

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church - 13 December 2020

Sit comfortably in a quiet place, turning your mind and spirit towards God. This is the third Sunday in Advent and you may want to begin by lighting three candles.

Prayer Lord, may this time together prove to be a time in which your blessing will be with us.

Hymn: StF 165 (first 3 verses) **Advent candles tell their story
as we watch and pray**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5sSARpY2-o>

Let us say together

**Hymn: StF 798 Great and wonderful are your deeds,
Lord God the Almighty.**

A prayer of confession

If we have fallen into despair,

Lord, forgive us.

If we have failed to hope in you,

Lord, forgive us.

If we have been fearful of death,

Lord, forgive us.

If we have forgotten the victory of Christ,

Lord, forgive us.

Silence

May the living God

Raise us from despair,

Give us victory over sin

And set us free in Christ. **Amen.**

Let us join together in the Lord's prayer. Our Father

Readings

Our theme this morning is John the Baptist.

Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11

John 1. 6-8, 19-28

Address

Today we are thinking of John the Baptist. His society, like ours, was in a time of change.

The Romans had occupied the country in 66BC. The Roman Empire was growing rapidly, absorbing a lot of countries. The Romans brought new technologies, they built new roads and new towns. But they were resented as foreign invaders, there to use the country for their own purposes. Also they imposed taxes.

As we all know, just before Jesus was born, "Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world". This was so that the emperor could know how many subjects he had and could decide how much tax everyone should pay.

So the Jews were thinking wistfully of the days when they were fully independent and had their own king.

The prophets Malachi and Isaiah in the Old Testament had testified to God's promise to bring a saviour, a Messiah, to free the people. But what sort of Messiah would he be?

The prophets had also said that the Messiah would be preceded by a messenger. So when the strange figure of John the Baptist appeared there was great excitement. Could he be the messenger showing that the Messiah was near?

John's message was as uncompromising as his lifestyle. He lived in the desert, he wore clothing made of camel's hair and he ate locusts and wild honey. He called upon his fellow Israelites to repent – to repent of their sins.

In our reading we heard that the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to check John out. They wanted to pin him down. Was he the Christ, the promised Messiah?

("Messiah" is the Jewish word for the redeemer who was promised. "Christ" was the Greek word. So they both mean the same thing).

"No" replied John "I am not the Christ. ...He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

(When Jews entered a house, they took off their sandals. Then they washed their feet which would have been dirty due to the unmade roads. In richer households, a slave knelt and did this for visiting guests. It was considered a very lowly task.)

Luke gives us more details of what John was saying to the crowds. John said to them:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

When the crowds asked him what they should do, he told them to build a fairer and more just society. For example, the tax collectors were told not to collect more than they were owed. A man with two tunics should share with a man who has none, and one who has food should do the same.

John’s message was radical. We can understand how radical his message of social justice was: that message is just as radical today.

What he did, was just as radical. The Jews thought that baptism wasn’t needed for someone born Jewish. They thought that it was enough just to show that you were a descendant of Abraham. Only people converting to Judaism needed to be baptised.

There are no references to baptism in the Old Testament. The Old Testament talks about “Israelites” and “the people of God” meaning those descended from Abraham. But Jewish thought had moved on during the centuries that passed between the Old Testament being written, and the time of Jesus and John the Baptist. The Jews had realised that the messages that they had from God were not only for themselves. They looked again at the prophecies in their scriptures that said that all the nations would come to Jerusalem. We read one of these prophecies in our Isaiah reading. They realised that God was asking them to spread the news of God’s love to other people. So by this time the Jews were seeking to convert other people to Judaism.

When people were converted to Judaism they had to repent – ie turn from their former life. They were then baptised as a sign of their new life.

But John the Baptist was telling Jews that they needed to repent, and be baptised for the forgiveness of their sins. Those who were baptised were baptised publicly in the River Jordan, so everyone could see that they accepted that they had done wrong, and needed forgiveness from God. No wonder the Pharisees were critical.

What messages can we draw from this story for ourselves? In the story we see John living in a time of change. He was looking again at God’s eternal message of salvation and making it more relevant to people of his day. We can see how much of his preaching prefigured what Jesus would say and do. John was preparing the way for the true Messiah – Jesus. Not a warrior but a saviour.

We are living in a time of change. How many changes has Covid brought to our society this year! How many changes has it brought to our church! Our church has reopened and we are able to worship together again in our building. Sadly our coffee morning and all other meetings in our building are still suspended.

Let us reflect on what we have been able to achieve during this difficult time.

- We have begun to use modern media such as zoom to enable us to meet one another.
- We are using our audio visual system as never before to enhance our worship of God together.
- We are sending out services by email so that all can worship together, whether at home or in our building.
- As always, the telephone has been invaluable in keeping us in touch with one another.

So with God's help we have done our best to continue to worship Him and to keep together our fellowship with one another.

We pray that in 2021 we may be able to meet together in the way that we used to do. Also we pray that what we have learnt in lockdown may continue to enhance our church.

The message of love and hope that we share in church is needed as much as ever. We pray that this Christmas we may be able to share it with many others. It is the true meaning of Christmas.

**Hymn: StF 197 Cradled in a manger, meanly
laid the Son of Man his head;**

Prayers of Intercession

Most merciful God, in a world shaken by the coronavirus Covid 19,
We look to you in hope and trust,
Acknowledging that there is much in life
Beyond our present understanding.
Help us to cope with the isolation and with all the restrictions placed upon us;
Bless all those working to find vaccines and to administer them.
We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Let us pray for the Church of God throughout the world,
whether meeting in homes or in church buildings.
Help us to remember that the Church of God is built within our hearts
And stands firm there.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us pray for those in authority.
Help them to make wise decisions at this difficult time.
Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us pray for the powerless,
For those who feel overwhelmed by the present crisis
And for all in difficult personal circumstances.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us pray for our ministers and our pastors,
and for our families and friends.
We name them and ask for your blessing on them.

Pause

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Eternal God,
Through the self-offering of your Son
You have filled our lives with your presence.
Bless us this Advent as you begin to prepare
for your coming into our world.
We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

**Hymn: StF 178 Long ago, prophets knew
 Christ would come, born a Jew**

Closing Prayer

May the love of God enfold you;
may the mercy of God absolve you;
may the strength of God support you;
may the peace of God console you;
and may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with you, now, and evermore. **Amen.**