

# Morning Worship for Sunday 29 November

from the United Reformed Church in Morpeth  
Widdrington and Gt Bavington.

## Opening Words

Welcome to our service for the first Sunday in Advent, and we take the opportunity today, to join with many churches and with Christian Aid as they launch their Christmas appeal. Christian Aid is encouraging churches to worship together today, and many of the elements of this service will be shared in other churches around the country and further afield.

So let us join, with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world:

Let us pray:

Even if we cannot gather in person

**Emmanuel, God with us**

Even if some Christmas traditions have had to go

**Emmanuel, God with us**

Even if we might not get to hug family and friends

**Emmanuel, God with us**

Even if we cannot sing carols beside each other

**Emmanuel, God with us**

Even if Christmas cheer is harder this year,

**Emmanuel, God with us**

## Hymn: 'Hark the glad sound the Saviour comes'

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 from ignorance and doubt  
to clear the inward sight;  
and on the darkness of the blind  
to pour celestial light.

He comes the broken heart to bind,  
the wounded soul to cure,  
and with the treasures of His grace,  
to enrich the humbled poor.

Our glad Hosannas, Prince of Peace,  
Thy welcome shall proclaim;  
and heaven's eternal arches ring,  
with Thy beloved Name.

*Philip Doddridge*

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Although Advent is traditionally a time of waiting, the busyness of modern life and preparing for all the trappings of Christmas means that this doesn't usually feel like the case. But 2020 has been far from a usual year. For many people, there has been a lot of waiting:

waiting for news, waiting for jobs, waiting to hold loved

ones close, waiting and watching for the new normal.

Such waiting has been hard.

Christian Aid's Christmas Appeal highlights the story of

Mekonnen, who alongside his community in Ethiopia, is waiting and watching for the rains to come so he can

water his cattle. He, like millions of people around the world, is still waiting for climate justice.

## Light of the Advent Candle

Our first advent candle signifies the hope for all God's people, that runs through our readings leading up to Christmas.

We light this candle for all God's people  
struggling to be bearers of hope

In a troubled world.

God as we wait for your promise,

Give light, give hope.

**Reading: Isaiah 64: 1-9**

**Reading: Mark 13: 24-37**

## Hymn: God hold us, enfold us

God, hold us, enfold us, through desolate loss.

The sign of your love is your own empty cross.

The shock and the anger, the hopeless despair  
are echoes of Calvary. God, meet us there!

God, hold us, enfold us, through long empty days,  
where living is pointless, a meaningless maze.

We need you to listen to raging and tears,  
to anguish and doubt, to remorse and to fears.

God, hold us, enfold us, by friends who can share  
our sorrow and pain with compassionate care.

By their words, you speak out your loving concerns.  
They hold us for you, while the tide of grief turns.

God, hold us, enfold us, till weeping has passed;  
when flickering hope parts the shadows at last.

One step at a time you will help us to move  
to face new horizons, held safe in your love.

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## Sermon

I wonder how you prefer to get your weather forecast?

You might listen to the shipping forecast on Radio 4 (if you're up early enough or late enough to listen to it)  
You might like to watch Carol on BBC Breakfast news.  
You might catch the weekly forecast on Countryfile.  
You might have an app on your phone that tells you what the weather is doing.

Or you might log onto the computer and get all the latest information from the Met Office.

This is what Louise and I often refer to tell the weather. You can see that with this modern technology they can predict the weather hour by hour so that you can plan your day accordingly. We will often joke that the rain will stop by 3:00 or that the snow is due at about 6:30 – and more often than not we will still get caught out due to the difficulty of accurately predicting what is to happen.

The Met Office is investing in more and more technology to enable them to get better predictions, but at times it seems we might just as well go back to using some of the tried and tested means of predicting the weather. Have you heard of these ones:

Red sky at night, shepherd's delight. Red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning  
St Swithin's Day, if it does rain. Full forty days, it will remain  
When halo rings Moon or Sun, rain's approaching on the run  
When the wind is out of the East, tis never good for man nor beast  
Mackerel sky and mare's tails make tall ships carry low sails  
Rain before seven, fine by eleven

Whereas me, I have found no better way of forecasting the weather than my weather rock.

