

Worship for Third Sunday of Advent (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Good morning and welcome. Once again although far apart we are able to meet together in spirit and we thank God for the wonders of technology which enable us to do this.

The darker mornings and evenings of winter remind us of the season of Advent but in the back of our minds we can look forward with confidence, not only to the light of Jesus Christ dawning upon us at Christmas in less than 2 weeks time, but also the ever so gradual return of longer daylight hours too as the seeds of nature begin to stir deep in the earth.

As ever we give thanks for the time and efforts of the whole team who contribute so much to ensure these services are produced every week.

THE PREPARATION

To open our service this morning let us join together in singing Stf.55 'Immortal Invisible God only wise'.

Hymn: StF 55 – Immortal, invisible, God only wise

- 1. Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of
Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we
praise.**
- 2. Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in
might —
thy justice like mountains high soaring
above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness
and love.**

- 3. To all life thou givest, to both great and
small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the
tree,
and wither and perish; but naught changeth
thee.**
- 4. Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their
sight;
all praise we would render: O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.**
- 5. Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of
Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we
praise.**

Walter Chalmers Smith (1824–1908)

Call to worship

We unite in spirit in the presence of our almighty and ever-loving God to offer our worship, praise and thanksgiving, to make confession of our sins and to pray for others as for ourselves that we may demonstrate the fruits of our saviour's grace in our own lives. Let us remember God's presence with us now.

Praise the Lord!

Now we have some words from Isaiah chapter 12 verses 2-6 telling of the greatness of our God!

² Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,

for the Lord God is my strength and my
might;
he has become my salvation.

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells
of salvation. ⁴ And you will say on that day:

Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done
gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of
Israel.

Prayer of approach

Loving Lord as we rejoice in the gift of this new
day may the light of your presence set our hearts
on fire with love for you now and forever.

Amen

Prayer of adoration

Let us remember God's presence with us now as
we pray our prayers of thanks and adoration

This morning dear Lord we offer ourselves to you
in worship, praise and thanksgiving in response
to your incomparable love for us.

You have shown us the wonders and mysteries
of your kingdom through the life and teachings
of your son Jesus Christ.

You have given us a universe bursting with life
and goodness the wonders of which we can
scarcely comprehend.

We owe you everything that we have and are
indebted to you for our lives and well-being.

You are the beginning and the end,
the God of the great and the small,

the source of all life and love
and our hope of eternal life.

We seek to find you as Jesus as babe to come at
Christmas;
we treasure your spirit within us every day of our
lives
and we look for your return as our Lord and
master in God's eternal kingdom.

Amen

Prayer of confession

Dear lord you have shown us your will but we
tire and forget;
you have shown us how to love but we let life
and our own feelings get in the way;
you have shown us how to care for others but
sometimes we struggle;
you have taught us the important values in life
but we bow to the pressures of life which lead us
astray;
you have shown us how to be good stewards of
creation but we are blinded by our short term
needs;
we forget that all of mankind are equal in your
sight as we look for special rights for ourselves
and our nation above others.

We pray for your grace and mercy in this time of
Advent that we may reset our hearts and minds
to obey your will for us and in fulfilment of your
Kingdom to come on earth

Pause to reflect

As we reflect upon our confession let us take
comfort that by the grace and mercy of God and
through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the
Cross
'Our sins are forgiven'.

Our next hymn this morning reflects our prayers

Hymn: StF 652 – Lord we come to ask your healing

- 1. Lord, we come to ask your healing,
teach us of love;
all unspoken shame revealing,
teach us of love.
Take our selfish thoughts and actions,
petty feuds, divisive factions,
hear us now to you appealing,
teach us of love.**
- 2. Soothe away our pain and sorrow,
hold us in love;
grace we cannot buy or borrow,
hold us in love.
Though we see but dark and danger,
though we spurn both friend and stranger,
though we often dread tomorrow,
hold us in love.**
- 3. When the bread is raised and broken,
fill us with love;
words of consecration spoken,
fill us with love.
As our grateful prayers continue,
make the faith that we have in you
more than just an empty token,
fill us with love.**
- 4. Help us live for one another,
bind us in love;
stranger, neighbour, father, mother —
bind us in love.
All are equal at your table,
through your Spirit make us able
to embrace as sister, brother,
bind us in love.**

Jean Holloway (b. 1939)

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSVA)

A Song of Joy

- ¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
- ¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgements
against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
- ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
- ¹⁷ The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
- ¹⁸ as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
- ¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
- ²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSVA)

- ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say,
Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to
everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about

anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18 (NRSVA)

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' ¹¹ In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'¹² Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³ He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.'¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his

granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Sermon

Hi and welcome to the third week in Advent as we traditionally "anticipate" Christmas.

The first 2 weeks have been all about the activity of Christ's coming and what we need to do to prepare. Traditionally, they have had focus themes of "The Second Coming", "The Prophets" and "John the Baptist".

This Sunday is the 3rd Sunday in Advent and the focus changes.

