

Dorset South and West Written Service – Sunday 14th December 2025
Year A Advent 3

If you have an advent wreath you might like to light the third candle for hope

Opening Liturgy

Heavenly God, you speak to us through messengers, words and deeds, the rhythm, the beat of your gift never ceases, never stops or falters or fails. Your gift is for life, not limited by time or space. Heavenly God, you challenge us to be the heartbeat of love to our community. You challenge and call us to be a constant power for good. You inspire us to be the bringers of good news. Heavenly God, may we be up to the challenges you set before us. May we give you time in our busy days, in our list making and our shopping, so that we are buzzing with your Spirit as your gift to all we meet. Gift-giving God, may Advent be for us a time of giving and receiving.

Hymn StF 165 vss 1-3

Advent candles tell their story
as we watch and pray,
longing for the Day of Glory,
“Come, Lord, soon,” we say.
Pain and sorrow, tears and sadness
changed for gladness
on that day.

Prophet voices loudly crying,
making pathways clear,
glimpsing glory, self-denying,
calling all to hear.
Through their message – challenged, shaken –
hearts awaken
God is near!

John the Baptist, by his preaching
and by water poured,
brought to those who heard his teaching
news of hope restored:
“Keep your vision strong and steady,
and be ready
for the Lord.

Mark Earey (b. 1965)

Prayer of adoration

It is beyond our power, Creator God, to put into words the wonder of your coming, and all that it revealed and continues to reveal. We praise you for the light that came into the world at the birth of your Son, and because that light is still shining and showing your glory to us. No longer need we desperately hope for the best, for we have the assurance of your love and grace. Accept, we pray, the adoration which comes from hearts that are full of wonder, a wonder words cannot express; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayer of confession

Lord Jesus Christ, as the anniversary of your birth draws near, we confess that we are often too busy with our festivities to give time to thinking about what it all means. We try to pretend that our preparation of material things is our way of acknowledging your birth; but deep in our hearts we know that these thoughts are shallow and unworthy. We confess too that we sympathise sentimentally with those less fortunate, without really doing much to help them. In so many ways we make Christmas less than it might be by not giving enough thought to the real meaning of your coming. Forgive us and help us, we pray; for your Name's sake. Amen

Bible readings

OT Lesson: Isaiah 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, ²it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God. ³Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; ⁴say to those with fearful hearts "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." ⁵Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. ⁷The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. ⁸And a highway will be there it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. ⁹No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah^[a] was doing, he sent word by his^[b] disciples ³and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' ⁴Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers^[c] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' ⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone^[d] dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet?^[e] Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Hymn StF 183 Praise to the God who clears the way

Praise to the God who clears the way
preparing room and space;
for power and pride will lose their sway
as peace comes in their place.

Praise to the God who comes to judge
the truth of word and deed,
who calls our minds and wills to change,
rebuking wealth and greed.

Praise to the God who waits for us
for hope and joy to reign,
who shares our suffering and our loss,
embodied in our pain.

Praise to the God who comes to bring
comfort to all who mourn.
The whole creation “Glory” sings
as Chris the light is born.

Jan Berry (b. 1953)

Reflection

In our Gospel reading today we read of the imprisonment of John the Baptist. He was thrown into prison because he had publicly spoken out against the antics of Herod Antipas, who had left his own wife in favour of his brother’s wife. It seems that sexual immorality amongst political leaders is nothing new! It must have been very difficult for John – someone who had been such a free-spirit, used to roaming the great outdoors all his life - to suddenly find himself confined within cell walls. In many ways he was very lucky. It was only because Herod knew that the people regarded John as being a prophet, that he didn’t dare have him put to death. But John’s experience of prison set him wondering. He began to wonder about Jesus. He has heard rumours about the lifestyle and ministry of Jesus. Had he got it wrong? Was Jesus really the Messiah? Should he have baptised Jesus and pointed him out as being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus didn’t seem to be behaving in the way that John had expected. Where was the great political leader who was going to come and overthrow the government, purge the evil-doers and establish a new rule of justice and peace? Instead in Jesus, John sees a man who is sociable and enjoys a glass or two of wine (John of course was tea-total). He seems to keep somewhat dubious company – tax-collectors, publicans, prostitutes and a band of men who appear to have abandoned their jobs to follow him. Had John made a terrible mistake? And if so, did that imply that John had failed to fulfil his destiny as the one who would come before to prepare the way for the Messiah? Had he been wasting his time? But John doesn’t pass judgement on Jesus on the basis of rumour. He wants to be certain. And

