



**The Benefice of
Harden, Wilsden, Cullingworth, Denholme
Sunday 15 December 2024
The Third Sunday of Advent**



Preparation

Praise God! For the Lord our God the almighty reigns!
Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory.
God in Christ has revealed his glory.
Come let us worship!

Silence is kept

The Lord is here
His Spirit is with us.

People of God: return!
You are called to be God's own.
From the mountains announce the good news.
God comes in justice and peace,
to all who follow his ways.
You are God's children.
**Lord, make us one in the peace of Christ
today and for ever. Amen.**

The Lighting of the Third Advent Candle



Response

Lift up your heads, O gates:
Be lifted up, you everlasting doors:
And the King of glory shall come in.
"Who is the King of glory?"
**"The Lord, strong and mighty,
The Lord who is mighty in battle."**
Lift up your heads, O gates:
Be lifted up, you everlasting doors:
And the King of glory shall come in.
"Who is this King of glory?"
**"The Lord of hosts,
He is the King of glory."**

Christ the light of the world has come to dispel
the darkness of our hearts.
In his light, let us examine ourselves and confess our sins.

Confession

Come, let us return to the Lord and say:
Lord our God
In our sin we have avoided your call.
Our love for you is like the morning cloud,
Like the dew that goes away early.
Have mercy on us;
Deliver us from judgement;
Bind up our wounds and revive us;
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The almighty and merciful Lord
Grant us pardon and forgiveness of all our sins,
Time for amendment of life,
And the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The Collect

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. **Amen.**

The Readings

The First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
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.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
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
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
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.
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.

Thanks be to God for the gift of His word

The Second Reading: Luke 3:7-18

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? 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. 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.'
And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more

than the amount prescribed for you.’ 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.’

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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. 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.’

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

Thanks be to God for the gift of His Word.

Reflection by Liz

A church, in another part of the country, was starting to look rather sorry and in need of some care and attention. So, the PCC decided that to give it a facelift, they would have the exterior decorated. Naturally, the work had to be put out to tender and a number of quotes were submitted. One of the quotes was much cheaper than all of the others, but still asserted that the same amount of work would be carried out. So, after some deliberation, the PCC agreed to go with that quote. They were pleased that, in addition to the cheaper quote, the decorator would be able to begin the work in the near future. A few fine days were forecast, so the work was begun. But, unknown to the PCC, the decorator was diluting the paint to quite an excessive degree. Within a few days, the work was completed and the church looked bright and fresh again. But sadly, a few days later, the weather became stormy and as the rain battered against the walls, the paint was just about washed off. Naturally, the PCC were extremely disappointed and insisted that the decorator was to rectify the problem and to make good the decoration by repeating the work to a proper standard – or as they said to him in the letter which he received, he had to “Repaint – and thin no more!”

I admit, not a true story – but it is the time of year for painful cracker jokes! It is a story that often comes to mind as I think of John the Baptist and his call to those around him to repent and turn their lives back to following God.

This week, we are again thinking of John the Baptist in our reading from Luke's gospel and having encouraged people to prepare the way for the coming of Christ, he is now giving them more practical advice about how they can prepare their own lives for the coming of our Lord. As we read, he doesn't mince his words and we can tell how strongly he feels, as he calls the people who were flocking to see him, a brood of vipers! Hardly a cosy, welcoming picture – but more one which conjures up an image of a mass of snakes writhing over and competing against each other. Very evocative language – and we can only imagine what sort of behaviour had driven him to describe those around him in such terms. Maybe he felt that people were not regarding others and their needs as they swarmed about with their minds set on their own needs. Or maybe, he felt that they were causing distress or anxiety in others as they competed to get what they wanted. Maybe, he felt that their words or actions were poisonous and a threat to those around them. Whatever he was attributing to them, it is evident that he was not impressed by what they were doing or how they were acting towards each other. And he could easily see that their actions were totally contrary to the teaching of Christ and to the way in which God would want them to behave. So, he challenges them!

That challenge is not a great physical feat, but rather he challenges them to really consider the gift which God is giving, the gift which is embodied in Jesus and which is willingly given to all who turn back to living in God's way, the gift which leads to eternal life. He challenges them to repent – to turn their lives around from the self-centred, self-focused way in which they have been living, to seek God's forgiveness and turn back again to living in a way which would be pleasing to God. Rather like the decorator in the story is being encouraged to put things right with his work, John was encouraging the people to put right their relationship with God – and also with those around them.

