

Haverhill Methodist Church – Worship at Home
Advent Sunday 29th November 2020

Welcome Message – Revd. Peter Goodhall

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As we begin our countdown to Christmas, we watch and pray and we look for God's coming among us with hope and expectancy. We don't just get ready for Christmas; we get ready for Christ, who is coming to us as King and Judge.

“Christ will strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”.

(1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 8 & 9)

Hymn/Song

Prayer of Praise and Confession

Loving, faithful God, we praise you for your faithfulness to your people down the ages. They hoped and were not disappointed. In Jesus they saw you come as one of us, sharing our life so we might share yours. We have known your coming in our lives, whether in blazes of glory, or quiet moments of knowing we are loved; and in the power of your Spirit. We know you will come again in glory, in light and power that we cannot imagine. One day all heaven and earth will praise you. We come to you too, sorry for the times when we have been too impatient to wait, when we have lost heart. God who comes to us in love, we know that you forgive all who turn to you. Forgive us, renew our hope, turn our eyes back to you, so that we may see your coming in our world and share your joy with others. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Saviour.

Amen.

Introduction to our Old Testament Bible Reading

When you see the pain and the wrong in the world and it brings feelings of anger and sorrow, do you ever find yourself saying to God “If only you would come down here and show your self, show your power and glory, have your way and bring us back to our senses”?

If you do ever feel like that, as I sometimes do, then we are in good company. We are in age-old company with the prophet Isaiah. Share in his plea for God's intervention.

Read Isaiah chapter 64 verses 1-9

Introduction to our Gospel Reading

On this Advent Sunday we mark a new beginning in our 3 year cycle of Lectionary readings. Its 'goodbye' Matthew and 'hello' Mark. The reading set for today is found towards the end of his gospel. At the end of his earthly ministry, with suffering and death at hand, Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure and his return. Jesus has prophesied the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple to the disciples. Then Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him: "when will this be ... How will we know when "these things" are about to happen"? Jesus has told them of persecution, of strange natural phenomena, of community breakdown, of the fate of the disciples. The portents will be wars, earthquakes and famines. The end will come suddenly; people will suffer greatly. It is only because God, in his mercy, has "cut short those days" that the elect, the godly, will be saved. And even they will be tempted by other messiahs.

Read Mark Chapter 13 verses 24-37

Hymn/Song

Sermon

December is here and thoughts turn towards Christmas. And yes, Christmas **is** compulsory! And *necessary* - as I will spell out in my message today. Perhaps this weekend you have dug out your boxes of familiar decorations and put up your Christmas lights, and even perhaps a tree. Advent calendars will soon be opening and we now finally let our children play their Christmas music. They have been nagging us for so long. And at least lockdown meant we didn't have to listen to Christmas music in shops and restaurants during November! So how do you feel about Christmas 2020? Some will say, yes, bring it on, we need some brightness and jollity to close a forgettable year.

While at the other end of the festive spectrum, there will be those who want to skip Christmas. This might be for all kinds of reasons. For some Christmas raises painful memories they do not want to resurface. Some might worry about their ability to pay for Christmas this year. The pressure and expectation is high. Some will spend Christmas hungry or in isolation, just as they did last year, and the year before. Yes Christmas can be blue as well as white. Many will have winter but no Christmas. Some are rightly fearful about the spread of Coronavirus, which does not take a Christmas holiday. The very last thing you want to give or receive this Christmas is Coronavirus. We have to take seriously our own personal responsibility and duty of care to one another, to the members of our family circle and to our NHS. Family dynamics can be complex. Hard choices may need to be made about who visits who this Christmas. If we find ourselves on the sharp end of that, may we find grace to give way, to accept the situation and go with it just this once. We know we can't go beyond the laws as set out in the new tier system. And, if the government says you can mix indoors with a few other households at Christmas, it doesn't mean to say you have to. Writing in a very different context, the apostle Paul believed something might be permissible but not necessarily beneficial. (1 Corinthians 10:23) For safety, you and your family might decide to stay well within the laws and set yourself even tighter restrictions. And that's ok too. May God give us wisdom and sensitivity in our family arrangements as we navigate the hazardous waters of Christmas 2020. We want all who can to come through this winter safe and sound. No one wants the bells of New Year to be the death knell. There is a vaccine with your name on it. Make sure you are around to receive it! On a lighter note, with the rule of six will Father Christmas have to furlough two of his eight reindeer? So, what is God's message for us today, in either our excitement or dread about Christmas, and the whole range of emotions in between these two extremes?

