

Parish of Central Exeter
2nd Sunday in Advent

6 December 2020

'Prepare the way of the Lord'

Welcome everyone.



Our reflections this morning are by Sheila and the Intercessions provided by Keith. Many thanks to you both.

The Lighting of the Advent Candles

This period was first called Advent in the fourth century and quickly developed into a month-long season of preparation not just for the birth of Jesus, but also for his second coming. The lighting of candles is another ancient tradition – the advent wreath is nineteenth century from Germany. Each candle symbolises a different aspect of the purpose of this season.

The second candle is often called the candle of peace.

If you wish to light a candle at home, do so now with these words, and we all join in with you:

Jesus is the Light of the world
A light no darkness can ever put out

We light this candle as a sign
that heaven and earth may pass away,
but the word of God will be present in the world for ever and for ever.

Call to Worship

We come to prepare the way;

The way for Christ –

the hope of Christ, the peace of Christ –

to enter our world,

to enter our hearts.

We cry out together in the wilderness:

The kingdom of heaven has come near.

We come to be part of the light–

the light that shines in the darkness.

(written by Joanna Harader, and posted on Spacious Faith. <http://spaciousfaith.com/>)

Gathering Hymn

*'On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry', sung by the choir of St Edmondsbury Cathedral.
Words are on the screen.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plr21lLqFpg>

Confession

Holy and loving God,
we have dwelt in darkness
and preferred it to the light;
we have been proud of our accomplishments
and despaired over our shortcomings.

Smooth down the mountains of our pride,
and lift up the valleys of our doubts.
Open a path in the wilderness of our lives
that we might find our way to you again.
Refine us and prepare us once again
for life in your kingdom.
Hear our prayer, O Lord. Amen.

(from First Sunday of Advent Prayers and Litanies, posted on the Ministry Matters website. www.ministrymatters.com/)

We are forgiven

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Your sins are pardoned.
The penalty is paid.
Thanks be to God.

The collect for Advent

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in
great humility;
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.



Collect for the second Sunday in Advent

Almighty God,
purify our hearts and minds,
that when your Son Jesus Christ comes again as
judge and saviour
we may be ready to receive him,
who is our Lord and our God.

Worship song

'Be still for the presence of the Lord', sung for us by Marilla Ness. Words are on screen.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOCfPjLOvC4>

Reading Isaiah 40 1-11 NRSV

God's People Are Comforted

40 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our
God.

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

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall 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 grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,



when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'

¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.



'The Nativity between prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel' by Duccio di Buoninsegna 1308-1311, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Reflection

We offer as a reflection on the reading a poem by Heather Pencavel

Voices

A voice

Howling in the night wolf's hunger
screaming in the cry of the owl
in the squeal of the beast
dying under the predator's claw
in the wail of the wind
whistling in the wilderness
'Here is where God will come!
This will be a road for our God.'

A voice

singing in the mother's lullaby
comfort, comfort
tenderly spoken for pains past,
soothing the hurt
all over now
all done.

A voice

calling from the high place
God, God alone
is constant,
God speaks always
the word for the time
tender as a shepherd
when the lambs are weak
the ewes weary;
stern as the Judge
pronouncing sentence
for the squandering of creation.

A voice

howling in the night wolf's hunger
screaming in the cry of the owl
in the squeal of the beast
dying under the predator's claw
in the wail of the wind
whistling in the wilderness
'Here is where God will come!
This will be a road for our God.'



God we hear you
in the dark, desolate place
in the quiet intimate place
on the high hill and deep in the heart
crying out
comforting
calling
challenging
we hear you
we hear you.
Amen.

Prayer

Awaken us to action.
Stir us to courage.
Rouse us to prepare a way in the wilderness for your coming,
clearing the brush of oppression, racism, injustice, and hopelessness—
so that all may see your light and perceive your coming.
Amen.

(From a prayer by lutheranjulia and posted on RevGalBlogPals. <http://revgalblogpals.org/>)

Affirmation of Faith

Jesus taught us to speak of hope as the coming of God's kingdom.

