

Worship for Sunday 9th January 2022

Call to worship

We are summoned out of habit, or a sense of duty through wonder, or expectation ... because of longing, or need.

And so, even in these difficult, dithering, hard-decision-making times, we have come to church.

In a time and world in which nothing is guaranteed, except that everything is a little risky, we set aside our apprehensions for the sake of worshipping God.

We come in the hope of enjoying fellowship with God and with one another, of sensing that our burdens are shared and that others care.

When we leave may we feel stronger, calmer, knowing that we are loved always and wholly by our God, and knowing that God knows our love is returned, as often as we remember, to the one who reigns over all.

Hymn 234: 'Tis winter now; the fallen snow

1 'Tis winter now ; the fallen snow
has left the heavens all coldly clear ;
through leafless boughs the sharp winds
blow,
and all the earth lies dead and drear.

2 And yet God's love is not withdrawn ;
his life within the keen air breathes ;
his beauty paints the crimson dawn,
and clothes each branch with glittering
wreaths.

Samuel Longfellow (1819–1892)

3 And though abroad the sharp winds blow,
and skies are chill, and frosts are keen,
home closer draws her circle now,
and warmer glows her light within.

4 O God, you give the winter's cold,
as well as summer's joyous rays,
you warmly in your love enfold
and keep us through life's wintry days.

Prayer

Even as we cope with changing limitations, restrictions, and risks, figuring what we cannot do, or do only with apprehension, life continues to move at speed. One minute, Advent, then the celebration of Christ's birth, coming, going, angels, stars and costumed kings packed away for another year. And then on again, to celebrate a new year, full of possibility, and hope, and goodness knows what. Living God, there are distractions and preoccupations everywhere, and everywhere there is your love, breaking through. May we, in these moments, give your love priority: the certainty of it, the strength of it, its constancy.

God who loves us relentlessly from the year's beginning until its end, from one year to the next, from before our birth and our baptism until we are once again dust, accompany us as we step with trepidation into the year. As far as we are able, may worship be our first call, whether here in the liveliness of one another's company, or at home. May we, each day, pause to give praise to you, to Jesus, and to the Holy

Spirit, always willing to be at work in us. Make your home in us, reach into the lives of others through us, and, if we are hurting, bind up our wounds and carry us through.

Loving God, on this day we come to think of the baptism of Jesus and the sacrifice of John. Make us attentive to stories that we know well, that we might hear echoes of distant truths, learn more about ourselves, and be conformed to the likeness of Christ our saviour. Still us in these moments and for this time, that, when we go from this place, our lives may be rich in service, full of compassion, and overflowing in love.
Amen.

Reading: Luke 3 verses 15 – 22

Hymn 334: On Jordan's bank the Baptists' cry

1 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.
2 Then cleansed be every heart from sin;
make straight the way for God within;
prepare we in our hearts a home,
where such a mighty Guest may come.

3 For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward;

Charles Coffin (1676–1749) *tr* John Chandler (1806–1876) and others

without your grace we waste away,
like flowers that wither and decay.

4 Stretch out your hand, to heal our sore,
and make us rise to fall no more;
once more upon your people shine,
and fill the world with love divine.

5 All praise to you, eternal Son,
whose advent has our freedom won,
whom with the Father we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

Sermonette

Luke 3 verse 21: When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened.....

BBC 4 does some marvellous programmes. Last Sunday night it was the Proms, focusing on Broadway musicals. At the end of it, another programme was trailed, and I watched that on Monday night. The first in a series called "Art on the BBC", it featured the work of Spanish surrealist artist, Salvador Dali. Tucked away in a corner of their heart, most Glaswegians, I guess, have a soft spot for the highly eccentric Catalan, on account of the city possessing one of his outstandingly famous works, *Christ of St John of the Cross*. Forget paintings of clock faces slipping off walls or sculptures of black Bakelite telephones with lobster handsets... My dad must have found something compelling in the man, because I have a childhood memory of standing in a queue with him to get into Kelvingrove Art Gallery to see an exhibition of Dali's work.

