

Hymn TIS 264 Hark! A herald voice is calling

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22.37–40, Mark 12.30–31

**Sentence**

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. Luke 1.78–79

**Let us pray.**

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Collect**

God of our salvation, you straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the paths made rough by sin: keep our hearts watchful in holiness, and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose Day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

**Malachi 3.1-14**

<sup>1</sup> 'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the Lord Almighty.

<sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, <sup>4</sup> and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

<sup>5</sup> 'So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,' says the Lord Almighty.

<sup>6</sup> 'I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. <sup>7</sup> Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty. 'But you ask, "How are we to return?"

<sup>8</sup> 'Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. 'But you ask, "How are we robbing you?" 'In tithes and offerings. <sup>9</sup> You are under a curse – your whole nation – because you are robbing me. <sup>10</sup> Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. <sup>11</sup> I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,' says the Lord Almighty.

<sup>12</sup> 'Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,' says the Lord Almighty. <sup>13</sup> 'You have spoken arrogantly against me,' says the Lord. 'Yet you ask, "What have we said against you?" <sup>14</sup> 'You have said, "It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty?

Hear the word of the Lord, **thanks be to God.**

## Song of Zechariah

Blessed are you, Lord, the God of Israel:

you have come to your people and set them free.

You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour born of the house of your servant David.

Through your holy prophets, you promised of old: to save us from our enemies,  
from the hands of all who hate us,

To show mercy to our forebears: and to remember your holy covenant.

This was the oath you swore to our father Abraham: to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

Free to worship you without fear: holy and righteous before you, all the days of our life.

And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High: for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,  
To give God's people knowledge of salvation: by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God; the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death:

and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

## Philippians 1.1-11

<sup>1</sup> Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: <sup>2</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup> being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup> It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. <sup>8</sup> God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, <sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

## Luke 3.1-6

<sup>1</sup> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – <sup>2</sup> during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

<sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. <sup>6</sup> And all people will see God's salvation."

## *The Sermon*

### The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven,

and is seated at the right hand of the Father; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church,

the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

## THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ has promised that you will hear us when we ask in faith: receive the prayers we offer.

Accept our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray,

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.**

## PREPARATION FOR THE LORD'S SUPPER

We are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. 1 John 3.2–3

## CONFESSION

### Invitation to Confession

The Lord comes, bringing to light things now hidden in darkness, and disclosing the purposes of the heart. Let us open our hearts and prepare for his coming, confessing our sins in penitence and faith.

**Heavenly Father, you have loved us with an everlasting love,  
but we have broken your holy laws and have left undone what we ought to have done.**

**We are sorry for our sins and turn away from them.**

**For the sake of your Son who died for us, forgive us, cleanse us and change us.**

**By your Holy Spirit, enable us to live for you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

God is slow to anger and full of compassion, forgiving all who humbly repent and trust in his Son as Saviour and Lord. God therefore forgives you in Christ Jesus, in whom there is no condemnation. **Amen.**

Our Lord Jesus Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 1 Peter 2.24

## THE GREETING OF PEACE

We are the body of Christ. **His Spirit is with us.**

The peace of the Lord be always with you. **And also with you.**

Hymn TIS 271 The advent of our God

## THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts. **We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

All glory and honour be yours always and everywhere, mighty Creator, everliving God.

We give you thanks and praise for your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ,

who was looked for by the prophets, heralded by the Baptist announced by an angel, born of the Virgin Mary, and revealed at last to men and women of every race.

By his death on the cross and rising to new life, he offered the one true sacrifice for sin and obtained an eternal deliverance for his people.

Therefore, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven,

we proclaim your great and glorious name, for ever praising you and saying:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.**

And now, gracious God, we thank you for these gifts of bread and wine,  
and pray that we who receive them, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, according to our Saviour's word,  
in remembrance of his suffering and death, may share his body and blood.

On the night before he died, Jesus took bread, and when he had given you thanks  
he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat. This is my body which is given for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me.'

After supper, he took the cup, and again giving you thanks he gave it to his disciples, saying,  
'Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many  
for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

We eat this bread and drink this cup **to proclaim the death of the Lord.**

We do this until he returns. **Come, Lord Jesus!**

Father, as we recall his saving death and glorious resurrection, may we who share these gifts  
be renewed by your Holy Spirit and united in the body of your Son.  
Bring us with all your people into the joy of your eternal kingdom,  
there to feast at your table and join in your eternal praise:

**Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive praise and honour  
and glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.**

## **THE COMMUNION**

We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread.

The body of Christ keep you in eternal life. **Amen.**

The blood of Christ keep you in eternal life. **Amen.**

## **THE SENDING OUT OF GOD'S PEOPLE**

### **Prayer after Communion**

God for whom we wait, we thank you that you have fed us  
with the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

As we joyfully await your Son, keep us ever watchful  
that we may be ready to stand before him on the day of his coming.

Father, **we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.**

Hymn TIS 447 Lord your almighty word

### **Blessing**

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you, fill you with great hope and make you ready to meet him  
when he comes in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be  
among you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

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

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## Song of Zechariah

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you have come to your people and set them free.

You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour:

born of the house of your servant David.

Through your holy prophets, you promised of old:

to save us from our enemies, from the hands of  
all who hate us,

To show mercy to our forebears:

and to remember your holy covenant.

This was the oath you swore to our father Abraham:

to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

Free to worship you without fear:

holy and righteous before you, all the days of our life.

And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High:

for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,

To give God's people knowledge of salvation:

by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God:

the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

To shine on those who dwell in darkness

and the shadow of death:

and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

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The second week of Advent is the Sunday of Peace, but Peace was not something that occurred very much in Biblical times.

In giving us a date for the ministry of John, Luke gives us 6 references, but it is still not very clear because ancient calendars are hard to reconcile and there were so many political events, rebellions etc but this attempt to date it gives us a vivid picture of the world at this time. Luke begins by setting the emergence of John against a world background, the Roman empire

Rome had ruled in this area for about a hundred years, Tiberius was the second Caesar and renowned for his ruthlessness. Pontius Pilate was appointed governor of Judah in AD 25 because Herod the Great's son was supposed to be governing that territory was so terrible that the Jews had asked Rome to remove him. The other tetrarchs were either sons of Herod the Great and puppet kings or are unknown.



There were also never two high priests at any one time, and the role was intended to be hereditary but there was actually a rapid turnover under the Romans. Annas was officially high priest from 7 Ad to 14 Ad and was then succeeded by 4 of his sons and finally Caiaphas who was his son in law. Caiaphas was officially the high priest, but Annas was the power behind the throne. Not a time of Peace at all.

And that is the simplified version! Behind the list of names and places is a story of oppression and misery that was building up to explosion point. These particulars are more detailed than earlier references because Luke wants us to know that John's ministry marks the real beginning of the period of Jesus' ministry.

That is the reason we often have readings about John the Baptist in Advent because Advent is a time of preparation for our celebration of Jesus' birth and John came to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry.



In our culture preparing for Christmas is making sure we have all the presents, the food is ready, beds are made for family to stay, and everything is primed for Christmas dinner and the whole get together. For many people it is the most stressful time of year and peace only comes in January.

Phil and I have been doing a lot of that in recent weeks, because we are celebrating Family Christmas in two weeks. We like to do that because then there is no stress about who will have the family for Christmas Day, and it leaves real Christmas free for us to celebrate Christ's birth.

But Advent was instigated as a time for us to examine our lives and see whether we have genuine Hope, Peace, Love and Joy in our lives and if we are ready to receive the Prince of Peace into our lives in an even more deep and meaningful way, both to be ready for our Lord to come as the baby in the manger and for our Lord to return in glory.



John introduced in exactly the same way as prophets are introduced in the Old Testament: *the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness.* All prophets are called by hearing the word of God, introduced by stating whose son they are, and where they were when they heard the call. The mention of Zechariah also reminds us of John's miraculous birth, so we are expecting something extraordinary.

The last prophet before John was Malachi who we read today. He was also warning the people that they needed to be ready for the Lord by changing their lives and fulfilling all their vows but also promising that if they did change, giving justice to all, keeping his decrees, and gave him their full tithe then he would bless them in so many ways. This would have been very much on their minds as they heard John.

*He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

This was a radical message because officially Jews did not need to repent and they did not get Baptised, they were born into God's chosen race, they obeyed the law and therefore were already secure. People who wanted to become Jews went through a process, which included total washing by full emersion to allow God to wash away their sins. The water ritual was not effective without genuine repentance. It was also understood to be a fulfilment of the Levitical requirements for purification.

But the people were not in great shape. John wasn't going to be satisfied with an outward ritual in which people could hide their real selves behind an outward conformity. For a Jew to admit that they needed to be baptised was quite revolutionary, but the people were longing for a saviour, for inner peace and a total change of life, so they flocked to John in droves.



John was the one who was prophesied to come and make the paths straight for the Lord. In those days it was normal that whenever a ruler wanted to visit his kingdom, he would send an envoy ahead to literally make sure all the roads were in good condition so that he could travel easily.

So, John is regarded as the courier of the king. But the preparation on which he insisted was a preparation of heart and of life. The king is coming, he said, don't mend your roads but your lives. John did not come to make the physical roads straight but to make our hearts straight and ready to receive our Lord. This is the only way we can

know peace in our lives. There is a call on every single one of our lives to make our lives fit for the King. In telling us this story Luke is emphasizing three things: John's prophetic role, the call for an ethical renewal and the extension of the work of salvation to all peoples.





Repeatedly in Luke we find this last point underscored. Our human tendency, like the Jews, is to limit God's activity to our own kind of people and the causes that are socially and ethically important to us. But God's concern for all continually pushes us to break across the boundaries that we set.

As the John's father said at his birth: *In the tender compassion of our God: the dawn from on high shall break upon us, To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death: and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*



Because God's redemptive work is still unfinished - the salvation of all people has not yet been realised - John serves as a role model for the church.

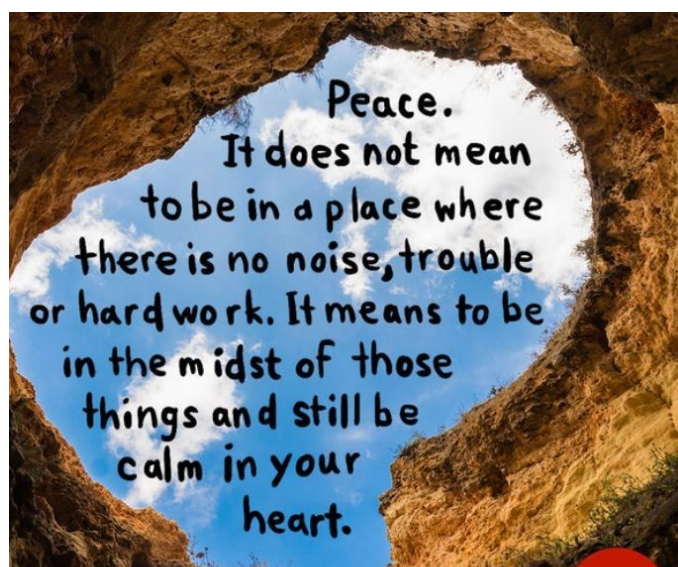
The gospel announces not only what God has done through Jesus but also what God is still in the process of doing. All who hear the word of God are called to declare what God is doing in our midst, show his peace in our busy lives and to point ahead to the fulfilment of history.

The reason God brings rescue and salvation is precisely because he is the holy and faithful god, keeping covenant with his people - but if that is so, he is bound to bring judgement as well as mercy and peace. He isn't a tame God, we need to be ready.



Paul had learnt the art of being at Peace no matter what his circumstances and was able to express his affection to the Christians at Philippi and pray *that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,<sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,<sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.*

He wanted them to be ready for the day of Christ, the day Jesus would return. Uncontaminated and righteous, full of all the virtues and blessings that come from following our Lord, so that they would be able to worship God in fullness.



Peace is truly not something we associate with this time of the year because we are so busy but, in every circumstance, and every situation, whether we are chasing sheep, at work or trying to find the perfect gift, God is with us, he can help us see what is really important, make ethical decisions and love our neighbours.