We believe that God is at work in our world
turning hopeless and evil situations into good.
We believe that goodness and justice
will triumph in the end
and that tyranny and oppression cannot last forever.
One day all tears will be wiped away;
the lamb will lie down with the lion,
and justice will roll down like a mighty stream.

True peace and true reconciliation are not only desired,
they are assured and guaranteed in Christ.

This is our faith.

This is our hope. *(20th century South African creed.)*

Worship song

'Come though long expected Jesus', sung by St John's College Chapel Choir, Cambridge.
Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEEdOuWnDGs&t=8s>

Intercessions

For the work of the Church,
that Christ's message of love and forgiveness will spread throughout the world, bringing
peace and blessings to all his people
Lord, hear us.

For the peace of the world,
that those in charge of political affairs may always be conscious that true peace is based
upon the dignity of humanity, whatever the race, colour or creed.
Lord, hear us.

For our parish community; that we may experience the loving kindness of our Father in
heaven as we journey through this life towards the Kingdom of God
Lord, hear us.

For the sick and those who care for them, that the Lord Jesus may heal the sick, rid the
world of hunger and protect us from all disasters.
Lord, hear us.

We pray that all who have died may experience the renewed and eternal life brought by the
coming of the Saviour.
Lord, hear us.

Father, you gave us your only Son to prepare us for your kingdom. May our lives be a daily
preparation for the day when we see you as you are. We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the
Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in
penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ
crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour
Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in
ourselves.

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,



help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to a Taizé version of Wait for the Lord.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OEcMxhvfGo&t=61s>



*Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can
have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm
sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of
silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it
a sacramental moment.*

*Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection
you may wish to say*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Post Communion Collect

Father in heaven,
who sent your Son to redeem the world
and will send him again to be our judge:
give us grace so to imitate him
in the humility and purity of his first coming

that, when he comes again,
we may be ready to greet him
with joyful love and firm faith;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commission & Benediction

Go now: wait and work for the coming of the day of God.
In the wild places prepare a straight path for the Lord.
Lead lives of holiness and godliness,
strive to be found at peace,
and speak freely of the Lord's comfort and promise.

And may God our shepherd gather you in loving arms;
May Christ Jesus reconcile justice and peace within you;
And may the Holy Spirit baptise you into the life of God.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
.....**In the name of Christ. Amen.**

(Nathan Nettleton LaughingBird.net)



Closing Music

We are back with Handel's Messiah again. But a little different than you might expect! This is the version known as the Young Messiah, and we hear 'Every Valley shall be Exalted' sung by First Call. You'll cringe if you're a Handel purist – but he might have liked it!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBkiloW7vjA>



Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

Dear Evangelist

Thank you for your enquiry into the rules governing lockdown in the administrative areas of Judea and Galilee at the time of the birth of the infant J. (name of minor redacted).

The data you have provided about J's DOB is sketchy, as you consider it to be 'probably' in the last or penultimate year of the reign of King Herod the Great, with a putative day given as '*ante diem VIII Kalendas Januarias*,' We have therefore taken as a median date December 25th BCE 5, but you will appreciate and must allow for a margin of error in the information. There could also be significant time delays between the issuing of decrees by central authority and their promulgation and implementation locally. It is also known that local towns could apply local restrictions that would not necessarily be recorded nationally.

With those caveats in mind we can provide you with the following information.

At the suggested birth date both areas were in a state of lockdown, but as the order had been issued '*in Idus Decembris*' (on the Ides of December: December 13) it would have taken some time to be known in the towns mentioned ie Nazareth (Galilee) and Bethlehem (Judea). Previously both towns were subject to restrictions of the '*primo gradu*' (Tier one) so although unnecessary travel was not advised, the father and mother in question could have begun their journey legally. There is no historical evidence to confirm that their travel could be deemed necessary because of a census.

By the time they arrived in Bethlehem the news of the lockdown would have been known, so all hotels, inns etc would have been closed, and it is believed that the Bethlehem inn was designated a *Hospitalis lusciniae* (Nightingale Hospital). Unless the family showed symptoms of being infected, they would have had to have found whatever shelter they could, and a stable is a distinct possibility.

