



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 does the word 'repentance' mean to you, and how do you feel about the call to embrace it during Advent?

Canticle – Benedictus (StF 792)

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 11:1 – 10
 Matthew 3:1 – 12

Sermon

Sometimes, a particular biblical text triggers a given train of thought. Contemplating today's readings led me to noticing a shift in the way in which street preachers put across their message. As a youngster, I remember going into Preston town centre with my dad, and seeing an elderly couple trying to evangelise the passing shoppers. It is not easy to decide which of the two was the most miserable looking, but the man was easily the more intimidating. His wife had this stack of leaflets she would thrust at startled passers-by, but he used to wear a sandwich board with flames and the word 'REPENT!!' on one side, and a selection of readings on hellfire and damnation (from what I'd assume must have been the Authorised Version) on the other. They did not usually have much to say for themselves, but when they did, they were often shouting at shoppers and threatening folks with hell! I suspect that we have all come across people like this couple, trying to scare others into faith. It is fascinating, therefore, that most street preachers one come across nowadays are much more likely to tell people God loves them – maybe there has finally been a realisation that shouting at people just puts them off...

This all came into my mind as I pondered the eccentric character of John the Baptist. On the face of it, he had more in common with the

scary northern street preachers than one might necessarily care for. And yet, there must have been 'something' about him that attracted others to him. Given his rather odd habits – dressing in itchy camel's hair, eating an admittedly high-protein diet of locusts, washed down with wild honey, and living out in the wildernesses – the good people of Jerusalem, Judea and the areas alongside the Jordan could have been forgiven for thinking him to be best avoided! Yet, all four of the Gospels tell us that thousands of folks flocked to him to be baptised in the Jordan, and the Jewish historian Josephus backs them up on this claim. Perhaps the time was right for that kind of stark message, and he successfully 'tuned into' the popular mood. With that in mind, who was this mysterious John, the older cousin of Jesus?

First, let's spend a while thinking about the backdrop to John's story, for which we need to turn to our Old Testament passage. According to the majority of biblical scholars, Isaiah is a complex work that was edited together over a period of time, and which centred around that turbulent chapter in Israel's history that witnessed the destruction of the throne of David, along with the capital city of Jerusalem, and the Temple around which corporate religious life revolved; those people who survived were then marched off into exile in Babylon. However, this particular chapter precedes that catastrophic episode within the history of God's people. The dominant power of the day was Assyria and the key question was whether Judah should engage in rebellion against them or wait upon God's initiative. Much of what First Isaiah, which covers chapters one through to thirty-nine, had to say centred on the judgement of God in relation to the violence and injustice that the prophet had observed, but there were also oracles of hope amid the darkness. What emerged over time was the longing for an 'ideal king', a Messianic figure, to decisively re-establish David's royal line and bring God's justice and righteousness to bear on the earth.

Nobody knew exactly what this would like, and how it would actually play out, but Isaiah understood that this would be both deeply joyful,

and deeply painful for Israel. God's people would be held to account and judged, confronted with their various shortcomings, and refined with fire. But, as today's passage reveals, they would also be invited to share in the vision of a 'transformed world', in which the poor and the lowly would be raised up and, as verses six to nine reveal, God's peace would extend to the whole of creation. Further exploration of what Israel's prophets had to say points towards the emergence of another figure, one who would prepare the way and make the paths straight for the Messiah. In time, John the Baptist would emerge as that figure. His strange clothing and eccentric diet were deliberately reminiscent of Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. It appears people were intrigued by John, including Pharisees who (presumably) were drawn to his message of repentance, and Sadducees who probably viewed him as a curiosity to be examined. As it was, he represented the culmination of all the Law and the Prophets up to that point, and yet what was coming after this would prove so earth-shattering, and deeply profound in the changes it would bring, that even the lowliest person in the Kingdom of Heaven would be greater than him so that he would not be worthy to remove their sandals.

So, in the middle weeks of Advent, we are invited to meet this edgy, volatile, profound and powerful character, and look to the coming of Jesus for which he 'paved the way', by calling people to repentance. The Greek for 'repentance' can be translated as 'turning away'; that is, turning our backs upon that which leads to us 'missing the mark', to failing to live up to all God created us to be. However, I reckon it makes rather more sense to think of 'repent' as meaning 'wake up'. Wake up, and take a good look around you. Wake up to the realities of God – to what it means to love God and love others as ourselves, without qualification. Wake up to the difference that *you* could make in the world. Wake up to what God is already doing around you, roll up your sleeves, and join in. By offering a baptism of repentance – something new, and not found in Jewish tradition – John was calling

Israel to wake up, and be ready for the differences that Jesus makes to our lives, and to the life of the whole world.

So, in one sense, John the Baptist does have something in common with those people I have seen out and about proclaiming God's love to the passing shoppers, in that his actions were motivated by God's passionate love for all creation, and a care about the future of Israel, in particular. Moreover, despite the superficial similarities, given the ways the northern street preachers reacted to certain folks, such as the gay couple which I vividly remember them lambasting simply for holding hands, it seems to me that John was a very different kind of 'prophetic figure'. In my view, he was far closer to John Wesley than to the sandwich board couple!

However, although we would rightly want to challenge the judgment of others based on characteristics they happen to have, which is the kind of *pre-judging* that has nothing to do with God's love, we should not be so quick to play down the concept of judgment as associated with John's talk of axes at the foot of trees, and of fires which cannot be quenched. If Jesus' cousin captured the spirit of his age by giving people the spiritual kick up the backside they needed, then who are those voices today? Who are the people in our time proclaiming the word of God from the margins, making us uncomfortable by refusing to conform to societal norms, and calling us to repent and wake up?

As you contemplate this, I encourage you to take the challenges in today's readings seriously. John the Baptist called his many hearers to bear fruit worthy of repentance and not just assume that they had a guaranteed ticket to heaven because they stood in Abraham's line and walked in his footsteps. The vision of Isaiah, of lions lying down with lambs, and serpents no longer being dangerous to people, gets realised through that judgment brought about by the Messiah – who reveals God's care for the marginalised. Jesus would later echo this proclamation in his own teaching, and so the one whose coming we

are getting ready for in this season of Advent also demands – rather than asking nicely – that we wake up and embrace the ways of God. That’s why the season of Advent has, traditionally, been a time used for self-examination, which holds together judgement and salvation. So, in the light of this, may we all have the courage to allow God to refine us in the fire, which burns away the chaff of selfishness, greed and prejudices, but grows in our hearts the wheat of righteousness, justice and love. Our world is longing for the same peace that Isaiah beautifully encapsulated those thousands of years ago. That means waking up, smelling the coffee, and changing for good. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of Advent hope,
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world,
as the one whom John the Baptist pointed us towards,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are feeling overwhelmed right now,
and struggling to find your comfort and peace in their lives.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who’ve lost loved ones in this past year,
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,
and all who have been made homeless during this period.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures build up.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all those who are aware of their need to change,

that you will bring renewal, hope and transformation.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who feel they have forgotten how to be joyful,
that they might reconnect with your joy during this Advent.
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...
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

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