

13th December 2020 6pm John Calling in the Desert

Service led by Paul Lewis (with Helen joining in the responses), Sermon by Val Whiteman, Bible readings by Felicity Hawke and Rosie Lee. Prayers by Gill Palmer

Greetings.....	1
Preparation.....	1
Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.....	3
1 st Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24.....	3
2 nd Reading: John 1: 6-8, 19-28.....	3
Sermon.....	4
Hymn: Be Still, for the Presence of the Lord.....	6
Creed.....	7
Intercessions.....	7
Collect for the day (3 rd Sunday in Advent).....	9
The Lord's Prayer.....	9
Blessing.....	9
The Peace.....	9
Hymn: Light of the World.....	10

Greetings

[Paul Lewis:]

Good evening and welcome. This is my first time as a virtual presenter. Welcome to our service at St John's Church this evening in Kenilworth, whether you're viewing this live or perhaps on catch up on YouTube, whether you're a regular at St John's or whether you're visiting us, even perhaps from somewhere across the world, welcome to you all. My name is Paul Lewis, and I'll be leading us through the service this evening. Val will bring us the sermon tonight and Felicity and Rosie will be doing our reading. Gill will be leading our prayers and this evening's technical guru is Charlie, but he didn't want to put his own picture up, so we'll mention him anyway because we rely on him.

Our theme this evening is *John Calling in the Desert*. Perhaps with the current weather we might not think too much of deserts, but, in a sense, we've all been perhaps having a little bit of a sense of desert experience over the last six months in different ways. But the various stories in the Bible, of people being in the desert, they were important points in their journeys, and perhaps they, in different ways this year, may have been important ways for us as well, to hear from God and to do things a bit differently to the way we had done things in the past. So if we turn to our service of Evening Prayer tonight:

Preparation

The light and peace of Jesus Christ be with you

All **and also with you.**

The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.

All **Let us rejoice and sing God's praise for ever.**

We have come together in the name of Christ

to offer our praise and thanksgiving,

to hear and receive God's holy word,

to pray for the needs of the world,

and to seek the forgiveness of our sins,

that by the power of the Holy Spirit

we may give ourselves to the service of God.

Confession

Jesus says, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' So let us turn away from our sin and turn to Christ, confessing our sins in penitence and faith.

All **Most merciful God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we confess that we have sinned
in thought, word and deed.
We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
In your mercy
forgive what we have been, help us to amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be;
that we may do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with you, our God.
Amen.**

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.

All **Amen.**

Prayer of thanksgiving

Blessed are you, sovereign God,
our light and our salvation;
to you be glory and praise for ever.
You led your people to freedom
by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.
May we who walk in the light of your presence
acclaim your Christ, rising victorious,
as he banishes all darkness from our hearts and minds.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

All **Blessed be God for ever.**

Opening prayer

The day is almost over, and the evening has come;
let us pray with one heart and mind.

Silence is kept.

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,
so may your Spirit come down upon us
to set us free to sing your praise
for ever and ever.

All **Amen.**

Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
2. O come, Thou, Dayspring from on high
And cause Thy light on us to rise
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadow put to flight
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel
3. O come, O come, true prophet of the Lord
And turn the key to heaven's door
Be Thou our comforter and guide
And lead us to the Father's side
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall by His word our darkness dispel
4. O come, our great High Priest, and intercede
Thy sacrifice, our only plea
The judgement we no longer fear
Thy precious blood has brought us near
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Has banished every fear of hell
- 5 O Come, Thou King of nations bring
An end to all our suffering
Bid every pain and sorrow cease
And reign now as our Prince of Peace
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come again with us to dwell

[Felicity Hawke:] That was a nice version of O come O come Emmanuel, wasn't it?
A bit different to usual.

1st Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

Our first reading this evening is from the first letter to Thessalonians, chapter 5, starting at verse 16.

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

And now we go to Rosie for the second reading.

2nd Reading: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

[Rosie Lee:]

And our second reading is taken from John chapter 1, verses 6 to 8 and verses 19 to 28. And I'm reading from the New International Version.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

19 Now this was John's testimony when 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."'

24 Now the Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

26 'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

28 This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

This is the word of our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

And now over to Val for our evening sermon.

Sermon

[Val Whiteman:] Thanks Rosie.

[Rosie Lee:] Thank you.

[Val:] So this is the third week in Advent; and Advent, as we all know, is the time when we think about the joy of the coming King, that Jesus will come back one day. And we remember too the baby in the manger. And in Advent we focus on the different aspects of how we know that the Messiah came with Jesus and will come again. And tonight we look at John the Baptist.

It's a bit of an odd year, or everybody says so, isn't it? The celebrations we're going to have at Christmas are going to be a little bit muted, but maybe that's a good thing because we focus on the essence of what Christmas means to us, and we can now think about all these past people in our own lives, and in the Bible, who've testified to the coming King, and who are waiting now for His return in glory.