You ask whether angels of the heavenly host would have been allowed to sing a message of glad tidings. The existence or otherwise of angels is a matter of religious belief and cannot be confirmed or denied by scientific investigation. However we have consulted theological experts who advise that whilst an angel appearing on the ground might have adopted a corporeal form, this would not be the case of those seen in the sky, and so any perceived singing would not have led to any contaminated particles or aerosols.

Shepherds were an exempted occupation, so would have been permitted to watch over their flocks by night provided they maintained social distancing and had easy access to soap and water or hand sanitizer. Whether they would have been allowed to return en masse to the town is a moot point. If stopped by the police, they might have claimed they were part of a support bubble or just returning home at the end of their shift. However, any visit inside the stable is quite out of the question, and instead they would have to watch and wave outside by the doors or windows.

We note with interest your inclusion in the research of three representatives from the Council of Sages. Profs Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar were well known and widely respected astrological experts. You say that popular legend asserts that they followed a star, but we would interpret this as evidence that they had carried out careful observation of the sky, consulted relevant charts and therefore were following scientific guidance.

They too would not have been able to enter any private dwelling space but would have been able to meet with (probably) the father outside in a public open space on an individual basis. Any gifts should have been cleaned with antiseptic wipes and quarantined for at least six days before being opened. Of course it is also possible that they claimed that since it was God incarnate in the building, it was a Place of Worship, and therefore at least open for private prayer, for which all three could be present together.

We have not been able to trace any evidence of research into a vaccine using frankincense or myrrh. However, gold would have been useful to pay for a vaccine once available as there was no free health service.

It would seem there was only one designated secure corridor out of Bethlehem at that time, and that was to Egypt, so anyone departing from the town would have had to go in that direction.

You might also be interested to know that there was a significant spike in infant mortality rates in the town shortly after the median date, but no evidence to explain why this happened.

We hope this material will aid you in your research into the life of (name redacted for reasons of commercial confidentiality), and we would be delighted to receive a copy of your book once published. We would ask that you acknowledge any use of this information in your list of references.

With best wishes The Sages of St Corona

Night Prayer

2nd Sunday in Advent
6th December 2020

'The Great 'O's -
O Root of Jesse

Preparation

Father God,
We rest in you.

Jesus the Son,
We rest in you.

Holy Spirit,
We rest in you.

Silence

Introduction

The Great 'O's: O Root of Jesse

The Advent Antiphons, or the "Great O's", that we're using for night prayers in the lead-up to Christmas are perfect illustrations of the role that metaphors play in religious language. If metaphor were banished, our language in general would be greatly diminished, and the Christian ability to speak of God and Christ and allied matters would disintegrate.

'God the Father' is an obvious example. Whereas 'Frank Skinner', born in 1913, was quite literally my father (he died in 1986, hence use of the past tense), 'God' is a father only in a metaphorical sense: the term 'God' doesn't refer to a biological entity who was born, who mows the lawn and plays chess with his son, and who dies; but there are qualities we wish to ascribe to God (such as caring for us, and omniscience as indeed a father is as far as a young child is concerned) which remind us of human fathers. By using the metaphor of God as a father we are alluding to those qualities...

That, at least, is the theory. In practice, sometimes it doesn't quite work. As has frequently been pointed out, referring to God as 'Father' is a complete turn-off for those who suffered at the hands of their actual, biological father. Moreover, the term 'God the Father' arose within a patriarchal society, and using a male noun can unconsciously perpetuate an assumption that men are superior to or more important than women. The intention behind the use of a given metaphor can get lost or subverted.



Or consider the wonderful metaphor depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd. When I was growing up, the entrance lobby of my home church sported a reproduction of a painting of a rather Caucasian-looking Jesus with a lamb draped round his shoulders and a couple of ewes rubbing against his legs. The painter had taken the description somewhat over-literally. Jesus wasn't actually a shepherd, of course: he was a carpenter, then an itinerant preacher, healer and exorcist. But in his being referred to (either by himself or by John the evangelist) as 'the good shepherd', certain of his qualities or attributes are being highlighted: guidance, care, protectiveness, knowing his 'flock', willingness to rescue the lost and straying... But of course some aspects of being a shepherd are definitely *not* part of the intention behind the metaphor (mint sauce, anyone?). Care, therefore, is needed in understanding what a given metaphor can convey.