He was encouraging them to really think about their relationship with God. Did they just pay lip-service to God – or were they prepared to give their time to being in God's presence, to reading his Holy word or to being open to God in prayer? And as their relationship with God deepened, how was that reflected in the way that they interacted with those around them? Were they honest and fair in their dealings with others? Did they consider the needs of the poor and those who were most vulnerable? Did they selfishly hoard all of their own resources or were they generous with them, particularly with regard to those who were most in need?

In this season of Advent, we can spend so much time getting a whole variety of things ready – cards, presents, our homes, trees and decorations, food – but I wonder whether we consider John’s challenge for us. Do we spend any time preparing ourselves? No, not the manicure or visit to the hairdresser’s, but preparing ourselves to celebrate our Saviour’s birth. Preparing to recognise his coming into the world. Spending time prayerfully considering our own relationship with our loving Lord and how that, in turn, affects the way we care for those around us. Many of the people who listened to John took this challenge seriously and were baptised. A blessing for them as they felt that their relationship had been renewed. And how about us? Do we take the challenge seriously enough to fit some prayerful reflection into our busy schedules? Do we make time for God amidst the busyness?

John encouraged the people who came to him, to repent and turn back to God and his ways. Within all of the busyness of this season of Advent, may we take time to focus on the One whose coming we will celebrate - and may we be blessed by knowing that we are held in the love of God as we welcome the gift of his Son once more.

Affirmation of Faith

Holy, holy, holy

Is the Lord God almighty,

Who was, and is, and is to come

We believe in God the Father

Who created all things:

For by his will they were created

And have their being

We believe in God the Son,

Who was slain:

For with his blood,

He purchased us for God,

From every tribe and language

From every people and nation.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit:

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come!”

Even so come, Lord Jesus! Amen

Prayers of Intercession with Debbie Child

Loving God, accept our glad thanksgiving for the hope you have given us in Christ, for the meaning and purpose, joy and fulfilment you bring through him; hear now our prayers for your Church and for your world.

We pray for the Church of England, that its leaders may seek to love and support all those who have been abused and feel ignored, who are struggling with their situation and the response of the Church. We pray our Diocese, for Nick our Bishop and for all those who lead with him; for Richard, Liz, Alison and Anna, and for all who play their part in ministry in this benefice. We pray for our congregations and the people of our villages, that they may know the joy of your love this Christmas. We remember all those who are worried about finances and especially those for whom Christmas simply brings more stress. We give thanks for everyone offering a warm space, or food or beds over the worst of the winter; for the work of the Salvation Army, Crisis, Inn Churches and all who are working selflessly to support those in need.. We remember the Church across the world, especially our brothers and sisters in Sudan, praying for those who are not allowed to worship openly and those who are refugees far from home. We pray that your love may restore and refresh them, even in their darkest moments.

Father we pray for your world and so many difficult situations. Bless all those in authority with a sense of humility, of integrity and respect for others. We pray for all places where conflicts seem far from being resolved, thinking especially of Gaza, Ukraine and Israel, Syria and Lebanon. Be present Lord in all places of war and violence and fill us with compassion to pray without ceasing for those in desperate circumstances. In the uncertainties of this ever changing world, may your love break through the shadows.

We pray for those who feel lonely as Christmas approaches, especially those who are bereaved. We remember those who are isolated, those who are suffering through illness, physical or mental pain and those worrying about loved ones. We pray now for all those on our hearts in need of our prayers, Father may your love envelop those whose pain is overwhelming and for whom no words can bring comfort. May the light of Christ find its way into their darkness.

Father we thank you for our friends and families, for all the love and joy in our lives, and we rejoice at the coming of your kingdom as Jesus makes all things new. May the message of joy which advent brings, burst afresh into our world, bringing courage and healing; may we take time to reflect on our lives, and be open and responsive to your bidding.

Merciful Father accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

The 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.**

Closing Prayers

We give thanks, O Lord, for your 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. **Amen.**

Blessing

May God himself, the God of peace make you perfect and holy,
and keep you safe and blameless, in spirit soul and body
for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Sending Out

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord:
in the name of Christ. Amen.