

Parish of Central Exeter

3rd Sunday in Advent

13 December 2020

'What did you go out to see?'

Welcome everyone.



Our reflections this morning are by Peter Beacham and the Intercessions provided by Richard. 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 third candle is often called the candle of joy.

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

Even if we cannot gather in person
Emmanuel, God with us
Even if some Christmas traditions have had to go
Emmanuel, God with us
Even if we might not get to hug family and friends
Emmanuel, God with us
Even if we cannot sing carols beside each other
Emmanuel, God with us
Even if Christmas cheer is harder this year
Emmanuel, God with us

(written by Christian Aid Scotland)

Gathering Hymn

'Hail to the Lord's Anointed' sung by the Celebration Choir. The words were written in 1821 by James Montgomery, a Scottish hymn-writer and newspaper editor. Words are on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkrepBvrLI4>

We say

Approach Lord Jesus,
You came
And come
To all

You came
And come
Especially to the poorest
And the most vulnerable

Come to us here, Lord Jesus
To help and to heal the poverty of our souls
To refresh and inspire us
Even through the weakness of our faith...

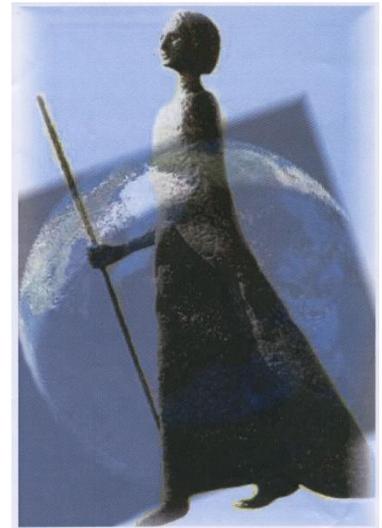
Come - to love and to hold us –
To give us the courage
Always to point to You
For Your name's sake. Amen

Confession (silence)

In the stopping
in the pausing
in the quiet
we cannot avoid
what we are not

Our faults
our lack of faith
our lack of vision and of action
our lack of trust in You –
all bubble to the surface

You, Father God,
see what we are
and still stand by us
offering us hope
and above all,
forgiveness.



Help us here
Help us now –
to recognise
that it was with us in mind
that You sent the baby Jesus
It was with us in mind
that He grew to live and die
and to rise again
Because that's what You think
we are worth

May Your love set us free
this day and always –
these things we ask
in the name of that Son,
whose praise we sing .

(written by Christian Aid Scotland)

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 third Sunday in Advent

God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Worship song

'Lord thy word abideth', sung by the choir of St Michael and All Angels, Bassett, Southampton. Words are on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcghwj7zZZg>

Reading Isaiah 64, 1-4, 8-11 NRSV

We are all the work of your hand

64 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!

²As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,

come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!

³For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

⁴Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

⁸Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

⁹Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;
do not remember our sins forever.

Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

¹⁰Your sacred cities have become a wasteland;
even Zion is a wasteland, Jerusalem a desolation.

¹¹Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned with fire,
and all that we treasured lies in ruins.



New Testament Reading Matthew 11: 2-11

Messengers from John the Baptist

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his 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 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.'

Jesus Praises John the Baptist

⁷ As 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? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This 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.



*John the Baptist in the Wilderness
Hieronymus Bosch c1510
Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid.*

St John the Baptist seated in a humid summer landscape, pointing purposefully towards the Lamb of God crouching at lower right.

This gesture traditionally identifies John as the forerunner of Christ. In this instance however, it also indicates a spiritual alternative to the life of the flesh symbolized in the great pulpy fruits hanging near him on gracefully curving stems, and in the equally ominous forms rising in the background.

Reflection

What went ye out in the wilderness to see?

Has there ever been a year when the great Advent themes have spoken so powerfully to our present condition? In Christian doctrine a traditional focus was to make us concentrate on The Last Things, in anticipation of the end time, intended to emphasise that this is a time for us to heed the call for repentance. An even more resonant Advent note is the journey from darkness to light, agonisingly slow this year, even as the arrival of a vaccine offers us a glimmer of hope for the future. And just now it takes a huge effort to re-imagine what we mean by 'the Christian hope' in a time of global crisis. Many a reflection this year will draw out something from these and similar threads of our faith.

For many Christians, Advent is the most important season of the year. It is easy to see why because the character of Advent is forward-looking, expectant, hoping and longing for renewal. But what are we hoping and looking for? That is why Jesus's rhetorical question, put three times in Matthew's gospel account, is the most important of all the questions Advent poses. Because Jesus's answer is simply this – whatever it is we were expecting to see, it will be very different from any of our imaginings. It will upend our thinking and make us start afresh. The great and powerful prophetic voice of John the Baptist will be found in the wilderness, not a palace- and will be silenced by imprisonment and brutal execution. Yet this is he who prepares the way of the Lord.

