



Make a straight path

Welcome to worship

I'm Jane Edwards, one of the local preachers who usually worships at Sherwood, and together we'll mark the first Sunday in advent and reflect on the command of John the Baptist to 'make a straight path' for Jesus. Wherever and whenever you're using this material be aware that you're sharing together with others who are also worshipping at different times and in different locations across Nottingham North East Circuit. I'd really encourage you to join in the songs in this worship - music is a great way to praise, and adds a dimension that you lose from simply reading the words. The prayers that I'm sharing this morning are based on those published in the Roots worship resources (with some alterations!) (© Roots for Churches Ltd (www.rootsforchurches.com) 2002-2024. Reproduced with permission)

Call to worship

As we begin our Advent journey,
we come together in hope,
to worship the one who brings hope to the whole world.
We come together to worship the Lord.

Hymn - Singing the Faith 186 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 for evermore!

*Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)
Based on the Magnificat*

Prayer

Abundant God, Saviour Christ, life-giving Spirit,
we praise you that each day and new season offers a fresh beginning, full of opportunity, hope
and promise.

May our love for you and those around us increase day-by-day;
may your grace fill us and those around us more deeply;
and may your kingdom come in us and through us.
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we praise you.
Amen.

Hymn - Singing the Faith 175 Light of the world you stepped down into darkness

Light of the world
You stepped down into darkness
Opened my eyes, let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore You
Hope of a life spent with You *Here I am
to worship*

Here I am to bow down

*Here I am to say that You're my God
You're altogether lovely
Altogether worthy
Altogether wonderful to me*

*Here I am to worship
Here I am to bow down
Here I am to say that You're my God
You're altogether lovely
Altogether worthy
Altogether wonderful to me*

And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross
I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross

King of all days
Oh, so highly exalted
Glorious in Heaven above
Humbly You came to the earth You created
All for love's sake became poor

So here I am to worship
Here I am to bow down
Here I am to say that You're my God
You're altogether lovely
Altogether worthy
Altogether wonderful to me

Stepping stones - reflection

Think of some of the things that tell us that Christmas is on its way. These might include buying Christmas cards, food preparation, Christmas parties, adverts appearing on TV, advent calendars, decorations in shops, but what other things can be added to the list? What order do they happen, and when do they occur? Which of these things point towards Jesus, and which of these things can lead us away?

Advent is a time when we think of Jesus returning in glory and power. Let's look forward to that time with our next song.

Hymn - Soon and very soon

Soon and very soon
We are going to see the King
Soon and very soon
We are going to see the King
Soon and very soon
We are going to see the King
Hallelujah, hallelujah
We're going to see the king
Repeat...

No more crying there
We are going to see the King
No more crying there
We are going to see the King
No more crying there
We are going to see the King
Hallelujah, hallelujah
We're going to see the King

Soon and Very Soon lyrics © Crouch Music Corp., Bud John Songs, Bud-john Songs Inc.

The reading this morning, from the gospel of Luke, takes place just before Jesus is about to start his ministry. We've had the angels and shepherds and trips to the temple, and it's about 30 years later. Jesus is grown up, and so is his cousin's son John. John has a vital role to play in setting the scene, telling the world what's about to hit them. So let's read together.

Scripture – Luke: 3 v 1 - 6

It was the fifteenth year of the rule of Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the territory of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was ruler of Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests. At that time the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. So John went throughout the whole territory of the Jordan River, preaching, "Turn away from your sins and be baptized, and God will forgive your sins." As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah: "Someone is shouting in the desert: 'Get the road ready for the Lord; make a straight path for him to travel! Every valley must be filled up, every hill and mountain leveled off. The winding roads must be made straight, and the rough paths made smooth. The whole human race will see God's salvation!'"

Sermon

A voice calls out in the wilderness: Get ready a path for the Lord, make the roads straight for him!

Most of us, me included, find it difficult to take a good clear look at our lives. We're too busy living it to see what's good for us. That's why we need people who will shake us out of our complacency and tell us what is really happening, and what we need to be doing about it.

That person is John the Baptist. This wild man of the gospel sets off telling the world about the huge change that's on its way. His clear advice is to stop messing about, understand that you're doing wrong, and turn back to God. Repent and believe.

And just like Mark, the gospel writer Luke continues by quoting a passage from the prophet Isaiah:

A voice calls out in the wilderness: Get ready a path for the Lord, make the roads straight for him! Have you ever considered how strange that is? 'Make his paths straight'. Does Jesus have a particular liking for straight roads, or an aversion to going round bends, like some kind of travel sickness? Perhaps he wants to get to wherever he's going quickly – Nazareth to Jerusalem in two hours flat, avoiding all those unsightly towns and villages in the way. Does Jesus really need our help with his travel arrangements? After all he could walk on water, so I don't think a bit of wonky tarmac would stop him.

Perhaps I've got the wrong end of the stick. Perhaps the whole business about preparing the way and making straight paths is not for his benefit at all, but for mine. Perhaps I need to clear things out of the way so that I can see Jesus just as easily as he can see me. If I really want to see Jesus clearly this Christmas perhaps I need to get rid of the obstacles that have accumulated over the last 12 months.

