's time for all the world's different people to prepare.

From east and west, north and south, to gather as one human family.

How do we welcome and receive people who seem so different to us?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we see the prophecies that arise from different cultures?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we understand a message from someone we don't expect?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How would we welcome amongst us John the Baptist, with camel's hair and leather belt?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we see God's message beyond our circle of family and friends?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we live together in harmony, in peace and love with people who are different from us?

When God reigns there is room for difference

We lit our first candle for you and me.

Let us light our second candle for people
who are different from us,
as we watch and wait



Hymn StF 171

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

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

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

Philip Doddridge

Prayers

God of the cosmos, God of the humdrum, be with each of us today: share our gladness at our sharing, inspire our talking and listening, enjoy our contentment and our vision, and be glorified in the 'someone has to do it' chores. May your irrepressible adventurous Spirit be in us today and every day, as we journey towards all that you call us to be.

Creator of light and darkness, we so often chase shadows and fail to walk in the light.

Forgive us, O God.

A time of stillness

We travel through Advent as forgiven people, lifting our faces towards the light. Let us walk together in hope and in faith. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn StF 182

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!

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.

For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge, and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

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.

To God the Son all glory be
whose advent sets his people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

John Chandler

Reading Matthew 3: 1 – 12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.' "

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Reflection

I would not like to be on the wrong side of John the Baptist, I would feel so worthless to be spoken to like this, so embarrassed, that I would probably go bright red and either run away, or try to bluff it out – I think this may be the same for many of us.

But, I hope, most of the people who came to John to be baptised were repentant, treated compassionately, and given what they needed – a Baptism of hope and reassurance, of new beginnings and fresh starts, a baptism of strength and courage, a baptism to bring them back to God

How we approach things in life can determine what we then receive. If we come in humility we may be uplifted, but if we come in arrogance, then we can only be put down. Our words and our actions can betray our intentions however much we may like to think we portray ourselves one way, we are seen by God as what we truly are. But this doesn't mean we cannot change, but before we do we must prepare to change.

Many of you know that during Advent, having done all the present shopping and written my cards, I try and fast, an intentional action of depriving myself of food that I enjoy, especially that which I know isn't great for me. It makes the feast of Christmas Day so much more enjoyable. Therefore as I write this I am preparing. There is no point saying that I am not eating meat, biscuits etc if the fridge and cupboard have a good stock in, because I know I will feel hungry at some point and if they are to hand and easy, I may be too tempted. I am preparing for my Advent fast by making sure there is nothing to trip me up, prevent me from moving forward, nothing to distract me.

Okay, this may be a facile example, but you get the point. To make a change, we are more likely to succeed if we plan and prepare. (I could make a joke here about going cold turkey, but I won't.) There is a saying that if we fail to prepare, we prepare to fail, and it's true. No sportsperson would go into a competition without having prepared; no job seeker would go to interview without preparation, even children practice new skills in preparation to doing them with confidence, and young people know that they will not pass their exams unless they have done the work beforehand.

I image the people who went to John, wanting to repent, wanting to make a change, planned to do so, prepared themselves and went with a right mind and confessed their sins, were baptised and left feeling renewed and ready to restart their journey with God. John's anger towards the Pharisees and Sadducees seems to be that they want the baptism without the preparation, without the confession and penitence, they just came for the show.

As we continue, in Advent, to prepare for Christmas, the feast to celebrate the coming of the Christ child, let us remember to make the proper preparations, not just make the show, listening to John's words and bringing God back into the centre of our hearts and minds.

Hymn StF 189

Wild and lone the prophet's voice
echoes through the desert still,
calling us to make a choice,
bidding us to do God's will:
'Turn from sin and be baptised;
cleanse your heart and mind and soul.
Quitting all the sin you prized,
yield your life to God's control.'

'Bear the fruit repentance sows:
lives of justice, truth, and love.
Trust no other claim than those;
set your heart on things above.
Soon the Lord will come in power,
burning clean the threshing floor:
then will flames the chaff devour;
wheat alone shall fill God's store.'

With such preaching stark and bold
John proclaimed salvation near,
and his timeless warnings hold
words of hope to all who hear.
So we dare to journey on,
led by faith through ways untrod,
till we come at last like John
to behold the Lamb of God.

Carl P. Daw

Prayers

God of challenge and change, John the Baptist spoke hard words to many, and words of hope to some; thank you for words that challenge us. Teach us to turn to you, our hope of new beginnings; give us wisdom and grace to challenge others where the is need, that we may be signs of your hope to all people.

A time of stillness

Help us to THINK on our conversations past and our communications for the future and let us offer a prayer for our words, church words, political words, media words and when we speak and write let us ask ourselves:

is it True?
is it Helpful?
is it Inspiring?
is it Necessary?
is it Kind?

Our God, who spoke through John the Baptist, speak words of hope and love through us. Amen.

Hymn StF 185

Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
joy to the nations when Jesus is King:

*Come let us sing: praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:
this is our song, who to Jesus belong:
glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.*

All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;
freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;
wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King:

Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
doubt shall not darken his witness within;
hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
love is victorious when Jesus is King:

Kingdom of Christ, for your coming we pray;
hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
when this new song your creation shall sing;
Satan is vanquished and Jesus is King:

Charles Silvester Horne

Blessing

We walk in the wilderness searching for meaning. May God baptise us with mercy and fire.
We walk in the community thirsting for justice. May God baptise us with integrity and hope.
We walk towards Bethlehem seeking a Saviour. May God baptise us with holiness and joy.
May God's baptism and blessing remain with us always. Amen.

