



Opening Responses for Advent

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.
Let there be light!

On those living in the shadow of death, a light has dawned.
Let there be light!

The true light has come into the world to dispel the darkness.
Let there be light!

Prayer of Approach

Let us pray:

The people groaned amid the gathering darkness,
longing for the 'something' that would change everything,
for the dawning of the new day after the long night of exile,
for the boiling over of God's life from eternity into time.

The people thirsted and ached for streams of living water,
for signs of new life springing up in the deserts of despair,
for the change that would free them to be 'at home' with God,
but without really knowing what that would mean.

The people preferred their own darkness and shadows
to the fire on the earth God's truth brings raining down,
but God promised to dwell with them as Emmanuel,
Love inhabited humanly, made vulnerable and defenceless.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of Advent,
give us the courage to leave our darkness behind
and the faith to draw near to you,
stepping into the light of your truth, love and hope.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,
the radical answer to Israel's longings,
and the wellspring of everlasting life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What do you think about the idea of there being a 'naughty list'? Do you imagine God having one of them?

Prayers of Renewal

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of ignorance of your love
and mistrust of your ways.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of indifference towards the needs of others
and the undervaluing of ourselves.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of unjust ways of ordering the world
and the blind pursuit of self-interest.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of light and hope,
make us ready to meet with you. Amen

Readings Isaiah 61:1 – 4, 8 – 11
John 1:6 – 8, 19 – 28

Sermon

He's making a list, and checking it twice; he's going to find out who's naughty and nice. That's what the Jackson Five and others warn us about Santa Claus in the run-up to Christmas. If you should happen to find yourself on the naughty list, then no Christmas treats for you! As a child, I remember my parents playing us this song in an attempt to calm my brother and me down, in the lead up to getting our hands on a much-anticipated haul of presents. Nowadays when I hear it, I am also reminded of its usage by Tesco in their Christmas advert in 2020. They declared that the challenge of keeping going through a global pandemic was enough to justify abandoning the naughty list, and indulging ourselves regardless that year. It was intriguing to see an advert being accidentally theological and resonating with the 'big questions' addressed in Advent, not least in relation to the edgy and compelling figure of John the Baptist. Questions of the nature of sin, evil and divine judgment come to mind, and especially in the light of the traumatic events in Palestine and Israel that have been playing out since early October, these are important and live issues to which we need to pay attention.

The basic premise of both the song and the Tesco advert is that we may divide people up, in a binary and simplistic way – there are nice people and there are naughty people, there are the goodies and the baddies. Yet, if we examine it carefully, most of us can see that such a neat division simply does not ring true. Fictional portrayals of 'anti-heroes' such as James Bond, and of morally ambiguous figures like

Albus Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* franchise, make a point which has long been a staple of Judeo-Christian thought. We're a complex mixture as beings who bear the image of God and reflect something of the divine love, on the one hand, while also being fallen creatures in whom that image has become distorted, on the other. In everyday language, it means we're neither impeccably good nor irredeemably bad. We can do genuine good and our lives can display the fruits of the Spirit – kindness, gentleness, love, and so on. However, we can also do terrible harm, and it is important to acknowledge the shadow side of human nature together with its more positive aspects.

In a word, what we're speaking about here is the reality of *sin*, which is a deeply unfashionable concept to talk of in the world outside the Church, and is becoming more so on the inside too. Often, we prefer a rosy and optimistic view of human nature as essentially good, and when we do talk about sin, the risk is that we trivialise it, and so rob it of the power to point towards anything meaningful and significant. However, if we can get beyond the association of it with the naughty list and the other baggage the word has accumulated in recent eras, I think most of us do have that gut sense that the world we share is not how it should be: that the poorest and most vulnerable do suffer, that justice is not always done, that preventable harm does happen, often with depressing regularity. That instinctive sense of (in)justice, such as it is, leads us once again to John the Baptist.

John emerged in the wilderness, as the forerunner to Israel's longed for Messiah. The version of his story which we find in John's Gospel bookends it with statements about him coming to testify (John 1:19, 1:34) to the Light that was coming into the world (John 1:7 – 8). His witness caused a stir among the Pharisees in Jerusalem, who came from one of the dominant blocs in the lively and diverse Judaism of the day. They sent a party of priests and Levites, who were basically functionaries in the Temple, to interrogate John. Was he Elijah, who was the greatest of the Hebrew Prophets, and predicted to return to

herald the Messiah (Malachi 4:5)? Was he that mysterious figure to whom Moses looked (Deuteronomy 18:15 – 18), who was expected to lead the people of Israel onward? Or could John the Baptist even be the Messiah himself? John responded to the hostile questions of his challengers with a categorical ‘no’ in each case (John 1:20–21), and hence they demanded to know just exactly who this jumped-up fellow thought he was, for they could not return to the city without an answer for their bosses (John 1:22). When he did point to the Isaiah reading we heard last week and his role in preparing the way for the Messiah (Isaiah 40:3, John 1:23), this was met with further hostility: why then, he was baptising? (John 1:25).

