



Call to worship

Loving God, as we light the 'third' candle we celebrate your presence with us today. May your light infuse the dark places of our hearts; may your truth reassure us when doubts drain and exhaust us; may your peace seep into the restless places of our souls; and may your grace strengthen, sustain and guide us, through this Advent, this winter, and always. **Amen.**

Advent hymn StF165 (vv1-3)

<https://youtu.be/tlC5ybhWcrM>

1. Advent candles tell their story as we watch and pray, longing for the Day of Glory, 'Come, Lord, soon,' we say. Pain and sorrow, tears and sadness changed for gladness on that day.
2. Prophet voices loudly crying, making pathways clear, glimpsing glory, self-denying, calling all to hear. Through their message — challenged, shaken - hearts awaken: God is near!
3. John the Baptist, by his preaching and by water poured, brought to those who heard his teaching news of hope restored: 'Keep your vision strong and steady, and be ready

A prayer of adoration

God of all seasons,
your love never wavers,
your power never fails.
You never leave us to our doubts,
you never abandon us to our insecurity.
You always hear our cry,
and you always help us to begin again —
that we may help others
in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Prayers of confession/Assurance of forgiveness

Living God, thank you for the opportunity to reflect and mull Scripture together. We know that sometimes to doubt is to grow — so, forgive us when we allow our doubts to diminish us; forgive us when we allow our weariness to demoralise us.

Silence

Forgive us and help us to glimpse your presence in our lives and in our world,
that we may negotiate all obstacles to our faith and be empowered afresh, this Advent, in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Reliable God,
you heal us when we are wounded,
you free us when we are bound,
you reassure us when we wobble;
Thank you holy, humble, here and now God. **Amen.**

A prayer of praise

God of Advent,
thank you for John the Baptist,
the greatest and the least,
for his certainty and his doubts;
for his honesty and his humility;
for his passion and his pondering;
for his single mindedness and his reflectiveness;
for his questions — and your answers,
all of which help us today in everyday life,
and for which we praise you. **Amen.**

Hymn: StF18 Be still and know that I am God

https://youtu.be/AyDr9-Mpc_s

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am God.

I am the Lord who saves and heals.
I am the Lord who saves and heals.
I am the Lord who saves and heals.

In you, O Lord, I put my trust.
In you, O Lord, I put my trust.
In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

Today's readings:

Psalm 146:5-10; Matthew 11.2-11

Sermon: 'A faith that questions'

"Hush!" said Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as he was about to lead worship in an English cathedral. 'Hush! Can you hear the butterflies in my tummy?'

In a strange way, it's reassuring to think of a man such as Archbishop Tutu experiencing nerves like the rest of us. John is also beset by uncertainty and anxiety. He is suddenly doubtful of the message he

proclaimed so boldly. Jesus' answer was to point to the practical ways his work was making a difference to people's lives. We'll never know if this comforted John or if he died still full of doubt.

This week we start with a searching question by John the Baptist, from what was (presumably) the dark dungeon in which he had been imprisoned by Herod. Perhaps that is what had triggered some of his dark thoughts. Had his ministry been in vain? Had he pointed his followers in the wrong direction when he directed them towards Jesus as the one who would follow him?

The term 'dark night of the soul' is closely associated with another John – John of the Cross, a 16th-century mystic – and it has become associated for many with an experience that involves profound challenges to a person's sense of who they are and what they believe. In the original poem where John of the Cross introduces this term, he embraces the experience of the 'dark night of the soul' as a time of transformation and spiritual growth. It has also been noted by many that seeds generally germinate in the dark, and indeed some require the harsh cold of winter to start the process. The point is that times of anxiety and doubt can be true of spiritual growth too.

Sometimes it is only when we stop, or are forced to stop by some outside circumstance, that we allow ourselves to think. But it was only when John (the Baptist) voiced his questions and had his followers convey them to Jesus that they could be addressed! However, Jesus somewhat like a modern politician, didn't directly answer the question. Rather, he gave John more food for thought. We don't know what conclusion John came to before his grisly end. But it is clear that this hero of the faith was learning more about the God he served and the Messiah he prepared the way for, right up to that point.

So, we may never be the finished article. We may go through many dark nights of the soul on many issues. It is said that Mother Teresa of Calcutta felt herself to be in a 'dark night' from 1948 almost up until her death in 1997, with only brief interludes of relief along the way. It has also been said that we should not forget in the dark what we learned in the light. Sometimes, perhaps, we need to remember in the light what we have learned in the dark! Amen.

Prayers of intercession

Lord, we wait.
We wait for the fulfilment of your promises
and the full and permanent coming of your kingdom.

In our waiting, we remember those grappling with circumstances outside of their control,
those who feel that life is passing them by,
those who are waiting for hope that never comes.

We pray for those whose faith is wearing thin,
whose patience is strained by the length of their waiting,
for those whose eyes are tired
of watching for the dawn.

We wait for light to break on their horizons,
for your Spirit to work something new,
something bright, something enduring,
deep within those places
that seem the most hopeless.

Lord, lift up those who are bowed down,
those far from home, those estranged and those who are weary, and encourage the hearts of all those who wait for you. In the name of Christ. **Amen.**

The LORD'S PRAYER

Final hymn – StF264 – Make way, make way...
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alCQ7fb0hEA>

Make way, make way, for Christ the King in splendour arrives; fling wide the gates and welcome him into your lives.

Chorus

***Make way (Make way), make way (make way),
for the King of kings (for the King of kings);
make way (make way), make way (make way),
and let his Kingdom in.***

He comes the broken hearts to heal, the prisoners to free;
the deaf shall hear, the lame shall dance, the blind shall see. ***Make way (Make way),***

And those who mourn with heavy hearts, who weep and sigh,
with laughter, joy and royal crown he'll beautify. ***Make way (Make way),***

We call you now to worship him as Lord of all, to have no gods before him, their thrones must fall!

Make way (Make way),
Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

Blessing & Dismissal

Lord, as we go out into the world,
may we be signs of your coming kingdom.
As we struggle through the dark,
may we know that you are there with us.
And, as we walk the way of faith,
may we know that your faithfulness is deeper than our doubts. **Amen.**

*This worship comes with materials from Rootsontheweb,
Everingham Music (YouTube) Singing the Faith*