so John sends out his disciples to challenge Jesus directly, asking him if he really is the Messiah. John is not looking for reassurance – he wants proof! In some ways we can identify with the crisis of confidence that John is experiencing. The prophets spoke of a Messiah who would come and set the prisoner free – and here is John, banged up behind bars! No wonder he is disappointed. And we’ve all experienced disappointment. Whether it be buying what you thought would be your dream home; or planning what was to be the perfect holiday; or seeing a film that has failed to live up to the hype. Appearances can be deceptive. When I was training for the ministry one of the Anglican theology students, dressed as a tramp and carrying a bottle in a brown paper bag, was nearly thrown out of Durham Cathedral by the police, when he was rehearsing a drama sketch to be used in the college service later that evening! Things aren’t always what they seem. People aren’t always what they seem. John wants proof – and Jesus shows his disciples the evidence. He doesn’t respond to them by saying, “Yep, that’s me alright. I’m the one. I’m the Messiah you’ve all been waiting for.” Instead Jesus asks them what they expected to see, someone in royal robes, living in a palace or a prophet? He refers them back to the prophecies made about him in scripture. He uses the images of salvation from Isaiah to describe the character of his ministry. The Messiah is someone who will strengthen the weak, heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and speech to the mute. All the things that Jesus is indeed doing. The challenge of Jesus then, is to re-evaluate our expectations of the Saviour. Some people come to Christ thinking that he will grant them a worry free, trouble free existence. Then they are disappointed when their relationships break down; when marriages fail and their teenage children go off the rails. But, Jesus doesn’t promise his followers exemption from life’s hardships. What he does promise, is to be present with us in our suffering and give us the strength to bear our burdens. He promises to give us a sense of peace – the peace that the world cannot understand. And Jesus changes things. He brings about his kingdom by turning the values of this world upside down. John the Baptist was the forerunner to the Messiah. He was more than a prophet and equal with Jesus. As we read in Matthew 11:11, Jesus says “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.” John was sent to clear the way, to remove preconceptions about who the Messiah would be and to build a road that would point to Jesus. As Christians, we are to use the waiting time until Christ returns to do the same. The way in which we live our lives, our attitudes to food, drink and clothing, can all point people to Jesus. We can help clear away the wrong ideas that people have about God. We need to show people that God is great and Christians are okay. Jesus calls all of us – even the least in his kingdom to prepare the way for him. Will you be a “road”, “a way”, “a pointer” for your family and friends who do not yet know the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Prayers of Intercession

Lord, today, as we are reminded of the imprisonment of John the Baptist, we bring before you all who suffer imprisonment of mind or body, soul or spirit.

We pray that those who work in the prison service may know they are valued and appreciated, so that they may treat the prisoners with fairness and humanity.

We pray for all who have been unjustly accused and convicted, that they may patiently stand their ground, and find others to stand alongside them in their struggle to be heard.

We pray for young people on remand, that the stresses they encounter may not drive them to desperation, and that the people they meet may not tempt them into deeper trouble.

May those who work in the legal profession be keenly aware of their responsibilities to their clients, to society and to God. Protect them from greed, threat and corruption.

We remember the families of prisoners, who are serving a sentence of their own. May they find kind and understanding friends.

We pray for prison visitors, and organisations that work for the welfare of prisoners and their families. **Amen.**

The Lords Prayer *Our Father, who art in heaven...*

Hymn StF 167: Colours of Day

Colours of day dawn into the mind,
the sun has come up, the night is behind.
Go down in the city, into the street,
and let's give the message to the people we meet.

*So light up the fire and let the flame burn,
Open the door, let Jesus return
Take seeds of his Spirit, let the fruit grow,
tell the people of Jesus, let his love show.*

Go through the park, on into the town;
the sun still shines on; it never goes down.
The light of the world is risen again;
the people of darkness are needing a friend.

Open your eyes, look into the sky,
the darkness has come, the sun came to die.
The evening draws on, the sun disappears,
but Jesus is living, his Spirit is near.

Sue McClellan (b. 1951) John Paculabo (1946-2013) snf Keith Ryecroft (b. 1949)

Blessing

Make a place for God in your hearts and in your lives, for he comes to you this day and always, and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with you and those you love now and always. Amen