It strikes me that John couldn’t win whatever he said, but he stayed true to his role as witness, and pointed to Jesus as the one who was so great that – despite John himself embodying Israel’s journey with God up to that point, and so outranking even Elijah and Moses – he wasn’t worthy even to untie the thong of his sandal (John 1:28). The lowliest servant normally got the thoroughly unpleasant job of taking care of people’s dirty feet and grubby footwear, so that was quite a statement to make! Reading this account, within the final of the four Gospels to be written, fills me with frustration. These people and the leaders who sent them weren’t stupid or ignorant of God’s ways and the prophecies of Judaism. Yet, they were so obsessed with looking to slap a label on John, to put him in a box in order to contain, control and perhaps even co-opt what he was doing into their own carefully regulated religious system, that they couldn’t see the bigger picture. Why was his younger cousin so great that John wasn’t fit to perform even the lowliest service for him?

The answer lies in today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah 61. It might be familiar to you because Jesus quotes it at the beginning of his public ministry in Luke’s version of the gospel; its first two verses form Jesus’s manifesto. In this reading, which builds upon the hope that God would do something truly new, and make the former things

fade away, we find passionate commitment on behalf of our God to justice. In the person of the prophet (based, in turn, on the Suffering Servant figure of Second Isaiah), God will bring good news to those who are oppressed, bind up the broken hearted and proclaim liberty to the captives, and bring release to the prisoners. Lest we be lured, as many have, into spiritualising this, remember that to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour is to cancel debt and restore land (Leviticus 25); this is deeply practical stuff, linking the salvation imagery of the oil of gladness, and restoration of the ruins of Jerusalem (61:3), with the love of justice, and the establishment of an everlasting covenant (61:8 – 11). In other words, this rich and beautiful array of prophetic imagery is directly bound up with real economic justice, and in Luke 4:18 – 19, Jesus claimed these promises for his own public ministry, as characteristics of the Kingdom of God.

This still has implications for life two-thousand years later, in twenty-first century Britain, with all of those faultlines in our society exposed by the pandemic, and further heightened by the cost-of-living crisis. Although it is true that there is no naughty list, in the sense of a clear division between good and bad people, it’s also true that the visions of justice of John the Baptist, and Jesus of Nazareth, are a long way from being the everyday norm, even after the passage of centuries.

Perhaps our society reveres those Christmas carols which cling on to Victorian sentimentality, wrap Jesus in swaddling clothes too tight to move and silence his disruptive cries, because we unconsciously seek to do the same thing to him as the religious leaders wanted to do with John the Baptist: to contain and control. The truth of Advent is that God’s passion for justice remains undiminished, and that the coming of Jesus into the world is a powerful reminder that sin is real and that we need the freedom of God to set us free. That freedom’s as fully present when we look at the vulnerable baby in the manger, as when we will confront the adult Jesus, for whom John the Baptist prepared the way. Albeit unintentionally, the naughty list reminds us

of the need for a realistic picture of human nature as we seek peace and justice. In this Advent and beyond, may it be so. Amen

A Methodist Way of Life

This week's theme is telling of God's love, in the contexts of realism about human nature and the complexities of the world in which God calls us to model love and light.

Prayers of Intercession

God of Advent hope,
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world,
as the one embodying your vision of justice and gladness,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are pushed to the margins of our society,
and those right at the sharp end of the cost-of-living crisis.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all living under oppressive regimes,
that they will hear, believe, and see your good news in action.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are broken hearted right now,
especially the bereaved and all struggling with other losses.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who feel trapped and held captive,
as a result of the situations or hardships they face.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all those who in prison or who work in prisons,
and for all who find themselves being victims of crime.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all at the sharp end of systematic injustices,

and for equality in God's eyes to be reflected in our society.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer

God of overflowing love,
whose body language cannot help but speak grace,
whose life and light boils over into our broken world,
not rending the heavens, but filling out that world from within;
we thank you that you identify so completely with us
that in Jesus Christ, you became one of us.

We thank you that we don't have to persuade you to care,
or flatter or manipulate you into being interested in us.
For you know our longings and desires and contradictions,
and you change everything through your defenceless love.

Help us to take the time we need this Advent
to be surprised and frightened and astonished
by the wonder of the Word made flesh –
God from God, and Light from Light. **Amen**

Blessing

Journey onward in the light of faith, and shine brightly.
Step forward in the strength of faith, and be bold.
And as you go, remember that you do so
with the blessing of God the Father,
the peace of Jesus the Son
and the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**