

HOW Mission Community & KSAT Worship Service for 13th December 2020 THEME: 'Rough places made plain'

We thank Douglas Birkbeck for this week's service for 3rd Sunday in Advent

Call to Worship: *'Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised and His greatness is unsearchable' (Psalm 145v3)*

Though we are scattered and some of us cannot meet each other face to face, let us remember that we are all one in Christ Jesus, united by His Spirit to offer our praise. So, may our worship bring a blessing to us and honour to His Name.

At this season of the year we turn to a hymn for Advent:

HYMN MP 102: Come, thou long-expected Jesus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEEed0uWnDGs>

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever, now Thy gracious kingdom bring.

By Thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all-sufficient merit, raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this opportunity of, once again, praying together, considering Your Word and thinking of its meaning for us, as we try to do Your will.

We bring You our thanksgiving for all Your blessings, daily renewed, which help and sustain us as life goes on. We come, too, confessing our need for Your forgiveness for all the times when we have failed to show our love for You, or to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Have mercy on us, we pray, and help us by Your grace to serve You faithfully.

At this time of year, we remember the message of Advent, that we are now in a time of waiting to hear the good news of Christ's coming to earth – humbly taking on our human form to draw us closer to You. We believe that, though we no longer see Him with our mortal eyes, he still comes in spirit, to those who are willing to receive Him. So, as we wait in Advent, help us to be ready, with hearts prepared to welcome Him and to recognise His presence with us.

We pray that, amid all the preparations we may make for the Christmas season, we may not forget Him, who should be the centre of our rejoicing. We pray that this service may be part of that preparation to celebrate Christ's coming. We ask this in His Name. **Amen.**

Bible Readings:

Isaiah 40 v 1-5

'Comfort, comfort my people', says your God, 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her, that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.'

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Luke 4 v 14-19

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him. He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

HYMN MP 393 – Joy to the world <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5hj518lugk>

Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room and heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven and nature sing
Joy to the world! The Saviour reigns! Your sweetest songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy
He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love
And wonders of His love and wonders, wonders of His love

Reflection

Isaiah 40 v 4: 'The uneven ground shall become level'

There are several roads that lead out of Soulby, the village where I live. It is not unusual to see pedestrians, from time to time, walking along one of these roads. One, which goes in an easterly direction, often has folk walking on it, perhaps giving their clogs some exercise or giving a young child an outing in a push-chair. The other road, which goes west, has far fewer pedestrians on it. I think the difference can be explained by the fact that the easterly road is level, with only minor slopes, whereas the road to the west goes through hilly country, with gradients steep enough to deter all but the most energetic walkers! The level road is the more popular of the two!

This contrast between the two roads reminds me that, for all of us, life has its ups and downs. Difficulties do arise, the way ahead may seem disturbing or even frightening, and we are only too glad if those difficulties are overcome and the 'road' becomes level again!

The prophet Isaiah knew that his countrymen feared such a situation. Judah, their native land, had been over-run by the mighty power of Babylon. Their homes and even their temple had been destroyed and many of them had been taken into exile in Babylon. The distress of the exiles is clearly evident in the opening verses of *Psalms 137* – *'By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion ... how shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'*

But Isaiah has an encouraging message for his people – God had **not** forgotten them. They would come back from exile to rebuild their homes and the temple – *'the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain ... and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed'*. Isaiah also promised that, in a time to come, God would send One, who would bring wisdom, justice and compassion to the world – the Messiah, God's Chosen One.

Many years later, when the nation was again subdued and troubled, this time under Roman occupation, John the Baptist quoted Isaiah's encouraging words, as he (John) foretold the Advent, or coming, of Jesus, God's Chosen One. The period of waiting would soon be over and Jesus Himself would be applying to His own ministry, those words of Isaiah promising 'good news to the poor ... release to the captives ... recovery of sight to the blind ... and liberty to those who are oppressed'. In other words, 'the uneven ground would be made level'!