How that seems to speak to us as we journey towards the end of this terrible year! In the manifold tragedies of 2020, from universal to personal, it has surely been the finding of faith, hope, and love in the darkest of places which has moved us most, the sheer dedication of countless acts of selfless love which has carried us through. It is the sacrifice of strangers for the good of other strangers, bound together by our common humanity, which has inspired us - to rise above all that separates and injures and destroys to find all that unites and heals and creates.

Now, as we stand on the threshold of Christmas, we know the festival will be different this year. Let's not forget Jesus's question – and we may find, yet again, something different from that we thought we were looking for.

Peter Beacham

Prayer

At the heart of Christianity
is a power that continues to speak to
and transform us.
As I found to my surprise and alarm,
it could speak even to me.

What I heard, and continue to hear,
is a voice that can crack
religious and political convictions open,
that advocates for the least qualified,
least official, least likely;
that upsets the established order
and makes a joke of certainty.

It proclaims against reason
that the hungry will be fed,
that those cast down will be raised up,
and that all things,
including my own failures,
are being made new.

It offers food without exception
to the worthy and unworthy,
the screwed-up and pious,
and then commands everyone to do the same.

(excerpted from Sara Miles in A Hunger Beyond Food. Posted on the Seed Publishers website. <http://www.seedspublishers.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

'Christ whose Glory fills the skies', sung by a virtual choir from Waltham St Lawrence Church, Berkshire. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3hCQIUkXIO>

Intercessions

(from Wild Goose Publications, modified by Richard)

We bless you, our God,
mighty sovereign power,
gentle caring mother.
You do not forget your children.

We bless you, our God,
for your gifts to us of the great books -
the book of Creation – fragile and fascinating;
the books of Scripture – revealing your truth.

And you bless us
with your forgiving love,
with the vision of your kingdom,
spreading light in our darkness.

We pray for those we know or hear about
caught up in wars and terrorism around the world:
soldiers, refugees, politicians and peacemakers –
may our prayers join the prayers of many
as we reflect on particular places of conflict ...

(Pause)

We pray for the many homeless, in our own city,
across the nation, and across the world,
excluded from what we consider to be normal life:
may our prayers join with the prayers of many
as we reflect on particular people we know of ...

(Pause)

We pray for those affected by the pandemic,
relieved that many swiftly recover,
grieved that for some it proves fatal:
may our prayers join with the prayers of many
as we reflect on those known to us who are struggling...

(Pause)

Into the mess and the marvel of this world
a fragile child was born,
yelling in the night for his mother,
needing milk and clean linen.

We put our hopes onto that child,
“Emmanuel”, “God-with-us”,
he who grew to manhood
making manifest the welcoming nature of our God.

We are in the season of waiting,
knowing that our waiting will not be in vain.

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.

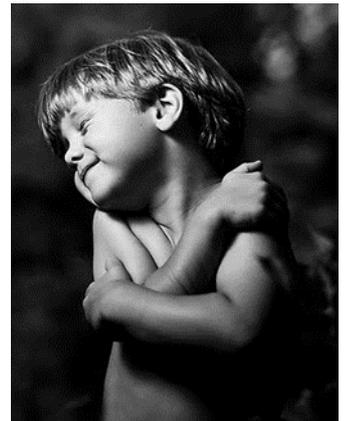
Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

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 Nigel and St David's Choir singing 'God to Enfold you'

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



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

We give you thanks, O Lord, for these heavenly gifts;
kindle in us the fire of your Spirit
that when your Christ comes again
we may shine as lights before his face;
who is alive and reigns now and for ever.

Commission & Benediction

In a cynical and despairing world, O God,
give us a quietly prophetic voice
to proclaim your hope.

In a violent and angry world, O God,
give us a quietly prophetic voice
to proclaim your peace.

In a dismissive and disinterested world, O God,
give us a quietly prophetic voice
to proclaim your compassion.

And may our quietly prophetic lives,
be channels of your restoring grace
wherever we may go.

Amen.

(written by John van de Laar, and posted on Sacredise.com)

May the blessing of God fall on our community,
May it be a safe place,
full of understanding and acceptance,
where you can be as you are,
without the need of any mask
or pretense or image.

Amen.

(posted on Third Space. <http://third-space.org.uk/>)

Closing Music

'Thy Kingdom Come O God', played as a trumpet solo by Oto Laleye. The words are on the screen. A more unusual version.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBS2TPo6rpk>



Scroll down for Coffee Break

Coffee Break

Today's 'Night Prayer' includes my Invocation '*O Darkness*'.