I'm fairly sure that you will have heard a conversation something like this at some time:

Person 1: *"What are you doing for Christmas? Are you all ready?"*

Person 2: *"You are joking! I've been too busy to think about it yet. What with work and family things"*

Person 1: *"Well there aren't many shopping days left you know, and there are likely to be problems with deliveries."*

Person 2: *"Tell me about it. We can't get any drivers at work. It's been a nightmare."*

Actually, I'm fairly certain that the same circumstances (or at least similar ones) have affected generations down through history.

- Difficult circumstances surrounding people throughout the ages.
- Expectation of coming events which will "test" us

- People looking for answers to how they can best react given the situations in which they find themselves.
- Encouragement from people, testimonies and promises that God will provide and be a source of Joy to them.

I chose to read all 4 of the lectionary readings although different in so many ways because they all share this last encouragement to find and to know Joy at this time.

This is the focus of this 3rd Sunday in Advent is JOY.

If we look at the visual representation of Advent, The Advent Ring of Candles, there is lots of symbolism in both the shape and the contents. The circle or crown shape for victory, the greenery, life and hope, the candles themselves, the light of the coming Christ.

The third candle in the “Advent Ring” is very often a different colour from the 3 others round the outside. It is often “rose” coloured to depict the Joy that is present in the coming of Christ. The red (or purple) one’s are used to illustrate penitence and judgement.

So how do the different passages we read encourage us to look for underlying joy in every situation. Remember joy is essentially different from happiness. Happiness depends on external conditions while joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away.

Zephaniah is known as one of the “minor prophets” or shorter books. The book only has 3 chapters and the writer is forecasting the judgement that will befall Jerusalem and the nation of Judah. He also talks of the judgement

that will fall on other surrounding nations as well.

But in the last chapter he sees the time when God has dealt with every circumstance, every difficult situation, everything that frightens us, and is with His people.

“Do not fear O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save”

Zephaniah, Isaiah and Luke all look to a time when God will come as both judge and saviour.

“At that time”, “the time to come”, “on that day” and “in that day” are all constant themes of promise for time to come.

Prophecy, or telling of future events, always has elements of events which have happened and of those still to come. Elements, which are true for a particular time and those which have yet to take place.

So, the promises of the Lord’s coming, of his judgement, of his gathering of his people and of being with them all have truth for when they were written, the present time and in the future as well.

Encouragement to “be glad and rejoice” in Zephaniah, “give thanks to the lord and call on his name” in Isaiah, and “rejoice in the Lord always” in Philippians all call us to know the joy of the Lord which is our strength.

But, I hear you say, it’s all very well to encourage us to seek underlying joy despite the circumstances. I am sure many of you may well have found real joy despite really difficult situations. You may well have known, in a very real way, God’s grace. But what about the here and now.

What shall I do in my circumstances? How do I make sure I am right with God and those around me?

John the Baptist, in Luke, answers his audiences' questions as simply as he can, by really saying: "Do what you can, as you are able, in any way that you can".

He said to all the people to act as though they are truly sorry for their sin.

He told them to be generous and share what they have.

He told the tax gatherers to be honest.

He told the soldiers not to abuse their positions.

It reminds me of one of my favourite verses in the Bible, Ecclesiastes 9 v 10.

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might"

That reminded me of Wesley's well-known saying:

*"Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can."*

Paul's encouragement to the Philippians is to *"be anxious for nothing but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God"*.

Ok you say – it's easy to say that but that doesn't change the situation.

I still don't have enough time, the pressure is too great, my debts are insurmountable, I can't change what I have done.

Yes I know that but Paul's promise from God to the Philippians is that "the peace of God, which

transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

It's His promise to us this Advent. *God is able to transcend all understanding in guarding your hearts and minds.*

Rejoice – know that God has come and will come again – do all you can in the situation you are in and know that God will rescue, restore, gather and bring you home.

God is able to do *"exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think"*. By allowing the truth of the gospel to speak to us we allow Him to work in us and through us.

Remember, Zephaniah is speaking to us as well as to those with him at the time. When he says: *I will rescue the lame At that time I will gather you, at that time I will bring you home and give you honour and praise*

May the Joy that is represented in our Advent wreath's 3rd candle be with you and undergird you this Christmas.

The hymn that follows, number 170 in Singing the Faith by Graham Kendrick, I have to confess I've not come across before. It recognises that circumstances may be difficult, but Christ will shine upon you and become "The Light of the World" .. Hymn 170 "Arise, shine, your light has come"

Hymn: StF 170 – Arise, shine, your light has come

1. Darkness like a shroud covers the earth.

Evil like a cloud covers the people.