Well it's not yet Christmas, but you and I have been given the precious gift of Advent. Advent is the four-week countdown to Christmas. The word advent means arrival or coming. Christians look to the coming of Jesus Christ; in the past as a baby in Bethlehem, in the present moment he comes and lives in our heart by the Holy Spirit, and he shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

We want to stand on that day without blame or boast. So we are not just getting ready for Christmas we are getting ready for Christ.

We have this gift of time to open our hearts to welcome Jesus and receive all that he wants to give us. Jesus, the promise of the ages is full of promise. Let me name just some of the ways he comes and fulfils the longing of our hearts.

Jesus brings the promise of salvation.

He comes as Messiah to seek and save what is lost.

Jesus holds the key to our freedom.

He comes to free those in chains of misery and despair.

Jesus comes as the promised Prince of peace; to bring a truce to all conflict and transform hatred to friendship.

Jesus comes near to us with the promise of comfort and healing to our pain and grief.

Jesus holds the promise of forgiveness.

Advent, like Lent, invites us to examine our lives, to live carefully, to turn from sin and turn back to God. Jesus loves you.

Receive the promise of his unconditional love.

In Advent, silence your inner critic. Show that same love to others.

Lastly, Jesus fills us with the promise of hope.

God's kingdom is breaking in and in Advent we pray more than ever: 'Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven'. We make ourselves ready for the day of the Lord. A day not to be feared, but welcomed.

This hope is the hope of glory. Jesus promises those who put their trust in him will not perish but will have eternal life.

Will you open your heart to his coming?

Will you say yes to all of his promises?

Jesus the Promise of the Ages is the promise of our age and time.

This is why Christmas 2020 cannot be cancelled.

This is why Christmas 2020 is necessary.

We seek Jesus in unlikely times, such as this.

We seek Jesus in unlikely places, as a child in a stable, in an empty tomb, in the midst of a global pandemic and in the unlikely corners of our hearts.

Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for.

Keep on seeking, and you will find.

Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.

This Advent. This Christmas.

Hymn/song

Prayer of Intercession

O God, for whom we wait and long, we bring to you our prayers for your world and for your church.

Promise of righteousness, come. Feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and hear the cries of all who plead for justice.

Promise of freedom, come. Bring good news of release to the oppressed, free those in chains of misery and despair.

Promise of peace, come. Heal ancient feuds and hatreds and deliver your people from the horrors of war.

Promise of forgiveness, come.

Look with mercy on our wrongdoings and help us to turn from our sinful ways. Keep us travelling the road towards you.

We are sorry for the obstacles that get in the way of our friendship with you, the wrong things we have done and said, for wrong attitudes and bad habits. Because of your love and mercy please forgive us and help us to make a fresh start, a new beginning.

Set us free and make us what we were meant to be.

Promise of salvation, come. Remember your people, according to your ancient promises, and send your Messiah.

Promise of love, come. Hold in Your tender embrace all who are lonely, friendless, forgotten, rejected.

Promise of comfort, come. Bring the balm of your presence to all who know pain, anguish, sorrow or grief.

Promise of hope, come. Let us see that the time of your coming is near and keep us watchful for your return.

Promise of glory, come. Draw your saints, in this world and the next, into the light of your eternal presence.

In the quietness, make your requests known to God through Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend...

Come, O God for whom we wait and long, and, in your mercy hear our prayer. **Amen.** Unite your prayers with the whole church as you pray The Lord's Prayer. 'Our Father...'

Hymn/song

The Blessing

We offer our lives and our gifts to the Lord.
The day of the Lord is surely coming.
Be faithful in worship,
unwavering in hope,
fervent in the work of God's kingdom
and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.
May almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you and
preserve you from all evil and bring you to everlasting life. **Amen.**

Coffee Time Conversation

- Name your hopes and fears for Christmas.
- What is your deepest longing?
- What promise(s) of Jesus do you desire most? Just ask him.

More Traditional Music:

Come Thou long expected Jesus
Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes
There's a light upon the mountains

More Contemporary Music:

Make way, make way for Christ the King
Open the eyes of my heart Lord
Great is the darkness that covers the earth
The Promise of the Ages

Keep social distancing. Keep safe. Keep communicating.
Keep alert to the signs of the times.
My prayers are with you.
God bless you and keep you until we meet again.

With love,
Peter