

HOW Mission Community & KSAT Worship Service for Advent Sunday – 29th November 2020

THEME: A People Hoping

We thank Rev Phil Rigby for this week's service for Advent Sunday

Welcome & Call to Worship:

The night is far spent; the day is at hand. New life dawns, so we can live in hope.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the Christian season when we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ into the world, and the promise that in the end His purpose and will, will triumph. After the pressures and hurts of 2020, we look forward to a new beginning.

A Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, as we come at the beginning of the Advent season to listen, to watch, to wait and to pray, we ask that You will open our eyes, ears and minds, to breathe Your loving and creative spirit into our hearts. Teach us to live in hope, to rejoice in the signs of Your kingdom, and lead us on, aware that You are with us every step of the way. **Amen**

Hymn MP 210: 'Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes.' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeNE_xVbt80

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long;
Let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song.

He comes, the prisoners to release, in Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before Him burst, the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of peace, Thy welcome shall proclaim,
And Heaven's eternal arches ring with Thy beloved Name.

Prayer of Worship & Penitence:

God, we praise You for the hope we have through faith;
for the marvellous promise that challenges our fearfulness;
and the glorious light that shines through our darkness,
keeping our faith and hope alive through all that challenges us, and seeks to drag us down.
We thank You for the assurance that Your love is ever-present for us,
even when we find it hard to find You or see the signs of Your presence.

We know that we often make it hard for ourselves.

Too often we are selfish and indifferent, too comfortable and too careless.

Deliver us from evil, we pray: from our own self-interest which is blind to the needs and hopes of others, and which accepts too easily the injustice and cruelty of the world.

Remind us again of the hope of this season,

and open our hearts to receive Your presence and Your promise.

So help us to reflect Your goodness and mercy, that we may inspire hope in others,
and bring You praise, now and always, **Amen**.

May God, who is both power and love, forgive us and free us from our sins,
heal and strengthen us by his Spirit, and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord, **Amen**.

Bible Readings:

Isaiah 64.1-9 Longing for God's coming

Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before You! As 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! For when You did awesome things that we did not expect, You came down, and the mountains trembled before You. Since 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. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember Your ways.

But when we continued to sin against them, You were angry. How then can we be saved?

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away! No one calls on Your name or strives to lay hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us and have given us over to our sins. Yet You, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all Your people.

Mark 13.24-37 Keep awake!

But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And He will send His angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away.

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'

HYMN MP 62: 'Born in the night, Mary's

child' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwiZJqiB4KA>

Born in the night, Mary's Child, a long way from your home;

Coming in need, Mary's Child, born in a borrowed room.

Clear shining light, Mary's Child, Your face lights up our way;

Light of the world, Mary's Child, dawn on our darkened day.

Truth of our life, Mary's Child, You tell us God is good;

Prove it is true, Mary's Child, go to Your cross of wood.

Hope of the world, Mary's Child, You're coming soon to reign;

King of the earth, Mary's Child, walk in our streets again.

Sermon: 'Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come.' (Mark 13.33)

The Jehovah's Witness on the doorstep was very convinced and very insistent. The end of the world would be soon. The Bible's predictions were surely coming true. Weren't there nations rising against nations, earthquakes, famines and pestilence? Weren't Christians being tested and persecuted? Aren't there false prophets and teachers, leading people astray? There was urgency in her voice, and a determination to bring me in, among the number of the elect, who'd be saved at the coming Day of Judgment.

Then there was the man carrying the sandwich board in the town centre. His sign said: 'Prepare to meet thy God!' He wanted me to repent now, to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and be saved before it was too late.

That feeling of urgency and crisis is echoed in these two advent readings offered to us today. There's intense emotion in them. We can feel the hurt and depression of the prophet, when the nation has been overcome by its enemies and God's temple has been burned down. He says: 'O that You would tear the heavens and come down.' God seems to be utterly absent and to have left His people to their fate.

And in the gospel reading, we see Jesus, standing in a later Temple, prophesying its destruction yet again, the Son of Man coming with the clouds & sending His angels to gather up the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The Jehovah's Witness and the sandwich board man both seem to take on some of these powerful ideas and emotions - about the Elect, the faithful remnant, a small minority up against the odds. During this last year, when we have been isolated by social distancing and threatened by Covid, it's not at all hard to share much of that feeling, and to wonder when it's all going to end. And the church, along with many other institutions and businesses, has been hit particularly hard when we have not been able to come together in person to worship - and we have to face the fact that online is a poor substitute.

Yet we remain, and will always remain, a community of faith and a people of hope. And those God-given gifts are particularly important in Advent. So what are the marks of such a people?

First of all, REALISM - being willing and able to face and accept the truth about the world, and where we are. It may well not be comfortable, or what we want to hear. Yet we can only build hope on an honest acceptance of the way things are. Anything else is cloud cuckoo land.

Remember the early part of Isaiah. The prophet had been in despair. The good king, on which so much of his hope for the future had rested, was dead. The immediate prospect for God's people was conquest and defeat. So Isaiah wanders into the Temple, clutching at whatever faith he had left - a very human and understandable response - and there he sees God, high and lifted up, and discovers his calling to be a prophet. And hope is kindled again.

