

When God reigns There is Room for Difference

Call to worship It's Advent. Not yet Christmas. It's not just time for you and me to prepare. It's time for all the world's different people to prepare. From east and west, north and south, to gather as one human family.

How do we welcome and receive people who seem so different to us?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we see the prophecies that arise from different cultures?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we understand a message from someone we don't expect?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How would we welcome amongst us John the Baptist, with camel's hair and leather belt?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we see God's message beyond our circle of family and friends?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

How do we live together in harmony, in peace and love with people who are different from us?

When God reigns there is room for difference.

We lit our first candle for you and me.

Let us light our second candle for people **who are different from us**, as we watch and wait.

Hymn StF 171 Hark the glad sound <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeBRYhG86x0>

Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long;
let every heart prepare a throne,
and every voice a song.

He comes the prisoners to release,
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name.

Philip Doddridge (1702–1751) StF 171

Prayers of praise and confession We praise you, O loving God,
who gave your very self in human form, your majesty born into our poverty, your love lying in an out-
house. We thank you that, amidst Bethlehem's noisy rush, we find in you
a focus for our activity, a hope for you humanity, a love for all eternity.

But we confess that Christ's birth has gone unnoticed. Now, as then, we have not made room
in our day to day lives. Now, as then, we have mislaid your message of reconciling love.
Now, as then, we have ignored the stillness of your presence.

Gift-giving God, forgive us. Free us from our self-centeredness.

Help us to accept your love so freely given that we may live as you have called us to live. Amen.

Gospel Matthew 2:1-12 The Visit of the Magi

Old Testament Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge for
the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his
mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid.
the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together.
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples.
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Reflection

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, I am picking up the Connexional Methodist Advent theme. There is room for all. One of my abiding images of school Christmas nativity plays is the boy playing Joseph and the girl, with a cushion under her clothes, playing Mary, knocking on the inn door and the innkeeper saying "there is NO room at the Inn". Joseph is desperate to get somewhere safe where his wife can give birth and eventually, they are offered the stable where the baby was born.

The connexional Methodist theme is to rip the NO out of the innkeeper's statement and say THERE IS ROOM. Each week focuses on a different category. Last week it was "THERE IS ROOM FOR YOU AND ME, emphasizing that all of us can be involved in the Christmas story, we do not need to feel isolated or outsiders, though we recognise that sometimes, we do feel like that

This week it is THERE IS ROOM FOR DIFFERENCE. Emphasising that we don't all have to believe exactly the same, we don't need to dress the same, or behave the same, God has created us as individuals and therefore there will be differences. The people from the nativity story that we use to show that differences are acceptable are the wise men. Hence our reading from Matthew 2

The wise men have travelled a long way, following a star, to find the baby Jesus and worship him. They probably came from Persia (modern-day Iran), and they weren't Jewish like Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They were 'magi', men who studied astrology. This was forbidden for Jews and for followers of Jesus. And yet, God chose to write a message in the stars to these magi and they responded to God's invitation. The Bethlehem stable has room for people from different belief systems, different racial groups, different national and tribal backgrounds – even people who might not expect to find themselves there, are welcome in the Christmas story.

Our Old Testament reading comes from the Prophet Isaiah. He was prophesying some 700 years before Jesus was born. Chapter 2, last week's reading talked about people streaming to the Holy Mountain – to Jerusalem. All nations with great diversity coming to worship God. And bringing such a change in relationships between the nations, that no longer are weapons of war being produced, but agricultural equipment for the development of the land.

Chapter 9 goes on to talk of a son being born, in David's line, in David's city, Bethlehem and is given the titles we now know were given to Jesus, – the names Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The government of this kingdom will be on this son's shoulders and it's a government of justice and righteousness.

Obviously if you look around the world today, weapons of war are still in use and there is plenty of injustice and unrighteousness – if anything it seems to be on the increase
But this is the "NOT YET" of the kingdom of God – we see glimpses of it but not the completeness.

The content of our reading today from chapter 11, reiterates what has been said and takes it further. It goes back a generation from David – to his Father Jesse. God has bought judgement on the Israelites because of their failure to worship only God, because of their doing things in their own strength and chapter 10 talks of the felling of great forests, not just the enemies (Assyrians) but also the tribes of Israel. From the stumps left in the forest after the destruction, from Jesse's stump a shoot will come up, and generations after, Jesus will be born
"The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord."

