



Call to Worship

Come, let us rejoice this day in the God who is near in everyone around us.

We will sing glad songs of the One who is rebuilding neighbourhoods in our midst.

Come, let us rejoice always in Jesus who baptizes us with hope and compassion.

We will join in choruses of praise of the One who brings justice to the forgotten in our midst.

Come, let us rejoice again and again in the Spirit who offers us new life in every moment.

HYMN 776 (*Taizé Community*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjZsXCZX8f4>

In the Lord I'll be ever thankful,
In the Lord I will rejoice!
Look to God, do not be afraid;
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near;
Lift up your voices the Lord is near.

*You are my salvation.
I trust in you. I shall not be afraid,
You are my strength, You are my song.
The Lord is my Rock The Lord is my fortress.
My God, You are my refuge and my shield.*

Prayer "Rejoice, rejoice with all your heart."

This is your command to us and recalling the beauty of our world and the joys of life, it is easy to obey.
Recalling the gift of Jesus to us, the living expression of your grace, we rejoice in your never failing love.
Forgive us when we ignore the Saviour you sent to be among us and to live in us.

Forgive us for not opening our eyes to Jesus. Prepare us for His return.

Help us rejoice in the light, so that your grace can illuminate the darkened places of our hearts. Amen.

Readings Philippians 4: 4-7

 Luke 3: 1-6

HYMN 162 *The Prophet's Voice* Alan Hinton (Note: not on video, but for a festive feel sing it to 205 "It came upon a midnight clear")

The prophets' voice comes down the years
to teach and to inspire,
to show the nature of our God
in words and deeds of fire;
not to disclose some rigid plan
that God has set in stone,
but to renew the promises
the saints have always known.

and then translates the things gone by
in ways that we find new
so we can judge the world we know
by standards ever true.

The prophets' voice speaks of the past —
the actions that reveal
the way God used the people
then this broken world to heal;

The prophets' voice holds up a glass
in which to see our day;
events which span the globe around
and things we do and say.
It calls us to repent and turn
from things that tear life down,
to choose the path that Jesus chose
and share his work and crown.

Sermon

Do you think Luke had a strange sense of humour? *You brood of vipers, flee from wrath to come, the axe is at root of tree. Judgement is nigh.* "So with many other exhortations he preached the good news to the people"! Heaven help us when we get to the bad news!

Not surprisingly people begin to ask what they should do. He told people if they had 2 tunics (undergarments worn next to skin) to give 1 to someone without. He told tax collectors to collect no more than their dues. Local collectors had to pay tax to authorities up front, then collect from people. There were no checks or accountability so the system was open to abuse. He told the soldiers (who were probably local mercenaries so like tax collectors viewed as collaborators, out so get whatever they could) not to use their position for gain by blackmail or force. 3 examples of repentance that don't go anywhere near the religious establishment but were rooted firmly in everyday life challenging the hearers to be people who share, are fair and don't bully others.

Really? That's all? Well, we're home and dry then! Except that although those 3 instructions are an integral part of being a follower of Christ they were actually addressed to 3 specific groups of people in John's audience. He told the listeners that their lives were to "produce fruits in keeping with repentance".

But opportunities to produce fruit depend on who and where you are. Did you notice that Tax collectors are not called to sever their relationship with Rome, nor are the soldiers exhorted to lives of pacifism. Even in light of impending judgment, they are called to serve where they are; to stand up for their neighbour and to do good *because*, rather than in spite of, their compromised positions.

This is the season of advent when Christians are reminded anew of the one who came to usher in the Realm of God. The context in which we find ourselves doing this is the tinselly, cash splashing, over catering, debt causing, anxiety inducing celebration of Christmasrather than Christ Mass. Like John's hearers we ask "what must we do?" Simply being "Bah Humbug" and denouncing our neighbours as vipers is not the answer. The question we each must ask of ourselves and God is "how do I declare and act out the sacred amongst the ordinary?" How can I be just, and gentle and kind and in so doing, make a difference to those with whom I deal?

Is this really all it takes to avoid judgment and enter into paradise? Apparently, according to John, the answer is, Yes, perhaps because everything looks different in light of the coming Christ. Jesus' coming, John implies, affects every dimension of our lives -including how we regard each other and our ethical obligations to one another and the world. It seems like one of the chief ways through which we can witness to God's coming kingdom is to actually live like it's here, as if we believe it's really coming, as if we think it actually matters. What if we believed – and acted on the belief – that being honest, kind, and hardworking in a culture that is impatient, immature, and fearful really makes a difference.

I know this message sounds a bit hollow in a world that feels as it's falling apart, but hear again those words from Paul in Philippians written from a prison cell when his future looked short. Rejoice, he commanded. Joy, for Paul, is not a feeling that is dependent upon circumstances. It is choosing to reflect on God's actions to redeem creation even when all the present circumstances might indicate that some other power had won. For Paul that was the might of Rome with all its oppression. For us it's – what? Climate change and the words not actions of governments? The hugely unequal distribution of wealth? The hugely unequal distribution of vaccines? The double standards of some of our politicians? The vitriolic hatred of some people towards those who are different? You can carry on the list I'm sure.

But Paul asks his community to be peaceable to all. How the believers behave in the hard times reveals a lot about their vision of good news. Paul places the believers' hope back in God whose power is greater than any that might try to thwart this good news. So as we, like John's hearers, await the coming of Jesus we can hear the role we can play in the coming Kingdom. It may not be heroic but it's do-able!

Prayer Your kingdom come, your will be done ...

where nations engage in war ... where regimes care more about their own power than their care for the people ...where taxation favours the rich at the expense of the poor...where fashion is created in sweatshops and quickly discarded by its wearers ... where those who have 3 vaccines are reluctant to give to those who have none...where else needs your prayers? *The Lord's prayer.*

HYMN 255 The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy *Bryn Rees*

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

The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
and all things cry glory to God all in all!

Blessing

The day of the Lord is surely coming. Be faithful in worship, unwavering in hope, fervent in the work of God's kingdom and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Now the blessing of God be upon you and all people this day and for ever. Amen.