An artist as different from Dali as it is possible to imagine was being featured on Radio 4's *Moving Pictures* programme when I got into the car on Tuesday afternoon. I paid attention because the subject of the painting was John the Baptist, and a quick glance

at the audio display panel told me that under discussion was the work "The Feast of Herod" by Peter Paul Rubens. When I got home and had put my shopping away, I googled it. There is only so much one can visualise from an audio description or discussion, but that had prepared me and I was able to see in the painting that which might not have been obvious without it. There would never have been any missing John the Baptist's head being revealed as the lid of a shiny silver platter is lifted, nor Salome's brilliantly festive and sumptuous red dress. But I might have missed her mother, Herodias, (Herod's wife) about to stab John's tongue with a fork, just as I might have missed the dog under the table, had those aspects of the painting not been mentioned on the radio.

All that's in the future, however, but it influences and colours our understanding of John the Baptist from the start because we know it's going to happen. Even in our reading for today we can sense that he is sowing the seeds of his own demise, speaking of Jesus baptising "with fire", and separating the wheat from the chaff, an intimation of judgment so obvious and vivid that even a middle-class, middle of the road Church of Scotland congregation might not miss it. But as we encounter John, for the first time since we heard of him leaping in his mother Elizabeth's womb when Jesus's mother came to visit with a baby in her own, we do get a sense that, for him, this might be the beginning of the end. What had he been doing in all the time in between? Had he been pious, introverted, single-minded? Yes, I think we can bet on him having been single minded. It would lead him to prison, and then worse.

But, for now, John is doing his thing: preaching a baptism of repentance. And it went down well, it seems, perhaps because it had given rise to the expectation, or at least the thought, that he might be the Messiah. Whisper it, but not too quietly: could he be the one? Luke puts it very well: **The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.** He had always denied it, however.

And then, suddenly, from nowhere, out of the crowd steps Jesus. Again, Luke puts it without much embellishment (unlike Matthew and Mark): **When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too.** It sounds innocuous, but there's a question in it. Jesus wasn't, any more than John, one to "go with the flow" (pardon the pun if you're still paying attention and have spotted it). So did he simply step out from the line and step into the chilly waters of the Jordan just because everyone else was doing it? And, if he did, was it such a bad thing? In one way, it would be wrong to say that Jesus just did what everyone else was doing, unthinkingly. But it would also be wrong to miss the point here, which is that Jesus is quite definitely aligning himself in those moments with the folk in front of and behind him in the queue. One writer, Robert M Brearley, puts it this way: *Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinners.* Then he continues: *Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had been broken by the "wear and tear" of this world....*

When the line of downtrodden.... people formed in hopes of new beginnings through a return to God, Jesus joined them. At his baptism, he identified with the damaged and broken people who needed God. Jesus, on our side, and making it plain by being baptised...

But of course, that was only the half of it, or perhaps not even half. Luke maybe departs from fellow gospel writer Matthew in not rehearsing any discussion that might have taken place between the cousins concerning the need for Jesus to be baptised, but he does give us a detail that neither Matthew nor Mark includes. It's so briefly put that, if you are in the habit of bypassing references to prayer, you'd have found it very easy to bypass this one too. The gospel writer again: **And as he was praying.....**

Is Luke simply like me in this single way, in his inability, or unwillingness (in my case, both), to pass up any opportunity to mention prayer? Whether or not we know the answer, we might note it as something important at the start of the year, because it provides a tiny but significant insight into what prayer is. I have a number of wee cards with these words on them: *The meaning of prayer is that we get hold of God, not the answer.* Luke is, I believe, on to a similar truth. "As Jesus was praying, heaven was opened". It was not so that God could see out, but so that all the bystanders could see in. That's what happens when heaven opens: we get a glimpse of God.....

