

**Dorset South and West Circuit Service for Sunday, 17 December.  
Third Sunday of Advent. By Tony Boyden**

**Theme: Witnesses of Joy**

**Advent Opening Liturgy**

Our Advent candles flicker,  
casting shadows spreading light,  
giving witness in the everyday,  
telling stories old and new.  
Advent God, shine from us today.

When we've encountered God,  
we have a truth to tell.  
When we have seen God's light,  
we have a light to share.  
Advent God, shine from us today.

When our lives seem ordinary  
and full of faltering steps,  
God's light still  
shines  
and bids us go and

We share our very ordinary,  
our sorrows, joys and faith,  
and trust that those we share with  
will glimpse the light of God.  
Advent God, shine from us today.

Advent God, we may feel we are not worthy  
to share your extraordinary message.  
We may feel we'll get it wrong;  
we don't know all the answers.  
We may feel we do not have the words; not  
erudite enough.  
Shine upon us, light our path that may speak  
and show and tell what you have done for us.  
Amen.

**Hymn: Come down, O Love divine. Bianco da Siena (d 1434)**

1. Come down, O Love divine,  
seek thou this soul of mine,  
and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;  
O Comforter, draw near,  
within my heart appear,  
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.
2. O let it freely burn,  
till earthly passions turn  
to dust and ashes, it its heat consuming;  
and let thy glorious light  
shine ever on my sight,  
and clothe me round, the while my path  
illuminating

3. Let holy charity  
mine outward vesture be,  
and lowliness become mine inner clothing;  
true lowliness of heart,  
which takes the humbler part,  
and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with  
loathing.
4. And so the yearning strong,  
with which the soul will long,  
shall far outpass the power of human telling;  
for none can guess its grace,  
till he become the place  
wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling

**Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving**

Lord, we thank you that John the Baptist took up the challenge to be your voice crying in the wilderness.

We thank you for the voice you have given each one of us; the voice that will sometimes have difficult things to say.

We pray that we will use it to your glory, whenever and wherever you call us. **Amen**

### **Prayer of confession and assurance of forgiveness.**

Some of us, Lord, are not comfortable with searching questions directed at us. We wriggle and squirm, wondering how best to answer in order not to lose face, or be ridiculed or found wanting.

Some of us are more confident and self-indulgent, choosing words that make us look better and relishing the spotlight.

John the Baptist had no such qualms or thoughts when questioned; he willingly redirected the focus to Jesus, his mind fully focused on his mission.

Forgive us, Lord, for focusing on self, for neglecting others in need, for pride, for half-truths, for lack of trust, for complaining.

Help us to prepare the way for your return, Lord Jesus, by focusing fully on you and helping to direct others to do the same. Amen.

### **Assurance of forgiveness**

Father God, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord came with the love and light of forgiveness, that we may see you. Because of him our sins are forgiven. **Amen**

### **Gospel reading : John 1: 6-8; 19-28**

*John reminds us that we are called to bear witness to the light that is coming into the world with an inspiring message of hope and joy.*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising

### **Reflection: Witnesses of Joy**

As we move through Advent our Bible message shifts. To begin with Isaiah was passionately calling on God to come to save his nation; and God returned his plea last week with 'Comfort, o comfort, my people'. Now the focus of attention is on us as individuals. The servant of the Lord, John the Baptist, is commissioned to bring Isaiah's good news; news that will burst the confines of earth's expectations as we gasp in awe of what God has in mind.

John the Baptist pictures himself as humble even though he is certain his role is to herald that God has come to earth as Jesus. He explains God's plan. Indeed most of that first chapter in the gospel shows us John making clear what he is announcing.

There is so much excitement in John's voice. He is scanning the crowd, waiting to see the face that he knows only he will recognise. He doesn't mind playing second fiddle. He

knows that the mission of Jesus will put anything he can do very much in the shadow. He applies the words of the prophet Isaiah; good news indeed for those who might feel down or depressed. God is coming to earth in all his glory; coming to bring justice and a measure of hope for everyone.