But with that care in mind, the use of metaphors in speaking of God, Christ and religion in general can be incredibly liberating, because *a religious metaphor is not a proposition that we are expected to assent to*. One religious metaphor doesn't have to be consistent with other religious metaphors. And a metaphor is not a mini-creed — it is more like a verbal icon, through which some aspect of the divine, or ultimate reality, or transcendence, or Truth-with-a-capital-T might be glimpsed. Metaphors can be playful, quirky and challenging in turn. And a metaphor which 'works' for me might leave you cold, and vice versa. *That doesn't matter*. There are plenty of others: of the making of metaphors there is no end.

In what now follows, the '*Root of Jesse*' metaphor of the original Advent Antiphon by Pope Gregory is developed in a sonnet *O Radix* (meaning 'root') by Malcolm Guite, alluded to in one of Jim Cotter's *Cries of Advent*, and (through a leaf) acknowledged tangentially in one of my own *Invocations*. You are invited, as you read them, to allow your own imagination and reflection to engage with the metaphor(s) for God/Christ/Divinity/ Transcendence/Truth in whatever way works for you. You can't get it wrong...

R.N.F.S.

Advent Prayer

O Tender Root of Jesse,
Promised to us,
Abiding with us,
Bloom in our dry deserts of hearts,
Grow in our distracted, busy lives.
Surprise us with your joy and love.
Encourage us with your hope and peace.

By Deborah Vaughn posted on RevGalBlogPals.

Hymn

O Come O Come Emmanuel

This is an upbeat version by Forte Femme

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmdkZ4Z0itY>

New Testament Reading Romans 15: 7-9,12

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."¹

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope."

The Great 'O's - O Root of Jesse

O Root of Jesse

O Root of Jesse, standing
as a sign among the peoples;
before you kings will shut their mouths,
to you the nations will make their prayer:
Come and deliver us, and delay no longer

Pope Gregory the Great

We suggest you maintain a period of silent reflection after each piece, and you might like to close each session listening to the original (short) Gregorian Antiphon: O Radix Jesse

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFE7B-DZ8_w

O Radix

All of us sprung from one deep-hidden seed,
Rose from a root invisible to all.
We knew the virtues once of every weed,
But, severed from the roots of ritual,
We surf the surface of a wide-screen world
And find no virtue in the virtual.
We shrivel on the edges of a wood

Whose heart we once inhabited in love,
Now we have need of you, forgotten Root,
The stock and stem of every living thing
Whom once we worshiped in the sacred grove,
For now is winter, now is withering
Unless we let you root us deep within,
Under the ground of being, graft us in.

Malcolm Guite

O Radix Jesse https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFE7B-DZ8_w

O Tree of Jesse

and flower of Jesse's stem,
lifted high as a sign to all the peoples,
before whom even the powerful
are struck dumb,
come and save us, and delay no more.

Jim Cotter

O Radix Jesse https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFE7B-DZ8_w

O Leaf

receptor of the sun,
powerhouse of the tree;
withering and dying at the year's end,
falling to feed the roots anew;
you are the round of life with death:
come, take us through death to life
by the tree on which you hang.

Richard Skinner

Prayer

God in this season
suspended between hope and fulfilment,
let us never forget what you have done.
May we be overwhelmed by your mercy,
which flows in wave after wave.
May we be honest about the darkness within us,
and perceptive of the light around us.
May we make straight the path for the Lord,
that together we may see God's glory revealed.
(adapted from weekly Advent reflections by Mark Pierson. <http://adventinart.org/>)

Blessing

God's love surround you, God's Spirit guide you,
God's whisper cheer you, God's peace calm you,
God's shield protect you, God's wisdom arm you,
wherever God may lead you.

Closing music

'Celtic Blessing – Deep Peace' Music by John Rutter.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eve2y-P-Zjk>

Thanks

Thanks to everyone who has participated, especially Sheila for this morning's reflection, and Richard for the poems and introduction to Night Prayer. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.

