

Morning Worship for Sunday 13 December

From the United Reformed Church at Morpeth,
Widdrington and Gt Bavington.

Opening Words

Good morning and welcome here to worship on this 3rd Sunday of Advent. We are very pleased that you have been able to join with us in worship today, whether listening and watching online, or using the prepared service sheets to join with us at home. It is good to be together and to worship in this way.

With the blessed virgin Mary we rejoice in the God who comes to us. We are in the power and the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us worship together.

Hymn: 740 Tell out my soul

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of his word;
In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
His mercy sure, from age to age the same;
His holy name, the Lord, the mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and forever more!

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Prayer of Approach

Lord Jesus,
You came
And come
To all

You came
And come
Especially to the poorest
And the most vulnerable

Come to us here, Lord Jesus
To help and to heal the poverty of our souls
To refresh and inspire us

Even through the weakness of our faith...

Come - to love and to hold us -
To give us the courage
Always to point to You

(silence)

in the stopping
in the pausing
in the quiet
we cannot avoid what we are not

Our faults
our lack of faith
our lack of vision
and of action
our lack of trust in You - all bubble to the surface

You, Father God,
see what we are
and still stand by us
offering us hope
and above all, forgiveness

Help us here
Help us now - to recognise that it was with us in mind
that You sent the baby Jesus
It was with us in mind that He grew to live and die and
to rise again
Because that's what You think we are worth

May Your love set us free this day and always -
these things we ask in the name of that Son,
whose praise we sing
and who taught us when we pray to say together:

Lords Prayer

Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Reading: Luke 1:46-58

Light the First, Second, and Third Candle

Let us Pray - Loving God, we thank you for the light that you have sent and are sending into the world, the light that even now lights our path. Come among us and fill us with the joy that you want all your children to have. Make us ones who by word and action bring praise and glory to you and your chosen one, the Christ who redeems all people. Amen.

Hymn: The Angel Gabriel

The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
"All Hail!", said he, "thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady."

Gloria!

“For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy Son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold;
most highly favoured lady.”

Gloria

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
“To me be as it pleaseth God” she said,
“my soul shall laud and magnify his holy name”
most highly favoured lady.”

Gloria

Of her, Immanuel the Christ was born
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say
“Most highly favoured lady.”

Gloria

Basque Carol para S Baring-Gould (1834 – 1924)

Sermon

Do you ever get tired of promises being made by people that just don't happen?

Whenever an election is coming up and politicians are full of promises of things they will do to help those who need it, and even when they get into power it never really happens.

Or the customer service departments that you have spent 30 minutes on the phone trying to get through to, and the person on the other end can't help but will get someone to call you who can.

Or the marketing companies that promise their products will be easy to use, fuss free, reliable, but inevitably end up being more bother than their worth.

We seem to live in an age where its very easy to make promises, and very seldom that we see those promises becoming a reality. Promises are indeed cheap, but delivery is expensive.

In our readings today we hear of God's promises to the people, and those promises being fulfilled. And though those promises span a great span of time, the promises are the same, and there is a confidence in the knowledge that these promises have come true. When Isaiah writes these words that we read from the OLD TESTAMENT today, the people of Israel have been released from captivity in Exile in Babylon. The Psalmists write of the songs and the joy that filled the roads on their return to their beloved homeland. But the return never quite lived up to their expectation. Years later, when this first rush of joy is over, we find the people of Israel struggling to rebuild their cities and their lives. The rebuilt Temple, the centerpiece of their worship, is not as magnificent as the one built by

Solomon, but there are even greater problems facing them.

I suppose it's a bit like our return to the church buildings to worship together, and in our celebrations leading up to Christmas. We have been allowed to return to the church building to worship, we are allowed to return to the shops to do our Christmas shopping, other places in our community start to see people returning. But somehow, all this just does not live up to our expectations. Its not the same. Its not how we want things to be. It's a return, but its not a restoration. There is still a long way to go before our churches and communities can be restored to their full potential. The reality just did not live up to the promise that was made.

Amidst this devastation and destruction, Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel with these beautiful words. The people of Israel find themselves in a state of frustration that what God had promised he failed to deliver. God should have restored them, their land and their lives. But he hasn't. They continue to live with destruction all around. And Isaiah offers them words that proclaim the coming 'liberation' of the community from its frustrations.

This is the year of the lords favour, the day of God's vengeance. A time when God will show his favour to those in distress.

And there is this wonderful imagery of the garland or the head-dress. In a time of mourning, the head-dress would be removed, and ashes sprinkled on the head as a sign of mourning. Isaiah says God will give them a head-dress instead of ashes, there is no longer any need to mourn.

The oil of anointing will be the oil of gladness, and not the oil of mourning.

They will be oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord which will display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations.

And at the end of the passage these images are picked up again, and it is worth just reading those words again:

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord
My soul shall be joyful 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 headdress,
And a bride adorns herself with jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots
And as a garden causes what is sown to spring up,
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise

To spring up before all the nations.”

These small shoots start to spring up, that later will grow into those mighty oaks of righteousness.

These words from Isaiah are resonant with the words we read today from the mouth of Mary that were uttered some 500 years later, when the people of Israel were still waiting for God to deliver on his promises. Living under Roman occupation, though the people of Israel were in their own land, though their Temple had been restored in grandeur, they still felt like captives looking for release.