So if we look at John for a little while, John pops up, as it were, in the beginning of that great hymn to Christ the Light, which we usually end our carol services with, and we usually miss out the bit about John the Baptist, we want to focus at that point on Jesus the light, not on His forerunner. But John, the writer of the gospel, is actually contrasting these two figures in the beginning of his gospel:

- Christ is from the beginning from eternity, whereas John came like other human beings into the world.
- Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, John merely human.
- Jesus is God, John is sent from God.
- Jesus is the light of the world, and John bears witness to that light.
- We trust in Jesus, and John shows by his testimony that Jesus is to be trusted.

I think it's pretty amazing that John the gospel writer manages all that lot in two verses, verses 6 to 8, when he contrasts these two, Jesus and John, showing their different functions, and makes it clear that John the Baptist's role really is a forerunner.

And then in the rest of the reading, we have what you might call the committee sent from Jerusalem. John's reputation has been spreading. Is he the Messiah, or at least a Messiah? Is he Elijah reborn? How should he be seen? Is he a threat? Because John has been doing unusual things. He's been baptising for a start, and the Pharisees know from their reading of the prophet Ezekiel, in chapter 36, verse 25, that God does the cleansing. It's a Messianic trait, it's not something that even prophets do, because there in Ezekiel it says,

25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...

It's a sign that the Messiah is bringing salvation to Israel. And also baptism is a little bit odd for the Jewish people. Usually only Jewish converts got baptised as a sign that they were being cleansed from their sins, and were therefore acceptable to God. To baptise the children of Abraham was extremely strange. It was saying, like any Gentile they had to be cleansed, they weren't special, or at least not special enough.

So, when the committee asks John who he thinks he is, then he is very clear indeed: he isn't the Messiah, he isn't Elijah. As you probably know, the Jewish teachers were expecting a major prophet to appear before the Messiah came, because of what was said in Malachi chapter 4 verse 5, the last verse of our Old Testament. All John says he is, is a herald who announces that the King is on His way, a voice crying in the wilderness. And this is Isaiah's prophecy when the exile was over and the Jews are going back to their homeland. In Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, it says, the verse that John uses, it's a time of rejoicing because they were forgiven and restored.

So John sees himself as not even being like a person. He's a voice. It's what he says that is important, and not who he is. Notice in verse 15 of John 1, which we didn't read, John cries out. And the thing he cries out is, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me." That's his message. Now, John the Baptist says the prophecy is being fulfilled in a new way. Isaiah said, "Make straight the way for the King." Everyone in the Kingdom now has to prepare, just as the people had to make the highway clear and straight for the king and his entourage to travel back into his kingdom. This means getting ready. John baptises because people need to repent to get ready. But accepting that repentance and forgiving the people is not something that John can do. That's something God does. So John is really important in alerting people to the fact that the King is coming, but he's also extremely *unimportant*, because he does not witness the power and might of the King, he's killed by Herod before that happens, and as you know, he has doubts even as to whether he was right about Jesus after he was imprisoned.

Jesus tells us that he is the greatest prophet, but John is the least in the new Kingdom. He's the last Old Covenant prophet, because Jesus says in Matthew chapter 11 verse 11, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women, there isn't one greater than John the Baptist, yet whoever is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he." And John himself recognises this humble place, and is willing to serve there. He also accepts his role is transitory: he has a job to do. And when it's done then he becomes unimportant while Jesus' role grows and increases. He serves God, as God calls him to do.

You remember that he encourages the disciples to go and seek Jesus. He doesn't try to hang on to them as perhaps some prophets might have done. People like us in the church should be doing this all the time. We're given various roles and sometimes these roles disappear, or sometimes someone else comes to do them. So how do we react? Paul in the Thessalonians reading that Felicity brought to us says, "Rejoice always." We serve where we're called, listening to the Spirit of God and being joyful, whether we feel we're serving or not. And it's really

important we learn this lesson. We aren't like people in the world who are ambitious to get on to have a really important place in the church and be respected. We're like John: we listen to God's voice, and we point to Him, we are His voice. We don't point to ourselves. Now, I don't know about you, but this is something I find extremely hard to do by myself. My own voice, my own ambition, my own wish for a place to be loved in the church, is very, very strong. I have to go back to the Holy Spirit time and time again and ensure that I live within it, so that I can be filled and sanctified for service, whatever that might be. It's always important to respect your fellow servants too. They may be doing a job that you think you could be doing an awful lot better. But as the body of Christ, we're supposed to support one another, to help each other, and to grow.

So we think about John the baptist as we come up to Christmas, and it does seem odd that we're whizzing through to the baptism of Christ at the moment when we're thinking of Him, a tiny baby in a manger, but we think about John the Baptist as this person who is almost like a signpost pointing to the power and might of the Messiah who comes, and that is definitely our job. Jesus has come, He's with us, but we still need to point other people to Him, to forget ourselves and to remember the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

Paul sums up his desire for the Thessalonians and for us in the reading that we had, and I'd like as I finish to read that to you again, and listen to it as a blessing and as a going forward to Christmas time.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is the really important bit:

24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Amen.