**But the Lord will rise upon you
and his glory will appear on you,
nations will come to your light.**

***Arise, shine, your light has come,
the glory of the Lord has risen on you!***

*Arise, shine, your light has come,
Jesus the Light of the world has come.*

2. **Children of the light, be clean and pure.
Rise, you sleepers, Christ will shine on you.
Take the Spirit's flashing two-edged sword
and with faith declare God's mighty word;
stand up and in his strength be strong.**

*Arise, shine, your light has come,
the glory of the Lord has risen on you!
Arise, shine, your light has come,
Jesus the Light of the world has come.*

3. **Here among us now, Christ the Light
kindles brighter flames in our trembling
hearts.
Living Word, our lamp, come guide our feet
as we walk as one in light and peace
till justice and truth shine like the sun.**

*Arise, shine, your light has come,
the glory of the Lord has risen on you!
Arise, shine, your light has come,
Jesus the Light of the world has come.*

4. **Like a city bright so let us blaze;
lights in every street turning night to day.
And the darkness shall not overcome
till the fullness of Christ's kingdom comes,
dawning to God's eternal day.**

*Arise, shine, your light has come,
the glory of the Lord has risen on you!
Arise, shine, your light has come,
Jesus the Light of the world,
Jesus the Light of the world,
Jesus the Light of the world has come.*

Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

Prayers of intercession

Dear lord we hear the cry for repentance from
John the Baptist
and pray that world leaders, governments and all
in authority will take heed of his call

turning away from self-seeking policies focussed
on their own nations and communities
and begin sharing resources and wealth with all
your peoples no matter from whence they come.
Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray that all such leaders will be captivated
and overwhelmed by the light and love of Jesus
Christ
so that they will share their own nation's wealth,
natural resource, technical and scientific
expertise with other nations less well-off and
under resourced
so that climate change may be mitigated for all
and that equality in opportunity and living
conditions in peace and harmony be spread
between all nations.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayers.

Dear lord we give thanks for our own security,
freedom of speech and worship;
we give thanks for our own homes and peace in
our nation.

We pray for all those cast adrift from their own
homes and communities by wars and conflicts,
natural disasters and outright poverty.

We pray for an end to people trafficking
and discrimination against all who are caught up
in the tragic cycles of migration, refugee camps,
and assessment
being passed from one country to another
with no hope of a secure home and a worthwhile
life.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayers.

Heavenly Father we give thanks for the
wonderful medicines and care that we have
enjoyed in our own country in mitigation of the
effects of the Covid virus
but we remember those who still are suffering

from life changing ill effects and the loss of loved ones.

Through your spirit of compassion Lord grant them relief from their illness and sad losses so that they may be restored to a happy and healthy life.

We pray for those sufferers too in countries far less equipped to deal with the pandemic that they may receive generous and compassionate support from other nations. We pray too that the world as a whole may avoid the effects of further Covid variants.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayers.

Dear Lord we pray for our churches that they may thrive in spreading the good news of The Gospel of Christ and that all divisions and differences may be peacefully overcome so that your kingdom here on earth will grow and prosper to reflect the love of Jesus Christ for all mankind
Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayers.

Finally Lord we pray for ourselves, our families and friends.
Grant us peace and contentment in our lives but inspire us by renewal of our faith this Advent to demonstrate our love and worship of our Lord Jesus Christ and his love for us in the hope that all who live in darkness without faith will open their eyes to his radiant light and start a new life of faith in him.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayers.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Let us say together the words of the traditional Lord's Prayer.

**Our Father who art in heaven
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the
glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen**

The Offering & prayer

Gracious Lord accept the material gifts that we give you and with them our lives to be used in the service of Jesus Christ.

Amen

Hymn: StF 544 – As the deer pants for the water

- 1. As the deer pants for the water,
so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.**
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*
- 2. I want you more than gold or silver,
only you can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy-giver
and the apple of my eye.**
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.*

*You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*

3. You're my friend and you are my brother,
even though you are a king.

I love you more than any other,
so much more than anything.

*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.*

*You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*

Martin J. Nystrom (b. 1956)

THE DISMISSAL

Let us join together now in saying the words of
the grace as we bless each other.

**'May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love
of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be
with us all evermore'.**

Amen

And now our closing hymn.

Hymn: StF 563 – Oh Jesus I have promised

1. **O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
Lord, be for ever near me,
my master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.**
2. **O let me feel you near me;
the world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me, and within;
but, Jesus, now draw nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.**

3. **O let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
Lord, speak, and make me listen,
O guardian of my soul.**

4. **O Jesus, you have promised
to all who follow you,
that where you are in glory
your servant shall be too;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
O give me grace to follow
my master and my friend.**

John Ernest Bode (1816–1874)

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StF 652 – Lord we come to ask your healing

Jean Holloway (*b.* 1939)

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Hymn: StF 544 – As the deer pants for the water

Martin J. Nystrom (*b.* 1956)

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StF 170 – Arise, shine, your light has come

Graham Kendrick (*b.* 1950)

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StF 55 – Immortal, invisible, God only wise

Walter Chalmers Smith (1824–1908)

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StF 563 – Oh Jesus I have promised

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Bible Verses

NRSV & NRSVA

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