



CALL TO WORSHIP

Deck the halls and light the candles. Prepare the way!
Open the doors and sing a song of hope. Prepare the way!
Make space in our hearts for a new kind of love. Christ is coming. Prepare the way!

HYMN STF 173 *Maggi Dawn (b. 1959)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXKOxub5obc>

Into the darkness of this world,
Into the shadows of the night;
Into this loveless place you came,
Lightened our burdens, eased our pain,
And made these hearts your home.
Into the darkness once again –
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with your love
To make us whole,
Come with your light to lead us on,
Driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Into the longing of our souls,
Into these heavy hearts of stone,
Shine on us now your piercing light,
Order our lives and souls aright,

By grace and love unknown,
Until in you our hearts unite –
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

O Holy Child, Emmanuel,
Hope of the ages, God with us,
Visit again this broken place,
Till all the earth declares your praise
And your great mercies own.
Now let your love be born in us,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come in your glory,
Take your place,
Jesus, the Name above all names,
We long to see you face to face,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

PRAYER

Advent God, we meet preparing to greet you. Turn us around to find your way. Guide us into a lifestyle appropriate to your coming kingdom, so that we may prepare the way for others and lead them in the path of peace. Be with us, Immanuel, the God who comes close. Amen

READINGS Isaiah 11: 1 – 10 and Matthew 3: 1 – 12

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Creator God, not a day goes by when you do not invite us to be peacemakers and advocates, listeners and Good Samaritans. Not a day goes by when we are not asked to be a friend to a stranger, and a neighbour to those in need. Not a day goes by when we are not asked to be the people you call us to be, and yet, day after day, we lose sight of your hope for this world. Forgive us for walking a different path, and grant us the strength to prepare a new way, your way – here. Gratefully we pray. Amen.

REPENTANCE OR PEACE?

Both of our readings for this second week of Advent, speak of urgency. Repentance can't wait, and Peace can't wait, I wonder which is the more important? Peace, or Repentance? One actually follows the other. Both are necessary to the health and well-being of the world, and society, in general, never mind ourselves, and the Kingdom of God. As I hope we will discover from the scriptures, peace follows repentance.

The word, repentance, translated from the Greek, as 'metanoia, means to turn around, to change your mind, or your way. So repentance is active, as is peace, which when translated from the Hebrew, as Shalom means wholeness and restoration, not stillness and freedom from noise.

So, we know that we live in a world where repentance just can't wait, and where peace is longed for. A peace so complete, so secure and so long-lasting that a wolf can live alongside a lamb, a leopard can lie alongside a goat kid, and a calf is quite safe being next to a lion, because all he wants to eat is grass! No tooth and claw here, no holding our breath watching a Sir David Attenborough programme as we will the zebra to outmanoeuvre the hunting lion. Have you noticed how many young are featured in these verses? The young that are vulnerable, defenceless, fragile and innocent. I think it is important to notice that as we read the introductory verses leading up to the illustration of peace and wholeness, where this peace comes from – from where does it start – from a stump!

I was reading in an artist's material guide, about how willow growers produce charcoal, not from twigs, as I had imagined, but from willow shoots growing out of a stump. Even a mature stump of 30 years old will only produce 10 – 20 shoots, but every one of them, when charred, will make their mark. The shoot that came from the stump of Jesse, Jesus himself, will make his mark, writes Isaiah. The Holy Spirit will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord.

This is what marks out Jesus, says John, as the long-awaited Messiah, as he appears in the wilderness of Judea, when he proclaims to the crowds who went out from Jerusalem to listen to him, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near.' Repentance can't wait any longer, he urges, the time is now – the present moment has come. If you want peace in your lives, in these troubled times, then repent now. The symbol of repentance that John offered was to be baptised with water, but he promised that Jesus, coming after him, would baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit.

It seems though, that the people, including the Pharisees and Sadducees were busy looking for the wrong Messiah. The Pharisees and Sadducees assumed that the messiah was going to 'save' the nation in a political and military sense, so they were on the look-out for a great leader to appear, perhaps someone like Alexander the Great. But just look at the world leaders of today, and consider how they got to power, what keeps them in that position, and how they treat their population. Maybe God has other ideas about what 'saving' the nation means. Maybe it looks more like Isaiah's prophecy. Maybe it is more about restoring or creating life-giving relationships of openness, love and trust. And that's why, as John so succinctly put it, 'Repentance can't wait.'

Even now the axe is lying at the foot of the tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire'

So it's hard enough to repent of what we have done wrong, but what if others have done wrong to us? How quick are we to forgive them and bring peace to our relationship? Remember the theme for today. Repentance can't wait, but neither can peace.

We can't wait for repentance. We can't wait for peace. We, as Christians, have to speak up and act now, if we are to bring about God's kingdom where the wolf will lie down with the lamb and where we welcome the Christ who will judge the poor with righteousness and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. Our human acts of injustice have produced green house effects and climate change globally, which will affect the poor before anyone else, and that's just the tip of the iceberg! It actually begins with ourselves. Are we ready to repent? Are we ready to forgive? Are we ready for peace? Because basically, we have been waiting, and putting it off for far too long.

HYMN STF 405

Gerald Coates (1944) Noel Richards (1955)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wP_BUHwweS4

Great is the darkness
that covers the earth,
oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
though many have come in Your name,
watching while sanity dies,
touched by the madness and lies.

May now Your Church rise
with power and love,
this glorious gospel proclaim.
In every nation salvation will come
to those who believe in Your name.
Help us bring light to the world,
that we might speed Your return.

*Come, Lord Jesus,
come, Lord Jesus,
pour out Your Spirit, we pray.
Come, Lord Jesus,
come, Lord Jesus,
pour out Your Spirit, on us today.*

Great celebrations on that final day,
when out of the heavens You come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end,
and rulers will bow at Your throne.
Our great commission complete,
then face to face we shall meet.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

For those who can find no peace in their heart through grief, anxiety or fear, we pray.

For those who can find no repentance in their heart through bitterness, guilt or anger we pray.

For those who can find no peace in their lives through hunger, homelessness or loneliness, we pray. For those who can find no repentance in their lives through abuse, neglect or cruelty, we pray.

Hear our prayers and bring healing light into those hearts and lives of darkness. Amen.

HYMN STF 180 (selected verses)

John Mason Neale (1818 – 1866)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
who mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God draws near:

Rejoice, rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, true Rod of Jesse, free
your children from this tyranny;

from depths of hell your people save
to rise victorious from the grave:

Rejoice, rejoice!...

O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
dispel the long night's lingering gloom
and pierce the shadows of the tomb:

Rejoice, rejoice!...

BLESSING

Go out to celebrate in love and laughter. Go as lights for the world! Shine in the darkness, act justly, and walk humbly with your God, in whose name we pray. Amen