The following poem, written in about 1990, is its precursor.

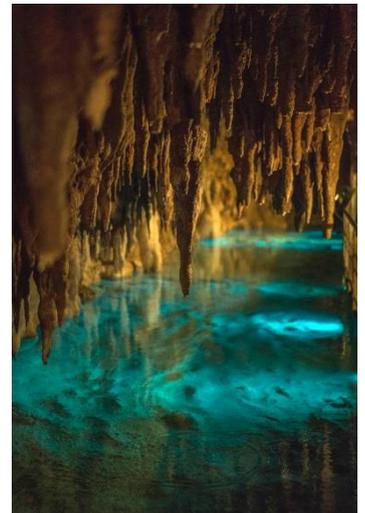
Richard

In praise of darkness

I sing in praise of darkness!
Darkness which enhances touch,
fine-tunes the ear,
alerts the subtler senses;
darkness which encloses us,
surrounds, enfolds and brings repose,
harkens back to wholeness.

I sing in praise of darkness
of a high-hedged midnight lane,
criss-crossed by creatures scurrying
to burrows where they snug themselves;
the mother darkness of the earth
in which the mystery of seeds unfolds,
and tree-roots find their nourishment.

I sing in praise of darkness
dwelling in the depths of caves,
the haunt of bats, themselves
an echo of their habitat;
deep-down, dive-down darkness,
where stalactites accrete in secrecy
and unknown rivers flow.



Night Prayer

3rd Sunday in Advent
13th December 2020

'The Great 'O's -
O Oriens (O Dayspring)

Preparation

Father God,
We rest in you.

Jesus the Son,
We rest in you.

Holy Spirit,
We rest in you.

Silence

Introduction

Dayspring/Morning Star

The opening invocation of today's Advent Antiphon is *O Oriens*, the literal translation of which is *O East*, with the intended meaning of *O Rising Sun*. However, the beautiful term "O Dayspring" is usually preferred, or "O Morning Star". Whichever is chosen, it is speaking of dawn: the moment the sun begins to appear above the horizon, that astonishing moment when, on some mornings, it seems that you can actually see the rays shooting out.

According to an online biblical dictionary, the 'place' of the Dayspring is "the particular point of the horizon at which the sun comes up on any given day. This slowly changes day by day through the year, moving northward from midwinter till midsummer, and back again southward from midsummer to midwinter." Significantly, we can't influence it, but simply receive it — it is manifesting the underlying order of creation.

As an image or metaphor for Christ, it is rich with associations: the notion of 'rising' or resurrection; the idea of the start of a new day or, by extension, the start of a new era (as, say, many Americans are fervently hoping they are about to enter); the sun as a symbol of 'the Good' in Greek philosophy; the shedding on us of the light of truth; the banishing of ignorance; the banishing of the deeds of darkness; the dawn chorus; renewed warmth for the sustaining of life; reassurance of the reliability of the cosmic order as opposed to unpredictable chaos; our total dependence on the energy of the sun with, in English, the sun/Son play on words. No wonder Pope Gregory the Great chose this as one of his biblical images for his seven "Great O's".



Below, following the English version of Pope Gregory's Advent Antiphon, Malcolm Guite develops the image in a sonnet, then we have Jim Cotter's take on it. I then ran into a problem, in that none of my 'Invocations' uses the image of dawn or dayspring at all. However, in my book of *Invocations*, one is addressed to 'Darkness'. It might seem perverse to have included it here (ok, ok, it *is* perverse) but it is not entirely random, for although we can develop many positive associations for the metaphor of sunrise/dawn/the dayspring, the start of a new day is not always a positive experience for everyone. It can entail being wrenched from the blissful unconsciousness of sleep, can involve the resumption of a grinding routine, can bring the daily reminder of a recent or not-so-recent loss. Moreover, all the praise for the coming of light results in our negativity being heaped onto 'darkness'. Darkness gets a bad press. Yet darkness has its admirable qualities, some of which I addressed in a poem called "I sing in praise of darkness". I had this poem in mind when, believing that darkness has its own contributions to offer as a metaphor for aspects of the transcendent order, I wrote the Invocation 'O Darkness'.

As I have written before, you are invited, as you read the following, 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...

Hymn

O Come O Come Emmanuel

This is a version for piano and cello by Thepianoguys. You might wish to ponder over where it was filmed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iO7ySn-Swwc>

Old Testament Reading Isaiah 9: 2-4

² The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.

³ You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

The Great 'O's – O Oriens

O Morning Star,

splendour of light eternal

and sun of righteousness:

Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness

and the shadow of death.