And if you know something is going to happen you want to get ready for it don't you? If you're going out on a Friday night you spend time looking the best that you can. If you're going on holiday you make sure that you are prepared for the journey. Passport tick. Currency tick. Sunscreen tick. If you know that someone is going to visit you make a bit of an effort. It always used to be the case when I was expecting a visit from my Mum. Now my house isn't too dirty, but as it got closer to her visit I would start to become more aware of the clutter that's about. I start to see things as I imagine she would see things. All of a sudden I start to notice how dusty the shelves have become, and that the curtains need a wash. I see the wastepaper bins that need emptying and the magazines that have piled up on the rack. It's funny that I never noticed these things before. But it takes an imminent visit to see things as they really are; and gives me the impetus to put them right.

This week is the first Sunday in advent, the time in the Christian calendar that we look forward to celebrating Christmas, and we think about the time when he'll come back again. The Bible promises us that Jesus will return, and we don't know when it will happen. But when he does there will be peace and an end to all suffering. Now I've explained that when a visitor is coming round I begin to see things differently. When you know that Christ's coming it's a chance to see things

differently as well. Think about your life through his eyes. Now I doubt that Jesus is going to be particularly bothered about the state of your carpets, but he is interested in you. And when we think about what he might see when he looks at our lives we may be uncomfortable, and we may want to change things. God loves us unconditionally and completely, but he doesn't always love the things that we do.

Both of these themes – the fact that Jesus is coming and we need to clear the path to him, and the fact that knowing he's coming we can see things in a different way should prompt us to reflect on where we are, and what we need to change. Have a look at the stuff that you've accumulated around you over the last twelve months and think about whether or not you want to keep it. Make a straight path for him. Look at all the clutter that you've put between yourself and God, and make some effort to get rid of it.

Getting rid of clutter is good for the soul. Many of us hoard things. We have clothes that we no longer wear, books that we have no hope of reading, and food lurking at the back of cupboards silently going past its use by date. And our digital age gives us so many more opportunities for clutter – defunct electrical items, digital files that simply get out of hand, TV programmes that we've recorded and have no time to watch. We take so many photos these days, but don't do anything with them. They simply take up storage space. When I have a good clear out I feel much better for it. My surroundings are more pleasant, I can find things much quicker. And it has a real impact on my emotional life too. I can handle things better, I think better.

So one place to start this advent is to have a de-clutter. I wouldn't advise trying to do everything at once, but why not pick an area where you can make a difference and stick to it. Give some clothes away that you no longer wear. Go through your kitchen cupboards, and if you have packets and tins well within their sell by date then bring them in for the food bank so that others can benefit. Have a look at those computer files.

And more importantly this week at the start of advent why not take some time to de-clutter your life. What are the things that you have or that you that get in the way of seeing Jesus? We are all at danger of picking up activities or behaviours that make our lives a bit 'messier'. We pick up clutter in our lives that makes it difficult to see or think clearly. This year, for instance I've noticed that I've become too overwhelmed by things at work and working too many hours, and so I've decided to be clearer about my boundaries. If I don't do that I know that I will eventually become burnt out, exhausted and ill. For you it may be something completely different. It may be a way of spending time, a behaviour, a habit, or even a relationship that has become harmful. It often happens little by little, without us noticing. And bit by bit these things get bigger and bigger until they distort the path ahead. They make it more difficult for us to see Jesus clearly. Take a moment this week to think about what decluttering might mean for you. What might you need to stop? What might you need to start?

Advent is an amazing opportunity to reflect. The wonderful news is that Jesus is coming. How can you make the path straight for him?

Response - Prayer

God of Advent,
it hurts us to remember the mistakes we have made.
We are sorry for the bad decisions that have ended
our hopes and those of others:
forgive us and help us to choose well.
We are sorry when our misreading of situations
has spoilt our hopes and those of others:
forgive us and help us to act wisely.
We are sorry when resentment and jealousy
have poisoned our hopes and those of others:

forgive us and help us to think carefully.
In Jesus 'name.
Amen.

Hymn – Singing the Faith 181 Of the Father's love begotten

Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore.

By his word was all created;
he commanded, it was done;
earth and sky and boundless ocean,
universe of three in one;
all that sees the moon's soft radiance,
all that breathes beneath the sun,
evermore and evermore.

This is he whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord,
whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
now he shines, the long-expected;
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore.

O you heights of heaven, adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing;
all dominions, bow before him,
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
every voice in concert sing, evermore and
evermore!

*Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-c. 413)
translated by John Mason Neale (1811-1866)
and Henry Williams Baker (1821-1877)*

Prayers of intercession

Heavenly Father,
at this dark time of year,
we pray for those whose lives feel dark.
May your presence be a light to them,
showing them how your kingdom of love
and mercy
is growing in their lives.

Father God,
as we begin this season of Advent,
a season of watching and waiting,
fill us with your hope
that we might be bearers of hope to others.
Amen.

God of hope,
as we take our first steps on the Advent journey
we take them with you, and for you;
with one another, and for one another;
and with Christians around the world.
We follow the path of those who have gone before us,
refreshing it for those who will come after us,
and trusting you every step of the way, hopefully and joyfully.
In Jesus 'name.
Amen.

Hymn - Singing the Faith 185 Sing we the King who is coming to reign

Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
joy to the nations when Jesus is King:

*Come let us sing: praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:
this is our song, who to Jesus belong:
glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.*

All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;
freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;
wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King:
Come let us sing ...

Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
doubt shall not darken his witness within;
hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
love is victorious when Jesus is King:
Come let us sing ...

Kingdom of Christ, for your coming we pray;
hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
when this new song your creation shall sing;
Satan is vanquished and Jesus is King:
Come let us sing ...

Charles Silvester Horne (1865-1914)

Blessing

Let us go out in hope to share God's hope with others,
that we might bring light into the dark corners of the world.
Amen.