According to the way Luke concluded the story of Jesus' baptism, the glimpse of God took the shape of a dove and out of heaven the voice of God spoke. Nothing so dramatic may happen in our lives, but I dare to ask you: at the start of a new year, have you had a glimpse into heaven? Have you seen, or sensed, God already at and continuing to be at work in you? I dare to say, to insist, even, that prayer is essential to that, even if "prayer" is not an exercise of words but of contemplative stillness. And I invite you, in this time of resolutions and good intentions and undertakings and all the other well-meaning things that pepper our lives in January, to simply allow yourself to be in a state and in a place where heaven may open. Because when it does, you will catch an unmistakable sighting of God.

But here's a warning: prayer is dangerous. In the Advent and Christmas stories we saw where their longings (and what is prayer if not our longings, our hearts' desire?) took several folk: Zechariah struck dumb for not believing God's angel... Elizabeth and Mary both pregnant, one because she longed for and the other who didn't, but who accepted it when God offered it... Joseph in turmoil because he faithfully undertook what God asked... and kings, wise men, astrologers who understood the motion of stars and planets, endangered and forced home by another route. Maybe prayer is not popular because its results are highly unpredictable, sometimes unwelcome, and often terribly upsetting. But isn't that life with God? And as our story took place, no-one could have known or feared that more than John.

and as he was praying.... Will that be our experience in 2022: amazing things happening, and prayer the cause of it, the result of it, in the midst of it? I don't know the answer. You might. But we'll all be shaped by it. May you see heaven opened and, every day, catch a glimpse of God.

Hymn 336: Christ is our light! the bright and morning star

1 Christ is our light! the bright and morning star
covering with radiance all from near and far.
Christ be our light, shine on, shine on we pray
into our hearts, into our world today.

3 Christ is our joy! transforming wedding guest!
Through water turned to wine the feast was blessed.
Christ be our joy; your glory let us see,
as your disciples did in Galilee.

2 Christ is our love! baptized that we may know
the love of God among us, swooping low.
Christ be our love, bring us to turn our face
and see in you the light of heaven's embrace.

Leith Fisher (1941–2009)

Prayer

Living God, when snow comes, we marvel at the transformation of the landscape, and then confront the harsh reality it brings: travelling difficulties, folk marooned at home (as if we weren't already!), and extra and more difficult work for so many. So we give thanks for what we normally enjoy: travel and transport and freedom (of a kind), and pray for those for whom the snow brought not much fun at all. Be with those who grit the roads and brush the station platforms, who drive supply lorries and clear school playgrounds, all those who simply have to get to work for the sake of others, all who put their lives at risk to drive ambulances and maintain our hospitals and care services.

Loving God, we pray for our own: our children (of whatever age!) and grandchildren and the children known to us here. So far as we are able, may we commend Jesus and the life of the church to them, and set them free. May we be an example, always, of the best life, helping them to believe in justice and compassion, and supporting them as they need. And we remember that our older ones (us!) are precious, and pray wholeheartedly for the frail, those whose horizons have come very near indeed. Help us to love all in our family circle and in the church community without ceasing, at any cost, cheerfully, with patience and hope and kindness.

Lord God, we pray for our church nationally, whose future hangs in the balance. When we feel helpless, remind us that you ask of us that we remain faithful in all things, the little things and the grander plans. Above all, all through these straitened times, you

ask us to be faithful in worship, steadfast in prayer, wholehearted in service, and selfless in our relationships. May we rise, every day offered to us, to your invitation.

Hymn 236: March on, my soul, with strength

1 March on, my soul, with strength,
march forward, void of fear ;
he who has led will lead,
through each succeeding year ;
and as you journey on your way,
his hand shall hold you day by day.

2 March on, my soul, with strength,
in ease you dare not dwell ;
your Master calls you forth ;
then up, and serve him well !
Take up your cross, take up your sword,
and fight the battles of your Lord.

3 March on, my soul, with strength,
with strength, but not your own ;
the conquest you shall gain,
through Christ your Lord alone ;
his grace shall power your feeble arm,
his love preserve you safe from harm.

4 March on, my soul, with strength,
from strength to strength march on ;
warfare shall end at length,
all foes be overthrown.
And then, my soul, if faithful now,
the crown of life awaits your brow.

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.

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