If the rock is wet, it's raining.  
If the rock is wobbling, then it's windy.  
If the rock casts a shadow, the sun is shining.  
If I can't see the rock, it is foggy.  
If the rock is white, it is snowing.  
If the rock is bouncing around, there is an earthquake.  
If the rock isn't there, there's been a tornado.

Of course it doesn't really help, because the rock doesn't predict the weather, it just tells me what is already happening. Like they say, "If you want to know what the weather is doing – just look out the window."

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In Matthews gospel, the Pharisees and Sadducees tested Jesus and he responded to them :

*"When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' 'And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?"*

And again in Marks gospel, in the passage we shared today, Jesus also uses the lessons of nature to point out that we are used to reading the signs of nature to understand the changing of the seasons, but we are not so good at reading the signs to understand what God is doing in the world.

We read this gospel lesson at the start of a new season in the churches calendar, the season of Advent.

A season of waiting, of penitence, of expectation for what is to come.

We know that in 25 days time, it will be Christmas day when we celebrate the birth of Christ. We know it will happen, and we can make our preparations knowing that we only have 24 days left to get everything ready.

For Mark it was a little less predictable. They didn't know when that time would be when Christ was going to come again into the world. Indeed, when the gospel was written, it was written in an atmosphere of expectation that it was going to happen sometime soon. There is an urgency about it. Hurry up. Prepare yourself. Because it's going to happen, but we don't know when.

In verse 30 it says "Truly, I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."

We in our Christian faith have perhaps lost some of that urgency of the gospel – we know Christmas is always on the 25<sup>th</sup> December – we live in an age when we don't expect to be caught out with freak snow falls – or the second coming of Christ – and that perhaps leads to a quiet complacency.

But in the gospel, there is a sense of urgency, a sense of imminence – that somethings going to happen – and its going to happen soon.

Nick Fawcett reminds us of our complacency and reminds us that to be alive is to, especially to be alive in Christ, is to be open to new and exciting and unexpected events in our lives. He writes "Life has a habit of catching us on the hop. Imagine how dull life

would be if we could know everything that was going to happen and had exhausted life's ability to offer new horizons and experiences."

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You know it's a little like waiting at a bus stop. I don't travel by bus very much, but when I was commuting and studying in Nottingham I would quite often catch a bus, or a train to take me backwards and forwards to college.

And I've been thinking about this passage in terms of waiting.

Because if I wait at a bus stop – I have a great sense of uncertainty. (Middle of nowhere) To me buses never seem to run to the timetable. Given the unpredictability of movement of traffic, buses can run early or late, and there is no means of communicating whether a service has been cancelled or not. So when I stand at a bus stop, I am never sure whether I have missed the bus, how long the next ones going to be, or indeed if one will ever turn up at all.

And even when a bus arrives, I am never sure whether it is the right one. So I find myself boarding the bus, and I always ask the driver are you going to... wherever it is that I am going.

If I'm waiting for a train – I am a little more comfortable. There can be delays, but the movement of traffic on the line is less a factor. If the train is early, it will wait. If the train is late, or cancelled, then there are announcements. (announcement)

But neither of these are infallible – and I have been left stranded on occasions – usually when the country has been caught out by unexpected snowfall.

So perhaps neither of these is perhaps a good example to use when we talk about advent and our hope in what is to come.

So let me give you a better example -  
A big feature of our family life has been the school run. For nearly 14 years, our weekdays have been broken up by the school run. One in the morning and one in the afternoon. Noah is hopefully getting to the stage, next year, when this might end for us, and we are no longer required to be at the school gate when our boys education has finished for the day.

Each day, our boys have come out of school knowing that we will be there to take him home. Each school day for the past 14 years we have been there to take them home. Yes sometimes we have been a little late, and occasionally we have to find a stand in, but the

boys knew that no matter what happens come rain, sun or snow – we will be there to pick him up. Because we are their parents and we will not forget him.

It is with this confidence, it is with this certainty, that we should look forward in hope this advent. Knowing with confidence that what God promised, will happen.

So what is it we hope for this Advent?