Isaiah repeats this prophecy in chapter 61 in similar but different words

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,

² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.

Jesus read this passage in the synagogue in Nazareth and says this is being fulfilled in his ministry
Who are the ones who are receiving the good news – the poor, the broken hearted, the captives, the prisoners,
those who mourn – were they all the same, or were there differences between those people being blessed?

Let's return to Chapter 11. This shoot from the root of Jesse (ie Jesus)
He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;

Again, it is not those you would expect to be heard who come out favourably in judgement. Those who defend themselves, those who have money, those who have political power. He will not judge by the clamour of the world, but support the poor, the oppressed.

Diverse groups of people are being raised up

Isaiah then goes on in Chapter 11 to describe a universal peace, recalling the paradise of the garden of Eden. It is a picture of the whole of creation put back into joint. The entire earth, not just Jerusalem the holy mount. In other words, He will be known and his rule experienced everywhere.

Isaiah is looking beyond the disappointments of his own AGE, to the coming of one who is God in the flesh, in chapter 9 his incarnation, birth and ch 11 the future kingdom where he shall reign – his second advent

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

When the Israelite were wanting a King, they were wanting a king like the other nations had. But Moses specifically instructed the people as to the sort of King they should have In Deuteronomy 17

¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite. ¹⁶ The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.' ¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

¹⁸ When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees ²⁰ and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

But the selection of Kings that were appointed, never matched the criteria laid down by God. They were greedy, selfish, proud, arrogant, independent. They overlooked the poor, they continued to oppress people, they thought themselves better than their fellow Israelites and demanded their rights as Samuel prophesied (1 Sam 8)

The prophecies of Isaiah point to a different type of King – they point to Jesus. The story of God holds together all people, all the world – and even those of us who feel different. We believe that God created all things and therefore is a God of diversity and creativity. In God's vision of the world, all things exist in love, harmony and peace – and the good news is that we are all asked to take our place in that vision.

For your reflection.

- 1) Have you ever felt like a religious or cultural outsider?
- 2) What would it take for us all to live in harmony?

Hymn StF website We come today to celebrate Tune : Amazing Grace

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

We come today to celebrate
the life that Jesus gives,
and welcome in God's loving grace
that in the Spirit lives.

The Spirit sanctifies our lives
and helps our darkest days;
we hold each other close to You
with voices joined in praise.

We celebrate diversity,
as well as common ground,
and will continue so to do
while love and peace are found.

For Christ does not discriminate,
but welcomes one and all;
so we will seek to do the same,
responding to God's call.

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Prayers

Living God, thank you today for those who have the courage to stand up and speak out against evil and injustice; those who are ready, if necessary, to stand alone for their convictions, enduring mockery and rejection, sacrificing status and security, willing to risk everything for what they believe to be right. We thank you for their vision, determination, their willingness to be a voice in the wilderness.

May your glory be revealed, **and all people see it together.**

Thank you for those who have sufficient concern for other to reach out and help ministering to the sick, comforting the bereaved, visiting the lonely, providing for the poor, giving hope to the oppressed, bringing

laughter to the sorrowful, We thank you for their dedication, their understanding, their goodness, their willingness to speak your word in the wilderness

May your glory be revealed, **and all people see it together.**

Living God, you call us to reach out to your broken world – to those walking in darkness, wrestling with despair, craving affection, thirsting to find purpose in their lives. Give us faith, wisdom, tenderness and love to meet the challenge. Help us to venture into the wilderness ourselves and there, gently but confidently to speak your word of life

May your glory be revealed, **and all people see it together.**
Amen

Hymn StF 175 Light of the world

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYsR49ReAj4>

Light of the world,
you stepped down into darkness,
opened my eyes, let me see
beauty that made this heart adore you,
hope of a life spent with you.

*So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.*

King of all days, oh so highly exalted,
glorious in heaven above. Humbly you came
to the earth you created,
all for love's sake became poor.

So here I am to worship ...

And I'll never know how much it cost
to see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost
to see my sin upon that cross.

So here I am to worship ...

Tim Hughes StF 175

Blessing Gracious God, just as you came into our world in Christ, help us now to go out for you, to proclaim his word, share his love and work for his kingdom. Help us to live in him and for him, and through him, until that day when he comes again and you are all in all. **Amen**