

Readings and Sermon for Advent 3 – 13 December 2020

Collect

O Lord Jesus Christ,
who at your first coming sent your messenger
to prepare your way before you:
grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries
may likewise so prepare and make ready your way
by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,
that at your second coming to judge the world
we may be found an acceptable people in your sight;
for you are alive and reign with the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Good News of Deliverance

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 24

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

John 1:6 – 8, 19 – 28

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' ²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' ²²Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' ²³He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' ²⁶John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Sermon by Reverend Susan Williams (Associate Priest)

Cancel Christmas?

Whatever regulations are imposed on us this year, it will still be Christmas. Christmas is unstoppable. You can't cancel Christmas – even if you can't celebrate it in ways we've come to see as 'normal', in workplaces and pubs, in homes or in churches, or crowded streets. Christmas is still Christmas, in this beleaguered world. I wonder what you're going to miss most – parties and presents, feasts and big family gatherings, crowded carol services and the wonderful flicker of candlelight, the stillness at the heart of the midnight service, the exchange of hugs, the shared excitement.

But perhaps you wouldn't have been in the mood for celebration anyway. So many of us have lost so much this year. It's not just the individual losses, the much-loved faces we should be seeing, but the thought of so many around the world. Those families who will be going hungry. Those houses where Santa won't be calling. Those who will find no room at the inn. All whose hopes and dreams have been set aside. All who feel bewildered and lost in a rapidly changing world. They have always been with us. This year, perhaps, we're more conscious of them.

Yes, there is much to mourn, there are many to mourn every year, especially this year.

The prophet Isaiah assures us that God has not abandoned us. Those with broken hearts will find their deep wounds attended to. Those who weep will be comforted. A shattered society will be rebuilt. New life will spring up. And we will rejoice and offer our praise to God.

Others have been in darkness before, and yet have found hope and the ability to trust, and thank, and praise.

A teenager travelled into an unknown but terrible future, in a cattle truck transport, heading for Auschwitz:

'When we left Berlin it was Friday, Sabbath eve. When it was dark, one lady on our transport took two candles out, and lit them, and said the blessings and the promises to welcome the Sabbath... Where did we find that spiritual power, riding in a rolling prison, a death wagon of a hundred people? Ninety per cent of them did not live to see the next evening. But still it was Friday evening, and they were singing and welcoming the Sabbath in the name of God'.

They took their familiar ritual and songs into that dark place, and resolutely celebrated the gift of God – Shabbat, God's rest and peace.

St Paul says in the letter to the Thessalonians: 'Rejoice always. Give thanks in all circumstances. Hang on to your key values whatever happens. Don't despise those who promise good things. Don't try to suppress the Spirit'. It's the gift of God, the Holy Spirit, which enables confidence and hope, and makes joy possible when things seem darkest. Joy doesn't depend on the outward trappings and familiar customs of celebration. Joy doesn't depend on getting together with family and friends. It doesn't even depend on coming to church, singing our hearts out – though, of course, there is much joy to be found in and through things. It depends on complete trust and dependence on the goodness and faithfulness of God and his gifts.

And all this is embedded in the unearned gift of Christmas, the child born into our suffering world to live and die and set us free.

John was resolute. He had a great following and many to hear and respond to his call to turn away from whatever might keep them from God. He stood firmly in the tradition of Elijah and the prophets. But he knew, and freely admitted, that his job was only to get people ready for another greater than he. The one that was coming would bring the gift of the Spirit, bring joy to the world, and so transform it.

That is Christmas. It cannot be cancelled.