John does, however, present us with a challenge. He's not afraid to say that Jesus will expect people to bring their lives into line with what God demands of them. But in Jesus the oppressed will find liberation, the broken-hearted will be restored, those who are bound will be set free, prisoners released, refugees find a new home, dignity, and a new beginning.

In a way John encourages us to be heralds of joy too. His message is that as Jesus' followers we need to stand up and be counted. We need to allow God to guide us to the role he wants us to fulfil. It might mean trying something we didn't think ourselves capable of; or possibly forsaking any grand illusions we might have about ourselves to take on a humble role in his service. John's humility made it possible for others to truly see Jesus. We must allow God to inspire us, as he inspired John, to enable others to see Jesus, rather than get in the way of their view.

In St. John's Gospel we learn about Jesus from the people who witnessed what he did. A woman from Samaria met him at the well and went to tell all the people in her village about him; and many of them believed what she told them. A man who was born blind was miraculously cured and he went and told the authorities who did not want to hear the truth. Mary Magdalen was the first eye witness to Jesus having risen from his grave. She rushed to tell Jesus' disciples; and those very disciples then risked their lives, to tell the world about him, some being slain because of their message.

Like those witnesses we are not meant to keep silent even when people seem deaf to what we have to say. And that applies to each one of us. No-one said it's easy to talk about Jesus and we will have to be careful about the best time, the best opportunity, to get over our message. It's likely, however, that people will notice that our faith has made a great difference to our lives and want to find out why. That's the kind of opening we can use to get our message over powerfully.

Inspired by joy, finding our place and our voice, means we will be prepared and recognise Jesus when he comes. John had courage to refer to Jesus as the one 'we do not know'. As the church all over the world prepares for Christmas, John reminds us that Advent is a time of expectation; one in which we anticipate God coming to be with us in a new way bringing in Jesus a message of new joy, new hope. It's a time of enlightenment and inspiration. It's a message we should long to share.

Let us allow God to show us how to be witnesses to the hope and joy that only Jesus can bring. Amen.

### **Prayers of intercession**

Lord, we come before you conscious of the freedom we have to speak with our own voices.

We pray for lands where that freedom is not known;  
where lives are destroyed by war;  
where people cannot voice their own opinions;  
where they cannot choose who governs them;  
where they can be imprisoned for speaking out.

We pray for people in our own country who have no voice,  
no identity apart from that placed upon them by others.  
We pray for the homeless,  
that they will find a roof to shelter them;  
the unemployed,  
that they will find work and respect;  
the lonely and unloved,  
that they will find compassion;  
those who are ill or suffering addiction and those who mourn  
that they will find comfort and strength in your message.

We pray that we will hear their cries for help  
and reach out to them in your name,  
and most of all, in your love.

**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.  
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Hymn: I will sing the wondrous story.** Francis Harold Rowley (1854-1952)

1 I will sing the wondrous story  
of the Christ who died for me,  
how he left the realms of glory  
for the cross on Calvary:

*Yes I'll sing the wondrous story  
of the Christ who died for me ,  
sing it with his saints in glory,  
gathered by the crystal sea.*

2. I was lost; but Jesus found me,  
found the sheep that went astray,  
raised me up, and gently led me  
back into the narrow way:

3. Faint was I, and fears possessed me,  
bruised was I from many a fall; hope  
was gone, and shame distressed me;  
but his love has pardoned all:

4. Days of darkness still come o'er me;  
sorrow's paths I often tread;  
but the Saviour still is with me,  
by his hand I'm safely led:

5. He will keep me till the river  
rolls its waters at my feet;  
then he'll bear me safely over,  
where the loved ones I shall meet:

### **Blessing**

May the Lord bless you and keep you;  
may he smile on you and be gracious to you;  
may he look your way and give you peace  
In the name of the Father,  
and of the Son  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen