

Introduction

Musical Item - O Come O Come Immanuel

Advent Candle

Merciful God

Who sent your messenger John the Baptist to prepare your way before you,
with this advent candle may we greet with joy the coming of our redeemer, Jesus Christ our lord
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever **Amen**

Hymn - There's a light upon the mountain

There's a light upon the mountains,
and the day is at the spring,
When our eyes shall see the beauty
and the glory of the King;
Weary was our heart with waiting, and
the night-watch seemed so long,
But His triumph-day is breaking, and
we hail it with a song.

There's a hush of expectation,
and a quiet in the air;
And the breath of God is moving in
the fervent breath of prayer;
For the suffering, dying Jesus is the
Christ upon the throne,
And the travail of our spirit is the
travail of His own.

He is breaking down the barriers,
He is casting up the way;
He is calling for His angels
to build up the gates of day;
But His angels here are human, not
the shining hosts above,
For the drum-beats of His army are
the heart-beats of our love.

Hark! we hear a distant music, and
it comes with fuller swell;
'Tis the triumph song of Jesus,
Of our King Emmanuel;
Zion, go you forth to meet Him,
and my soul, be swift to bring
All thy finest and your dearest for
the triumph of our King.

Greeting

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

And also with you

The Great Commandment

'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' Jesus said: 'This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

Sentence of the Day

Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. All people will see God's salvation.'" Luke 3:4-6

Prayer of Preparation

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.

Prayer of the Day

God of our salvation You straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the ways 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 on the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever **Amen**

Isaiah 40:1- 11(NIV)

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. 7 The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever. " 9 You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

1 You, LORD, showed favor to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

2 You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.

8 I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants— but let them not turn to folly.

9 Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

10 Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.

11 Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.

12 The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.

13 Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. 11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. 13 But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. 14 So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. 15 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation.

Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, 2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" — 3 "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" 4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Sermon

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Prayers

Let us pray for the world and the church.

Response Christ Jesus, intercede for us and in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

The Lord's Prayer

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.

Words of Comfort

Jesus said: A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. John 13.34

Prayer of Approach [Let us pray.]

We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies.

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.

But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy.

Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy, welcoming sinners and inviting them to the Lord's table. Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith, confident in God's forgiveness.

Merciful God, our maker and our judge, we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do: we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves; we repent, and are sorry for all our sins.

Father, forgive us. Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Almighty God, who has promised forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith: pardon you and set you free from all your sins, strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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 - Fairest Lord Jesus

Fairest Lord Jesus, Lord of all creation,

Son of God, and Mary's son:

you will I cherish, you will I honour,

you are my soul's delight and crown.

Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands

robed in the greenness and bloom of spring:

Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,

he makes the saddest heart to sing.

Fair are the flowers, fairer still the children

in all the freshness of youth arrayed;

yet is their beauty fading and fleeting;

Lord Jesus, yours will never fade.

Fair is the moonlight, fairer still the sunshine,

fair is the shimmering starry sky:

Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines clearer

than all the heavenly host on high.

**Jesus, all beauty, heavenly and earthly,
in you is wondrously found to be;
none can be nearer, fairer or dearer
than you, my Saviour, are to me.**

Offering

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have these gifts to share. Accept and use our offerings for your glory and for the service of your kingdom. **Blessed be God for ever.**

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 by the power of your Spirit was born of Mary and lived as one of us. By his death on the cross, 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. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Merciful God, we thank you for these gifts of your creation, this bread and wine, and we pray that by your Word and Holy Spirit, we who eat and drink them may be partakers of Christ's body and blood.

On the night he was betrayed Jesus took bread; and when he had given you thanks he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take, eat. This is my body 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 shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Therefore we do as our Saviour has commanded: proclaiming his offering of himself made once for all upon the cross, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension, and looking for his coming again, we celebrate, with this bread and this cup, his one perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Renew us by your Holy Spirit, unite us in the body of your Son and bring us with all your people into the joy of your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom, and in whom, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we worship you, Father, in songs of never-ending praise:

Blessing and honour and glory and power are yours for ever and ever. Amen.

As this broken bread was once many grains, which have been gathered together and made one bread: so may your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.

The Offering

The gifts of God for the people of God

Come let us take this holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ in remembrance that he died for us, and feed on him in our hearts with thanksgiving.

The Lord's Supper is open to all who love the Lord. Grape juice is available. Please come to the Communion Rail if you are able observing appropriate social distancing.

Prayer After Communion

Gracious God, we thank you that in this sacrament you assure us of your goodness and love. Accept our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and help us to grow in love and obedience that we may serve you in the world and finally be brought to that table where all your saints feast with you for ever.

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.

Notices

Hymn - The King of Glory Comes

Chorus

The King of Glory comes, the nation rejoices,
Lift up your voice before him, Lift up your voices

Who is the king of glory? How shall we call Him?
He is Emmanuel, The promised of ages. *Chorus*

In all of Galilee In city or village
He goes among his people Curing their illness *Chorus*

Sing, then of David's son Our savior and brother
In all of Galilee Was never another *Chorus*

He gave His life for us The pledge of salvation
He took upon Himself The sins of the nation *Chorus*

He conquered sin and death He truly has risen
But, He will share with us His heavenly vision

Final Chorus 2

The king of glory comes The nation rejoices
Open the gates before Him
Lift up your voices, Lift up your voices

Blessing

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. **Amen**

Dismissal

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

Sermon

What sort of bath do you want?

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned how important it was to me to prepare when my mum came to visit my flat in Sydney. I would put in a big effort to do all the clothes and dish washing, get rid of all the empty cans, pizza boxes and take away containers, all the mouldy or passed use by date items in the fridge, and yes, put the special table cloth I kept for mum on the manky 1970s laminex table. I would also make sure I took a bath or a shower, but then, I did that most days.

Mum certainly didn't tell me I had to do these things, although the way she brought me up meant I expected it of myself (especially the taking a bath bit). I did however sometimes need reminding that mum was coming, but she normally did a pretty good job of that.

Today I want to look at the man who warned us to be ready when Jesus came the first time. It wasn't his mum, although I am sure that if she was anything like mine she would have told everyone who would listen, and probably a few others as well, well in advance about her visiting her son.

No, the one I want to talk about today was actually Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Apart from Jesus, I think John is one of the most interesting people in the New Testament, and the one I most relate to. After you've heard this sermon, be sure to let me know what you think.

Let's start by asking the question, who was John the Baptist?

John 1:19 (NIV) says the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. 20 He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." 21 They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

This passage is perhaps more interesting in saying who John wasn't than who he was, but I find the suggestion that they thought he was Elijah interesting. After all, why would they think he was a strange old prophet who lived some 900 years before they were born?

Well, if you read 2 Kings in the old testament, Elijah was a mighty prophet during a turbulent time in Israel's history. The nation had turned away from the Lord to worship Baal, and their

King Ahab had formed an alliance with the nation of Sidon by marrying their princess, Jezebel. Elijah was sent to show Israel the evil of their ways and encourage them to return to the Lord. In particular, you may recall that Elijah had a competition, a sort of sacrifice-off with the prophets of Baal, a competition to see who's god could burn a sacrifice ; which Yahweh, Elijah's God won hands down. More relevant to why the priests thought John was Elijah was that the Bible records that Elijah didn't die, but was transported to heaven in a bodily form. Thus he was the ideal prophet to return to precede Jesus.

Also, if you go right to the end of your old testament, to the book of Malachi, and it's last 2 verses, you will find these words: Malachi 4:5 (NIV)

5 "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

So the people of Jesus' day, some 400 years after Malachi, were expecting Elijah to return, and suddenly this fellow shows up and is dressed like Elijah in a hairy coat with a big belt. The authorities ask if he is Elijah, but he denies it.

The confusing part is that in Matthew 11 Jesus is also asked if John is Elijah, and Jesus said he was, at least if you are willing to accept it. So, according to Jesus, John the Baptist of Elijah, but according to John the Baptist, he isn't.

So, we should look at what John does, to see if he does the things expected of Elijah.