At the news that Mary was to have a baby, the words sing out in praise of what God has done to save his people. Mary at the time when God's Messiah is coming into the world, sings of restoration, and the promise of God that has been fulfilled.

“He has brought down the rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
he has filled the hungry with good things
but he has sent the rich away empty.”

And to confirm this, when a grown up Jesus stands up in the synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah, it is the passage today that he reads.

‘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”

And then he sits down saying “Today, in your hearing, these words have been fulfilled”

We reflect today, on the words of Mary and Isaiah, and speak with joy at the promises of God being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. But we have to ask ourselves, as we have done during our Advent course this week – if this has been fulfilled then why do we still see such injustice in the world, why is there still so much that needs sorting out.

The current COVID 19 pandemic has desolated many peoples way of life and livelihoods, and though some promising signs have come forward, we still live amid the fear of this virus. The 1 Jan deadline for Brexit is looming with fears of food and medicine shortages with the chaos that is developing at customs sites. And we continue to live amid the realisation of the damage that we as a human race have inflicted upon the natural world, and our unwillingness to take notice and do what is needed to help our environment to recover.

It is not hard for us to see why Isaiah's words speak so strongly to us today.

For we are living among what seems to be a ruined world, and trapped by our frustrations that God is not bringing about the restoration that he has promised us.

But Isaiah, and Hannah and Mary uttered these words in the knowledge that God's restoration had begun. God was not willing to permit the continuation of a situation in which his people are deprived of justice and are suffering. They speak the words like Jesus saying ‘Today the word has been fulfilled.”

I don't know how many of you have seen the Disney film Wall-E? It is a film that is set after the earth has become inhabitable, through humanity's lack of care. It is a land of destruction and devastation – a rubbish tip – a barren desert. And the remaining human race has evacuated the planet with the intention that they will live in space for a period of five years – while they leave robots like Wall E on earth to clean the planet up for them. However, it takes much longer than they thought before they are able to return home.

But in the film, it is just one green shoot, that Wall E finds among the devastation and rubbish – that becomes the turning point of the story and signals that it is time to return home. Wall E's fate and indeed the entire human race is transformed by the discovery of this single green shoot.

Our political commentators love to use this image – when they talk about the green shoots of recovery. The situation on planet earth might not be as bad as the situation in this Disney film. But many would paint a picture of the world that is not far off. Today is a Sunday when we focus on the joy of knowing that God has delivered on his promises. So as we reflect on the promises that we hear today in Isaiah and from the mouth of Mary:

May we look with Joy this Christmas at what God has done to bring about our restoration. Amid the desolation and destruction, may we discover those green shoots that herald the coming true of the promises of God. May we celebrate with joy the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, who comes bringing Good News to all, and Peace on Earth.

Prayers of Intercession

Creator God,
we thank You, for Your Son – the Light of the world.
We thank You too, for those in every generation
who have faithfully pointed to Him

and who have spread His light in even the darkest times.

Lord Jesus,
May we find the courage to point to the hope
and comfort and peace You offer,
especially in times of difficulty and sorrow.

May we witness to Your love and Your goodness
Your presence and Your compassion.

And thank You –
thank You for the family of Your people meeting
throughout the world this day –
all of us gathered only too aware of our faults
and our limitations,
but knowing too, that You, Lord Jesus,
can take the tiniest spark and fan it into a raging fire.

Give us the courage and the desire
to seek to serve You as best we can –
and in that service may we reflect the life You lived.

We offer You our prayers for those who struggle with
this season.

We think of the bereaved,
of those who cannot afford to celebrate as they might
want,
of those with no one to share a table,
and of those for whom childlessness is accentuated at
this time.
Lord God,
You understand
and share
tears and silences,
disappointments and regrets.
Bring Your comfort,
fill with Your strength,
and grant all Your peace...

We pray too, for places in the world
where conflict and violence are rife...
For places where nature has been harsh –
and we have been thoughtless in caring for Your
creation:
Give us greater concern for one another
and an even greater willingness to do whatever we
can for each other
and for the world itself.
So may we work with You, Lord God,
to make this world, the world You intended it to be –
a world where people care and love and laugh
a world where justice reigns and peace is evident
and where all know they belong.

These prayers, along with our gratitude for the birth
of Your Son, we offer You in His name and for His
sake. Amen

Hymn: Thou didst leave thy throne.

Thou didst leave thy throne
and thy kingly crown
when thou camest on earth for me,
but in Bethlehem's home
there was found no room
for thy holy nativity:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

Heaven's arches rang
when the angels sang
to proclaim thy royal degree;
but of lowly birth
cam'st thou, Lord on earth,
and in great humility:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

The foxes found rest
and the bird its nest,
in the shade of the forest tree;
but thy rest was found
on the stony ground
in the deserts of Galilee:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
There is room in my heart for thee.

Thou camest, O Lord,
with the living word
that should set thy people free;
but, with mocking scorn,
and with crown of thorn,
they bore thee to Calvary:
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus!
Thy cross is my only plea.

When heaven's arches ring,
and her glad choirs sing,
at thy coming to victory,
let thy voice call me home,
saying, "yet there is room,
there is room at my side for thee!"
And my heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus,
when thou comest and callest for me.

Emily E. S. Elliott (1836-97)

Blessing