Jesus must also have felt the same sense of despair. He'd known the rapture of an excited crowd welcoming him on his royal progress into the city of God. Now their joyful shouts turn into a threat to kill: 'Crucify him' was the cry he heard - much more dangerous than the depression surrounding Isaiah. Yet it was the same God who sustained and called Isaiah in the temple and who sustained Jesus through all the bitterness of his passion.

The hard truth is that goodness is NOT always triumphant. Maybe at times we want to shout out in defiance that God is in charge. But there seems too little sign of that in the world we live in. All God seems to give us, most of the time, is the silence that led even Jesus to cry out: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' Yet somewhere, thank God, a spark of hope remained, and even in the bitter end He was able to pray: 'Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.'

The second quality of a community of faith and hope is DISCERNMENT - learning to recognise the presence and purpose of God. Where IS God to be found? And when we do ask that question, we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking we must always look for Him in important places and big events. When Jesus was born, the Wise Men came looking for Him. They went to the palace, in Jerusalem - and there they lost sight of the star. Jesus wasn't in the palace nursery, but in the stable of an inn in a remote country town.

God isn't always with the big battalions. He IS where the oppressed and weak struggle to make a living. And being part of a big, spectacular church, with dramatic worship and big events is no more a guarantee of God's presence than when 2 or 3 are gathered in His name. That's where He has PROMISED to be. Very often, God is to be seen and known where nothing very dramatic seems to be happening - perhaps just in the silence as we battle with electronic technology to share in THIS act of worship, one by one. And He IS here, in the stillness and smallness of our time now, separated, yet together.

The third quality of this faithful, hopeful people of God is OBEDIENCE. That's what gives us the courage to work and witness in the real world, where there is so much pain and disappointment, and to keep on at it - because we know that what we can see and do now isn't the whole story.

Look again at Isaiah. He paints a depressing picture. God seems to be absent, and no longer interested in His people. And they went astray because they couldn't find Him, or see what He was up to in their world. 'There is no-one left who calls on Your name', he laments. But he bravely goes on: 'Yet you, O Lord. ARE our Father. We are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.' And so it is that God's people are called to obedience - to be the clay which God works, and transforms, and used in His work in the world.

Then there was another temple, beside that of Isaiah and where Jesus spoke those words we read. That time He spoke of the temple of His body. 'Destroy this temple', Jesus said, 'and in three days I will raise it again.' And we are those who believe that in Him, and in those words and what they represent, there is still hope and promise for the world.

So we continue today on our Advent journey of faith. We hear again the same message. It's a call to REALISM - to recognise the world we live in, and admit its disappointments and hurts and horrors. It's a call to DISCERNMENT. We point to a God, whose grace and goodness we declare, who is very often a God of small things, who lets us discover Him in the day-to-day business of living our lives, and offering our simple worship. And so it's a call to OBEDIENCE - to go on working and witnessing, to help make this place where we are - where God has brought us to be - a place of good news, of justice and truth and fairness, to the glory of God, and a sign of the coming of his kingdom.

Prayers for others and ourselves:

Living God, coming in power and love to establish Your justice and peace; keep coming into our lives to make us just and peaceable. Keep coming into the life of the Church to give it power to proclaim Your purpose for the world, and love to put that purpose to effect in people's lives.

Keep coming to the world in the men and women chosen to serve You, so that justice and peace may become the pattern of every nation's life.

We pray for all who devote their own lives to other people's needs - doctors and nurses and other health workers, social workers, care home workers, prison visitors, food bank volunteers, and all who in any way share Your concern for human beings in need and distress.

We give thanks for them, and pray that they may always be encouraged, rising above tiredness and hardship, discouragement and disillusion, keeping their eyes fixed always on the hope and love that first prompted them to serve.

Father God, keep coming in the world in such folk as these, so that Your power and love may be effective in every place of suffering and despair.

Let Your justice be done wherever people are hungry or homeless, where they are afraid or oppressed, or ill, or in prison: let Your justice be done and Your peace brought to hearts and minds that have no peace.

Renew in us all, we pray, the quality of mercy; instil in us compassion for the poor, a yearning to find the lost, and creative love for all our fellow men and women. Be with us in our anxiety and sorrow, in our delight and gladness.

Continue to make Your demands on us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, enable us to meet them. Come, Lord Jesus, in the power of the love that took You to the cross, and lead us through these hard times. And come in Your risen splendour to make this world Your place again: the end of all sorrow and the fulfilment of Your eternal peace;

For we ask it in Your Name, **Amen.**

Now we sum up all our prayers, those in words and those unspoken in our hearts, in the words of the **Lord's Prayer**: 'Our Father....'

HYMN MP 102: Come, thou long-expected

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

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.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, Light of the world,
born in David's city of Bethlehem,
born like him to be a King,
be born into my heart, and all our hearts, this Christmas.
Be King of our lives today,
and in Your good time, Lord of the world for ever.

Amen.