According to our gospel reading, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Appearing in the wilderness sounds like Elijah, and his message, 'repent and have your sins forgiven' sounds a little like turning your heart to your parents, as repenting essentially means turning around, or turning away from your sinful ways as Malachi prophesied. The old prophecies however didn't say anything about baptising, which John seems best known for.

In John's gospel, John the Baptist specifically identifies himself with a prophecy in Isaiah: 3 A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert

a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

So it seems that John actually draws the two prophecies, Isaiah and Malachi together. He understands that he is fulfilling the Isaiah prophecy, but he didn't realise he actually also fulfilled Malachi.

I mention this because confusion that John had this also reflects many circumstances I have found in my life. You may not be aware, but my journey to the ministry i am now in has taken quite a while, with numerous set backs (or what I thought were set backs) along the way. I grew up in a Christian household, and pretty well always considered myself a Christian. However, it was while studying engineering at university that I was convicted that I would go into full time ministry. The first setback was that I was in the middle of a University course, paid for by defence, and they expected some return on the investment. So I stuck at engineering, and 8 years later, started at Bible college. I passed everything in first year, but got in the middle of an argument between 2 bishops, and wasn't invited back for 2nd year-set back number 2. It was another 8 years before I went back to my studies, graduated, got ordained, but was told I needed more parish experience before I could go into navy chaplaincy, which seemed right at the time given my 20 or so years working with navy. Setback number 3. Good in his graciousness provided an engineering job in customs, that led me to setting up chaplaincy in the Border Force and the entire home affairs department, but when I finally got the role full time, I overdid it, got extremely sick, and had to take 5 months off, which allowed me to think how I might do it more strategically.

Anyway, you get the picture. I was always seeking to serve God and his people, but I was never absolutely sure where things would lead in the long run, and to be frank, I'm still not really sure. I've done lots of ministries, from lay student, parish and workplace ministry, navy chaplaincy, disaster recovery chaplaincy, professional navy and workplace chaplaincy, and have been locum in a handful of parishes, but I'm not sure where God will lead from here.

Realistically, they say it should be the journey, not the destination, and that focusing on the immediate ministry at hand is our highest priority, particularly when our ultimate destination, that is, eternal life, is absolutely sure, and probably won't involve the sorts of ministries that we do in this life.

Nevertheless, getting back to John the Baptist, this is what he did. As we read on in the gospels, we find that John's ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus by preaching a gospel of repentance, and then to grow lesser as Jesus gained in stature. We know, however, that along the way, he also has a ministry to governors, kings and royalty, to prisoners (after upsetting the king), and after a period of doubt as to whether Jesus was the one he was preparing the way for, lost his life at the whim of a petulant teenage dancing girl and a lustfull weak king who felt he had to keep stupid promises that he should never have made in the first place.

Nevertheless, throughout his entire ministry, he knew that his role was to prepare the way of the Lord, to turn people's hearts back to God in repentance of their sins and in the promise of their forgiveness.

He knew that the people of his day, the crowds in the wilderness, the priests in the temple, all the way to the governor and even the king needed to hear his message to prepare them to meet Jesus himself in the flesh. But he also now knows, from his position in heaven with Jesus following his senseless death at the hands of Herod, that the world still needs to hear his message to prepare themselves to meet with the risen Jesus, to meet with him spiritually to put their faith in him so they can stand certain before him when they meet him face to face on the day of judgement. He symbolised that forgiveness in his ministry through water baptism, symbolically washing away our sins with water, and we continue that ritual with new Christians to this very day..

John also knows we need to repent of our sins and receive the forgiveness that Jesus has brought through his death and his resurrection on our behalf before we meet him at judgement day, and risk having our sins burnt away in the fires of eternal judgement.

John knows everyone will be cleansed by the baptism of repentance, or the burning fires of judgement. He knows it will be one or the other, no matter who we are.

So, You need to be prepared, and so I ask everyone of us here this morning, what sort of bath do you want when you meet Jesus face to face?

You, like me, like John, may not be aware of where God will lead you in ministry, but you do have a ministry, and wherever your ministry leads, the most important part of our ministry right here and now, is to be preparing people with repentance and forgiveness to meet Jesus. Will you continue with me in this ministry?

Amen