What significance has all this for us today? We can have the wonderful assurance that Christ still comes to bring relief to those who have had a 'rough road' to tread. A good many years ago, an American lawyer had a devastating succession of losses. In 1871, his son died and 'the road became even rougher' when a fire destroyed his property. Two years later, his wife and four daughters sailed for Europe – his own departure was delayed by business affairs. The ship on which his family were travelling was in collision with another one and sank within twelve minutes. Over 200 people died, including the four daughters. It was indeed a 'rough road' for their father. But, he was a committed Christian. He sailed to bring his wife home and, near the place where his daughters died, he wrote a hymn – MP 757 – 'It is well, it is well with my soul'! For him, by God's grace, the very rough country had been made smooth.

Much more recently, a reminder of this comforting and consoling work of Christ was brought to my notice when I happened to visit the Methodist chapel in Glassonby. I was shown an oak memorial table, which was there in the chapel and I was told the story behind it. One day, a local couple were at home waiting for their twenty-year old daughter to arrive back from holiday. Her arrival seemed to have been delayed and then came the dreadful news of her death in a car crash. Her parents were obviously distraught, but they were Christians and were surrounded by Christian friends. Their grief wouldn't disappear, but they felt that Christ was 'smoothing the road' for them and it was in the Lord's house that they decided to place the oak table in memory of their daughter.

We are in Advent, and we are invited to wait, in faith and hope, for the One who, in these uncertain times, promises to 'level the uneven ground'. **Amen**

Hymn MP 204 – Hail to the Lord's anointed *(words vary on clip)*

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

Hail to the Lord's anointed; great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed, His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free,
To take away transgressions, and rule in equity.

He comes, with succour speedy, to those who suffer wrong:
To help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong:
To give them songs for sighing, their darkness turned to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying, were precious in His sight.

He shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth:
And love, joy, hope, like flowers, spring in His path to birth:
Before Him, on the mountains, shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness in fountains, from hill to valley flow.

Kings shall fall down before Him, and gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore Him, His praise all people sing;
To Him shall prayer unceasing and daily vows ascend;
His kingdom still increasing, a kingdom without end.

O'er every foe victorious, He on His throne shall rest;
From age to age more glorious, all-blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever His changeless name of Love.

Prayers of Intercession:

Let us remember those known to us who need our prayers

Gracious God, we pray for any we know who are suffering illness, whether it is caused by the coronavirus or any other source of ill-health. We pray for those who are anxious at this time, fearing that the future will be difficult and uncertain; for those who feel lonely or neglected; and for any who have been saddened by the loss of a loved one

And we pray for all those who are striving to offer help, healing or hope to those in need, especially those who put their own safety at risk in the service of other

We pray for this troubled world where so many are suffering. Be with the leaders of the nations, that they may set aside any thoughts of self-interest or prejudice and seek only to uphold human rights and justice for their people. Bless we pray the peacemakers and also those who are doing all they can to overcome this pandemic

We pray for the Christian Church, that in these troubled times, the good news of Christ may still be proclaimed and touch many hearts and minds. May the Church show that it cares, by the practical help it extends to those who are suffering. Strengthen, we pray, our Church leaders as they guide us through this difficult time. May the ministers and members of the Methodist Church here be blessed as they continue to work for Your kingdom

And we pray for ourselves, as we face the days ahead. There may be problems and hardships, but help us to trust Your promise that You will not leave us, and that by Your will and in Your time 'the rough places will be made plain'.

We ask these prayers in Jesus' Name. **Amen**

Lord's Prayer

Hymn MP 757 – When peace like a

river <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKPvBV4xqVw>

When peace, like a river, attends all my way, when sorrows like sea-billows roll,
Whatever my lot, You have taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul.'

'It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul.'

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come; let this blessed assurance control:
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate and has shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin – O the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to His cross and I bear it no more; praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live! If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life, You will whisper Your peace to my soul.

But, Lord, it's for You – for your coming we wait; the sky, not the grave, is our goal;
The trump of the angel! O voice of the Lord: blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!

The Blessing

Now may the peace and blessing of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest and remain with us this day and always. **Amen.**