Hymn: Be Still, for the Presence of the Lord

And now we'll have a second hymn, *Be Still, for the Presence of the Lord*.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. Be still for the presence of the Lord
The Holy One is here
Come bow before Him now
With reverence and fear
In Him no sin is found
We stand on holy ground
Be still for the presence of the Lord
The Holy One is here</p> | <p>2. Be still for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around
He burns with holy fire
With splendour He is crowned
How awesome is the sight
Our radiant King of light
Be still for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around</p> |
| <p>3. Be still for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place
He comes to cleanse and heal
To minister His grace
No work too hard for Him
In faith receive from Him
Be still for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place</p> | |

Creed

[Paul:]

Thank you, Val, for that. And now we join together with the words of the Creed.

**All I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his 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 again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and 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.**

Intercessions

Now Gill will bring us our intercessions.

[Gill Palmer:]

Good evening. Our response this evening will be "in your mercy, hear us."
Let us pray to our Father God, that He will bring to fruition all that he
desires for creation.

Father, Lord of Creation, in your mercy hear us.
You have created the universe by your Eternal Word,
and have blessed humankind in making us stewards of the Earth.
We pray for your world, that we may share and conserve its resources and
live in reverence for the Creation and in harmony with one another.
Father, Lord of Creation,
In your mercy, hear us.

At this time of Advent, let us reflect on Mary's song¹ with its message of
inclusion, justice and care for all of God's Creation.

51b He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

1 Luke 1: 51b-53, [ESV]

Thank you, God, for sending Jesus to be a light in this world. Thank you for His courage, His vulnerability, His tenderness, His strength.
Thank you for the full and free salvation He won for us all.
As the time draws near for us to remember again His birth at Bethlehem, we pray for all those who are homeless, for refugees, and for those those who are persecuted, or afraid.
Let us pray for peace for all humanity.
May Your Kingdom come, and Your will be done here on Earth.
Father, Lord of Creation,
In your mercy, hear us.

A prayer in the Celtic tradition from Iona.

O God, we hunger and thirst for love, for acceptance, for equal footing.
Give us courage to join with our brothers and sisters
to move beyond tolerance, beyond acceptance, and towards true compassion.
Build among us opportunities for radical compassion,
to move us forward into the miraculous generosity that you offer each of us.
Draw Your people together.
Weave us all into wondrous communities of love for all.
There is much work to do. There is no time to waste.
And come quickly, Advent God, burn brightly, swift and strong.
Father, Lord of Creation,
In your mercy, hear us.

We pray for our town and the wider community.

Lord, we lift to you our leaders in national government.
We are living through tumultuous and divisive times.
Lord, we ask for wisdom and humility, as they make life-changing decisions.
We pray that our divided, polarised country can learn to walk forward together into a new phase.
Lord, give us patience, tolerance, and help us to focus on the love that Jesus came into the world to share, and that we may follow his example of humility and selflessness.
Father, Lord of Creation,
In your mercy, hear us.

Lord, we thank you for the compassion local people have shown during this pandemic, caring for the sick, the lonely and the housebound.
We pray for peace and rest, and that they will know that they are loved.
We pray for our mayor and counsellors who have worked tirelessly to support communities and to ensure that life goes on, if we pull together.
Father, Lord of Creation,
In your mercy, hear us.

We pray for all our key workers, especially those who are in the front line: teachers, care workers, nurses, doctors and many others who continue to put themselves at risk as they work, often long hours.
We pray that they can put their worries aside and get some rest and peace.

And Lord, we thank you for all the scientists who've devoted months to finding a vaccine.

And we pray for all those who will be helping to administer it to all.

Finally, let us pray for our friends and families, especially those who are grieving, or are unwell. In a moment of quiet, bring those who you know to Jesus. Perhaps name them out loud.

Father, Lord of Creation,
In your mercy, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

And back to Paul.

Collect for the day (3rd Sunday in Advent)

[Paul:]

Today is the third Sunday in Advent and a special prayer this Sunday, the collect.

God for whom we watch and wait,
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.

The Lord's Prayer

And gathering all our prayers and praises into one, as our Saviour taught us, so we pray.

All **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.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever.
Amen.**

Blessing

The Lord bless us, and preserve us from all evil,
and keep us in eternal life.

All **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.

All **Thanks be to God.**

The Peace

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

All **Amen.**

The peace of the Lord be always with you

All **and also with you.**

Amen.

Thank you for everybody who's helped to be part of the service this evening and we pray that you may have met with God tonight. Our final hymn is *Light of the World*.

Hymn: Light of the World

1. 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

Chorus:

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,
All together worthy,
All together wonderful to me.

2. 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.

Chorus

Bridge:

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.

Chorus

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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