For Isaiah and the people of Israel, they were looking for a Messiah to come and save them as a nation. To redeem them and restore them to their former glory. For the people hearing Mark's gospel, they were looking for Christ to come again and rescue them, to raise them up out of the oppressiveness of Roman occupation.

What is it that you are waiting for God to do in your lives?

In this time of Advent, we look forward with expectation, more than just a wishful thinking but with a confidence, that God will not forget us. Just as a child has confidence that their parents will not leave them standing.

Isaiah, with the people of Israel, asks "How then can we be saved? For you have hidden your face from us and given us over to our sins."

And then in the next breath "Yet you, Lord, are our Father  
We are the clay and you are the potter,  
We are all the work of your hand.  
Look upon us we pray  
For we are all your people."

Advent is not just a time of waiting though – it is an active waiting when we start to look for the signs of God being with us. It may not be an earthquake, or the sun darkened, or the stars falling from the sky. No one could miss that.

But the signs are there.

Like my weather rock, the signs are there and are reliable, because it is already happening. We need to adjust our vision during advent to be more open to see the signs of God being among us, and to be surprised at finding him with us. The reign of God constantly unfolds before us.

Even the fig tree bears signs of the changing seasons, if only we look for them.

And again Nick Fawcett writes

"We should live each day in a sense of expectation, recognising God at work in a host of ways, constantly able to surprise us. Do that and whenever Christ comes we will be ready to meet him."

Our next hymn is chosen by Christian Aid, and they are asking churches to sing this in their services today, so as we sing we might unite in one voice to prepare the way for the dream that will not die. So please sing along, and join with others all around the country, as we look forward with hope.

### **When Out of Poverty is Born**

When out of poverty is born  
a dream that will not die  
and landless, weary folk find strength  
to stand with heads held high,  
it's then we learn from those who wait  
to greet the promised day,  
'The Lord is coming; don't lose heart.  
Be blest: prepare the way!'

When people wander far from God,  
forget to share their bread,  
they find their wealth an empty thing,  
their spirits are not fed.  
For only just and tender love  
the hungry soul will stay.  
And so God's prophets echo still  
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

When God took flesh and came to earth,  
the world turned upside down,  
and in the strength of woman's faith  
the Word of Life was born.  
She knew that God would raise the low,  
it pleased her to obey.  
Rejoice with Mary in the call,  
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

*Kathy Galloway - Copied with permission by Christian Aid.*

As we come to a time of prayer, I share with you a video from Christian Aid featuring communities in Ethiopia. Even though Ethiopia might feel far away from us in these deep winter days, as we watch the film, please consider that the 'dream that will not die' might be for these farmers. What might be the hope for these communities suffering the effects of climate change.

How might the love that came down in the form of a vulnerable child, be the love that changes our world and theirs. How might that love, be the kind of love that builds dreams, communities and hope?

### **VIDEO**

We pray for people such as Kawite, and others in Ethiopia who might seem very far from us and in a very different season. We remember that they too are living through the same coronavirus pandemic.

As well as the pandemic, they also face the difficulties of drought caused by climate change. Around the world, it is those living in poverty, that are on the frontline of the climate crisis.

Families are losing water, food, homes, and livelihoods. Every day they walk further, dig deeper, work harder and build stronger in order to survive.

We remember them in our prayers today.

Let us join together in the Lords Prayer.

### **Hymn: 656 'Lo He comes with clouds descending'**

Lo! he comes with clouds descending,  
once for favoured sinners slain;  
thousand, thousand saints attending  
swell the triumph of his train.  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!  
God appears on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him,  
robed in awesome majesty;  
we, who set at naught and sold him,  
crucified him on the tree,  
Lord, have mercy. (3 times)  
Let us all thine advent see.

Those dear tokens of his passion  
still his dazzling body bears,  
cause of endless exultation  
to his ransomed worshippers:  
Sing Hosanna (3 times)  
see the risen Lord appears!

Yea, amen! let all adore thee,  
high on thine eternal throne;  
Saviour, take the power and glory,  
claim the kingdom for thine own.  
O come quickly, (3 times)  
Alleluia! Come, Lord, come.

*Charles Wesley, and John Cennick. Altd. Martin Madan*

### **Blessing**

We close our time together with a blessing for hope.

'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit'. Romans 15:13