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 Oriens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BsZH7e27Dg>

Oriens

First light and then first lines along the east
To touch and brush a sheen of light on water,
As though behind the sky itself they traced
The shift and shimmer of another river
Flowing unbidden from its hidden source;
The Day-Spring, the eternal Prima Vera.
Blake saw it too. Dante and Beatrice
Are bathing in it now, away upstream...
So every trace of light begins a grace
In me, a beckoning. The smallest gleam
Is somehow a beginning and a calling:
"Sleeper awake, the darkness was a dream
For you will see the Dayspring at your waking,
Beyond your long last line the dawn is breaking."

Malcolm Guite

O Oriens <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BsZH7e27Dg>

O Morning Star

Splendour of Light Eternal,

O Radiant Dawn, O Dayspring from on High,

shining with the glory of the rainbow,

come and waken us

from the greyness of our apathy,

and renew in us your gift of hope.

Jim Cotter

O Oriens <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BsZH7e27Dg>

O Darkness

as potent as a curse,
as fragile as a candle flame,
as threatening as a foe,
as comforting as a friend;
you are the womb for all qualities:
come, and endow us with your fecundity,
enrich us with your every paradox.

Richard Skinner

Advent Prayer

This is a translation of an Anglo-Saxon poem, for 'Oriens' written around 800 and in the Exeter Book, one of the great treasures of Exeter Cathedral.

O Earendel, brightest of angels,
sent to mankind over middle-earth,
righteous sun's radiance,
splendid above all stars! Of thine own self
thou ever enlightenest every age.
As thou, God born of God long ago,
Son of the true Father, eternally existed
without beginning in the glory of heaven,
so thine own creation cry with confidence
to thee now for their needs, that thou send
that bright sun to us, and come thyself
to lighten those who long have lived,
surrounded by shadows and darkness, here
in everlasting night; who, shrouded by sins,
have had to endure death's dark shadow.

Prayer

Shout for joy
The whole earth
And everything within
Rejoice!
For Light has come into the world

Blessing

May the blessing of Light be on you
Light without and light within,
May the blessed sunlight shine on you
And warm your heart till it glows like
A great peat fire, so that the stranger
May come and warm himself at it,
And also a friend.
And may the light shine out of the two eyes of you,
Like a candle set in two windows of a house,
Bidding the wanderer to come in out of the storm.

Celtic Blessing posted on Godspacelight.com

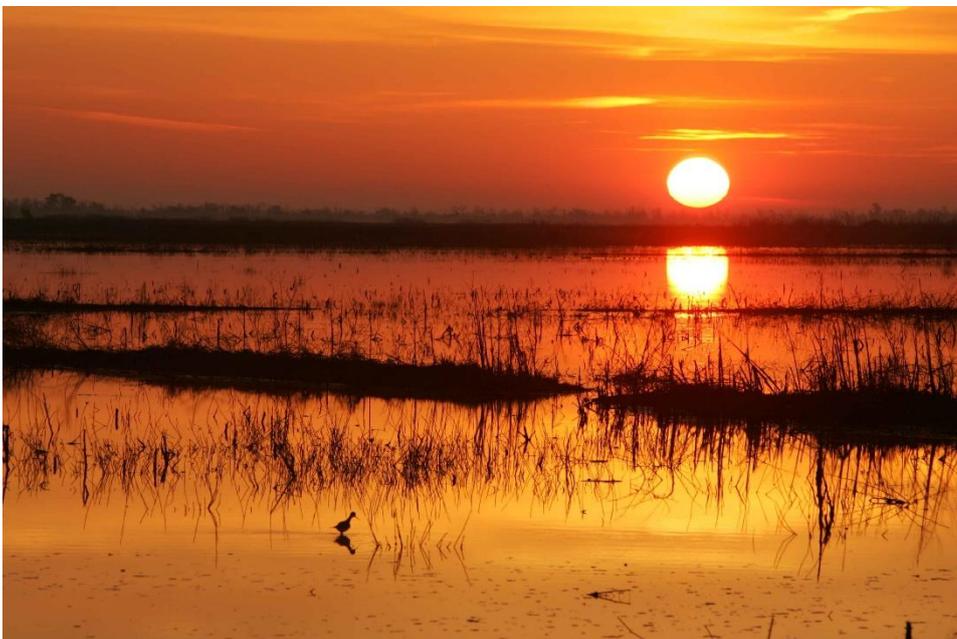
Closing music

'A Blessing' from a virtual choir from churches all over Japan. It's a long piece, but good to see how Christians from other nations and cultures have come together during the pandemic.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b74EymT_0GA

Thanks

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



Oriens or Occidens? Sunrise or sunset? Only time will tell!