

By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship

In this Advent season,
Let us wait together,
In our homes, in our churches,
United by our love, our joy and our faith in Jesus

Hymn 169

Come, thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee
Israel's Strength and Consolation
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation
Joy of every longing heart

Born Thy people to deliver
Born a child and yet a King
Born to reign in us forever
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit
Raise us to Thy glorious throne

Prayer of Approach (*adapted from www.methodist.org.uk*)

As we enter this season of longing and waiting,
Open our eyes to the glimpses of your glory.
Open our minds to the hints of incarnation.
Open our ears to the whispers of your grace.
May we be watchful for the light that breaks through
the darkness of our world.

Prayer of Confession

God of love, in this season of Advent, we recognise that we have fallen short of Your perfect standards.
We have not always shown love for others, we have valued our riches too much and sometimes failed to share.
We have sometimes judged others and neglected to show compassion.
You have provided Your Word for us and we have sometimes failed to read and learn from You.

*In Your great mercy, we know that You are ready and willing to forgive us as we repent of all our sins.
We thank You for this assurance
Amen*

Lord's Prayer

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.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and for ever. Amen

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

40 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling:
'In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out.'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

'All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the
field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures for ever.'

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
'Here is your God!'

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:
he gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Reading: Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the
Messiah, the Son of God, ² as it is written in Isaiah the
prophet:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way' –

³ 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him."'

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness,
preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness

of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the
people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their
sins, they were baptised by him in the River
Jordan. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair,
with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts
and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: 'After me
comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of
whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and
untie. ⁸ I baptise you with ^e water, but he will baptise
you with the Holy Spirit.'

Reflection

Well, Christmas is approaching. Are you getting ready? Have you ordered the turkey, made the pudding, made the cake, bought presents? Maybe you have guests coming to stay. You need to get their rooms ready, check you have enough towels, buy enough food. Christmas can take a lot of preparation!

Another feature of this lead up to Christmas is anticipation. As a child, I anticipated the arrival of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve, I anticipated the opening and giving of family presents and eating a spectacularly delicious meal and pudding with my parents, grandparents and sister.

My parents and grandparents are now long gone and Santa has forgotten all about me! But we find ourselves now in the season of Advent, anticipating an arrival infinitely greater than a big man in red suit.

The ancient Jews were in anticipation of what had been promised by a long line of prophets sent by God, specifically they expected a Messiah who would bring salvation to their nation. They also anticipated a messenger who would announce the imminent arrival of this Messiah, as prophesied in the book of Isaiah.

Mark begins his gospel by quoting from Isaiah, where it was prophesied that there would be:

'a voice of one calling in the wilderness,'

urging his hearers to:

*“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”*

Reading on from those words quoted by Mark, Isaiah 40 continues:

*‘Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.’*

This levelling of rough ground was perhaps like preparing the ground for the rolling out of a red carpet for a VIP. The hills and valleys were like the sins and bad habits of the people, which were obstacles in the way of the Messiah’s smooth approach.

In verse 4, Mark identifies the messenger “*calling in the wilderness*” as John, the man urging the people to confess their sins and baptising them in the River Jordan. Baptism was a symbol of repentance from these sins, a visible sign of a decision to change.

For Jews, however, baptism was highly unusual - it was used mainly for non-Jews who wished to convert. The conventional view was that this kind of cleansing was unnecessary for Jews, because they were, collectively, already in a favoured position as members of God’s chosen people. So John’s baptism of the Jews who came to him was quite radical – those who came to him recognised that they had gone wrong in their lives and needed to repent. We can see this as the time when individual faithfulness becomes significant, with less emphasis on nationhood being a guarantee of salvation. It was a foretaste of a new way to relate to God.

Of course, the idea of *individual* repentance and salvation is familiar to Christians, but we may be tempted to think to ourselves, “I’ve done this now, I’ve repented of all my sins, now I’m fine, I’m in the clear.” However, when we clean our houses, do they not get dirty again? Do we not have to get out the dusters and Hoover again and again?

In the same way, after a thorough cleansing of our lives, our repentance and decision to live a godly life, we can benefit from a periodic cleaning out, reaching with a scrubbing brush into all the corners of our lives – perhaps murky, unacknowledged corners where the dirt of sin might hide.

As John prepared the people for the arrival of the Messiah, we have the season of Advent for our preparation for the annual celebration of the coming of this Messiah. Advent is an opportunity to re-examine our lives and repent of any deeds, thoughts or attitudes intruding on our relationship with God.

Let’s remind ourselves exactly what we are preparing to celebrate:

V7-8: “*And this was his message: ‘After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with^l the Holy Spirit.’*”

Only superficially are we preparing for the season of Christmas trees, tinsel and turkey. This news from John is stupendous. A man was coming who was utterly unique, a man who would baptise, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit. A baptism in a different league altogether, a baptism whereby a real supernatural power comes to dwell within the person.

Water baptism is a powerful symbol of repentance; baptism with the Holy Spirit is far more than a symbol. It is genuinely transformative, for the Spirit dwelling within us empowers and strengthens us to serve God. The uniqueness of the arrival of Jesus cannot be overstated. We know who Jesus is, but it would benefit each of us to sit still and contemplate again the enormity of what happened over 2000 years ago. God himself arriving on earth, to serve His people and offer the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, to dwell within us.

If we were reading Mark’s gospel for the first time, we would have been left with a massive cliffhanger as we finished verse 8. We cannot “unknow” what we know, but perhaps we can try to relive the anticipation built up by Mark’s words, to feel a thrill at the prospect of the arrival of this man who has the authority to baptize with the Holy Spirit, a man so great that John the Baptist is unfit even to untie his sandals. A man who can change the world, a man who offers the human race a completely new relationship with God, a man who can conquer death itself.

Advent is a time to live this thrill of anticipation. It’s a time to smooth out any hills, valleys and rough ground in our lives so we may be ready to again welcome our saviour on Christmas Day.

We have fifteen days until Christmas, but it isn't about turkey and sprouts and presents. Actually, it isn't really about a helpless baby in manger. Rather, Christmas is a celebration of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, the mighty Saviour, coming to us all in love.

Prayer of Intercession

This Advent, we approach You, Lord, confident that you hear our intercessions. We call this the season of good will and love, but we recognise that the world is cruel and frightening for many people.

We pray for countries at war, that their leaders will find a peaceful and just solution to disputes. We pray for civilians caught up in conflicts in which they are powerless. Comfort the injured and bereaved.

As we approach Christmas, we recognise that it is not a happy season for everyone. We pray for comfort for those who have lost loved ones and for whom Christmas celebrations are a reminder of their pain. Please bless and comfort the sick, the depressed and those in unhappy families. Bless the homeless and the work of charities bringing comfort, shelter, food and company.

Help us to keep in mind the real meaning of this season – the arrival of our Saviour and the deep and lasting joy He is bringing to our sad and suffering world.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen

Hymn 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 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 bless the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Your welcome shall proclaim;
And heaven's eternal arches ring
With your beloved Name.

Blessing

As we continue our journey through Advent, let us travel hopefully and mindfully towards the future God has prepared for us.

Amen