

**THE BRIDE VALLEY CHURCHES: Telephone Service for Sunday 13<sup>th</sup>  
December 2020 – Third Sunday of Advent**

The service for today has been prepared by Liz Howlett and can also be accessed by phone on Sunday morning on **01308 293062**.

Welcome to this act of worship for the Bride Valley churches for the Third Sunday of Advent. We begin with a prayer:

**Lord Jesus, light of the world, John the Baptist told the people to prepare, for you were very near. As Christmas grows closer day by day, help us to be ready to welcome you now. Amen.**

*Invitation to Confession*

A voice cries out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.' So let us listen, and turn to the Lord in penitence and faith.

*Prayers of Penitence*

Lord Jesus, you came to gather the nations into the peace of your kingdom:

Lord, have mercy.

**Lord, have mercy.**

You come in word and sacrament to strengthen us in holiness:

Christ, have mercy.

**Christ, have mercy.**

You will come in glory with salvation for all your people:

Lord, have mercy.

**Lord, have mercy.**

*Absolution*

May the God of love and power forgive us and free us from our sins, heal and strengthen us by his Spirit, and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

*The Collect*

God for whom we wait and watch, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son: give us courage to speak the truth, to hunger for justice, and to suffer for the cause of right, with Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

*Old Testament Reading*

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-end

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

*Gospel Reading*

John 1:6-8; 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

*Reflection*

John the Baptist said, 'Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' There is a well-known Dutch artist from the 16th century, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, whose paintings are often teeming with crowds of people, dressed in contemporary Dutch outfits, even when he is depicting a biblical event. He wanted to draw viewers into the scene in front of them and engage their attention, partly by making the people in the picture look familiar but also by requiring the viewer to concentrate on what is actually going on in the painting. This is true of a picture entitled, 'The Sermon of St John the Baptist'.<sup>1</sup> It is full of surprises! Where is John the Baptist for a start? Ah yes, that must be him, dressed in camel skin, visible in the centre of the picture, and surrounded by crowds who have purportedly come to listen to his preaching. Some men and women do seem to be listening intently to John – and one of these is a man wearing a turban and likely to be a Muslim. There is more unexpected detail: two of the people in the foreground, for example - one of them has turned his head away from John and towards us and he is having his palm read by his neighbour. Then there is a group sitting a bit back and up from the rest – are they not wanting to mingle with the common folk? – they certainly look better fed and dressed than most. Then you spy the young lads who have climbed trees to get a better view. It would be all too easy for them – and for

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<sup>1</sup> (If you would like to look at the Bruegel picture mentioned (and you are reading this order of service on a computer or phone, please click [here](#) This will take you to a copy on the Google Arts and Culture website.)

us - to miss the really important stuff going on. Because then eventually you spot that Christ is actually in the painting as well, - you recognise him because of his 1st century clothing and beard, but he isn't centre stage - he is off to the right, in the midst of a crowd, quiet and eyes lowered. And you notice that John the Baptist is pointing to him, but no one is taking any notice of Christ. Bruegel is portraying the moment when John says, 'Among you stands one whom you do not know'.

This painter is skilful: a snatched glance at his canvas will not do - it requires the viewer to stop and pay attention if there is going to be any chance of understanding what is really important within it. There is so much going on that can be distracting, but within, at the heart, there is John the Baptist pointing to Christ.

Perhaps we can take this as an invitation to us this Advent, to stop and pay attention, to allow our gaze to be drawn to Christ. I wonder in what ways he might be standing among us, in our communities, as one we do not know, or perhaps we see, but do not recognise. I wonder, do we look for Christ in certain places and not in others? Do we expect his influence to be at work at some times of the day and not at others? Are there people through whom Christ might be working for good in the world whom we ignore? Might we be missing him and some of the ways he is working within us, within our communities, within our world?

We would not be in bad company if we weren't seeing the whole picture, for we are told in the gospels that John the Baptist himself, when he was in prison, was questioning who Jesus really was. John had heard about Jesus' ministry in Galilee and he sent some of his followers to ask him directly, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Was John wondering, did I get it right at the river Jordan - is this man really the one we have been promised by God? John's own message had been one of strong condemnation of the people's sins - perhaps he thought there should have been a lot more of that in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' reply is very interesting - he doesn't answer yes or no, but he draws on words from the prophet Isaiah to show that his main task as Messiah was 'the restoration of the needy and the giving of life to the lifeless.'

This rings so many bells with start of the Old Testament passage set for today - again from Isaiah. 'The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...' This is a wonderful passage of hope - originally in the author's time for people who had been through terrible times as exiles from their home land. It is also the passage that Jesus used in the synagogue in Nazareth as a sort of mission statement near the start of his ministry: this is what I am about - this is what God has commissioned me to do.

A prayer to close

Loving God, in this waiting time of Advent, please help us to stop, to pay deep attention.

Finding John the Baptist in the crowd, help us to follow as he points us to Jesus Christ.

Help us to see what is yet unknown to us about Christ - what we have missed in our own communities, what we may have ignored in the world.

Help us to focus on what is really important, what is at the heart of the good news for the world. Amen.

*Prayers*

Watchful at all times, let us pray for strength to stand with confidence before our Maker and Redeemer.

That God may bring in his kingdom with justice and mercy,  
let us pray to the Lord:

**Lord have mercy.**

That we may seek Christ in the scriptures and recognise him in the breaking of the bread,

let us pray to the Lord:

**Lord have mercy.**

That God may bind up the brokenhearted, restore the sick and raise up all who have fallen,

let us pray to the Lord:

**Lord have mercy.**

That, with all the saints, we may shine forth as lights for the world,  
let us pray to the Lord:

**Lord have mercy.**

Almighty God, as your blessed son Jesus Christ first came to seek and to save the lost; so may he come again to find in us the completion of his redeeming work; for he is now alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

*The Lord's Prayer*

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

**Our Father, who art in heaven,**

**Hallowed be thy name;**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,**

**On earth, as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread,**

**And forgive us our trespasses,**

**As we forgive those who trespass against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation,**

**But deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory**

**For ever and ever. Amen**

*Final Prayer*

**God of all grace, your Son Jesus Christ fed the hungry with the bread of his life and the word of his kingdom: renew your people with your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us by your true and living bread, who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. Amen.**

As we await our coming Saviour, let us live in the peace of Christ.

**Thanks be to God.**

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