



Call: Bring your thoughts and feelings, bring your busyness, bring your chaos. Bring your worries and bring your calm, bring your hope and bring your fears. Bring it before God, who promises to level mountains and raise valleys, who draws a straight highway to Him.

Hymn: STF 443 Come let us sing of a wonderful love <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dOSfceRwOU>

Come let us sing of a wonderful love,
tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
Home! weary wanderers, home!
Wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
joyfully came;
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost,
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

Come to my heart, O Thou wonderful love,
come and abide,
lifting my life till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;
seeking to be
lowly and humble, a learner of Thee.

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Prayer of Praise and Adoration: Eternal God, for you one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. You are beyond time, beyond space, beyond our deepest thought. Yet in your constant love you judge your people with righteousness, and restore them once more. You sent your Son to live amongst your people and through him we have been redeemed. All praise and glory belong to you, in time and in eternity; in Jesus Christ our Saviour. AMEN

Hymn: STF 489 All I once held dear <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxpPla-BskY>

All I once held dear,
Built my life upon,
All this world reveres,
And wars to own,
All I once thought gain
I have counted loss;
Spent and worthless now,
Compared to this.

*Knowing You, Jesus,
knowing You,
there is no greater thing.
You're my all, You're the best,
You're my joy, my righteousness,
and I love You, Lord.*

Now my heart's desire
Is to know You more,

To be found in You
And known as Yours.
To possess by faith
What I could not earn,
All-surpassing gift
Of righteousness.
Chorus

Oh, to know the power
Of Your risen life,
And to know You in
Your sufferings.
To become like You
In Your death, my Lord,
So with You to live
And never die.

Chorus

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Reading: Isaiah 40: 1-11

Prayer of Confession: *Find a rock/ pebble, as rough as possible and feel it in your hand whilst you read this prayer)*

God of mercy and grace we confess that we are all in need of change. There are things in our life that get in the way of us drawing closer to you. We have wandered from your ways and followed our own paths. We have ignored the messages of your prophets and trusted in our own judgement. We bring those things before you now and ask for your forgiveness. You tell us that mountains will be laid low and valleys brought up, and a straight highway made in the wilderness. Thank you that through your Son, our mountains are levelled down and valleys are levelled up, our sins are forgiven and once again we can follow your straight highway. AMEN

Reading: Mark 1:1-8

Hymn: STF 264 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.

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.

Refrain

And those who mourn with heavy hearts,

Who weep and sigh;

With laughter, joy and royal crown

He'll beautify.

Refrain

We call you now to worship Him

As Lord of all.

To have no gods before Him,

Their thrones must fall!

Refrain

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Message: "Metanoia – transformative changing of the mind"

I learnt a new word this week – Metanoia, meaning "changing of the mind." It's a term used in both psychology and theology. In theology it means conversion and reformation or repentance. Metanoia is the act of "prostration before God," both physically and spiritually. In psychology it has a rather more disturbing definition, meaning a psychotic breakdown which then leads to an experience of positive rebuilding and healing.

In simple terms it means a journey of changing one's mind, heart, self or way of life. It is transformative.

This is what John the Baptist was preaching – transformative change in people's lives as a result of repenting, or turning away from sinful ways.

The Jews were living in relatively peaceful times, despite the Roman occupation. They were just getting on with their lives, putting up with the foreign order, sitting back and waiting, and waiting. It had been 400 years since the last prophet had spoken, and the people had almost forgotten what it felt like to be anticipating the coming of the Messiah, the One who was to save them.

I wonder how they were feeling? Excited, sceptical, anxious, resigned. Was THIS the time that the Messiah would finally come to set them free? Had they felt let down before and didn't want to get their hopes up?

They would have known the words of Isaiah, and perhaps gained some comfort from his words. Isaiah had prophesied to the Jews that they would be taken into exile and that their beloved city of Jerusalem would fall, all as a result of God's judgement on them for turning away from Him, but God promised that after the time of judgement he would restore them. In fact it was another 100 years after this prophesy that Jerusalem fell and then 70 years in exile.

For the Jews, the most important time in their life was Passover when they celebrated the Exodus and God leading them through the Red Sea to the Promised Land. God had once again promised restoration and indeed the people were brought out of exile and Jerusalem was once again a great city.

The Messiah was promised, his day would come.

And as they were contemplating, waiting, wondering, praying(?) John the Baptist bursts onto the scene.

Mark's gospel opens at a fast pace, good news about Jesus the Messiah, John the Baptist is on the scene and promises one will come who does not baptise in water but in the Holy Spirit, one who is so important that John feels unworthy even to undertake the most menial of customs, that of untying the sandals of a guest.

Mark was writing to the early converts in Rome. In Roman culture anyone of importance was announced by a herald, someone who prepared the way. So here we see the story of John the Baptist, rather than the chronology of Jesus' birth and childhood, right at the beginning of the book. It's as if Mark is saying to his readers, "come on, wake up," as if he is throwing cold water to shake them into action.

John the Baptist was also preaching this, "come on, wake up, the Messiah really IS coming!"

And like Isaiah, John is saying that God WILL keep his promise of restoration, "After me comes one more powerful than I....I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Jews recognised baptism, but it was for other people. It was part of the process of conversion to Judaism, along with circumcision – the sign of a covenant people of God, and sacrifice – a blood sacrifice for the atonement of sin. Baptism with water was seen as a cleansing for the uncleanness and pollution of the gentile life.

So for Jews, baptism was unnecessary for themselves. Yet here was John, himself a Jew, preaching of baptism of ALL, for forgiveness of sins. It was not for groups of people, rather it was personal, individual, and with new meaning.

It was a complete, individual, personal turning away from sin – it was metanoia, a transformative and complete change of heart, mind and whole self.

The Jews had been waiting, anticipating, expecting a sign, something to tell them that the Messiah was coming to set them free, just as God had done on setting them free from the Egyptians, and again from the Babylonians. But what they weren't expecting was for God to do it this way – to tell them THEY had to change, repentance of sin for everyone gentile AND Jew.

So what does this mean for us as we come once again to the time of Advent, when we take time to reflect on what it means to prepare for the One who will set us free? What does the story of John the Baptist tell us?

1. He came into the wilderness, to make a straight highway. The mountains would be lowered and the valleys brought up.

What is there in our lives that we need to bring down? What are the obstacles we need to remove? What valleys are hindering our progress on the highway to God?

2. Mark's Gospel is a wakeup call, like someone switching the lights on when you are sound asleep to wake you up, or splashing cold water on your face. John comes to herald the coming of that Messiah, urging people, promising people, that the best is yet to come.

What does it feel like to be suddenly woken up? Disorientating? Refreshing? What does it feel like to be suddenly challenged to change? Exciting? Confusing? What me – it's those others that need to change?

What does it feel like to suddenly admit to yourself, to others and to God that you need to change?

3. In the Old Testament, after the Exodus, God appeared in a pillar of cloud and fire. He was distant, invisible except to the prophets. In the New Testament, John tells us that God will be present WITHIN each one of us who believes, in the form of the Holy Spirit – the air we breathe, living water we drink, the fire in our hearts.

What does it feel like once you have embarked on that journey of change? Think about something you've done that is different to your normal habits; a hobby perhaps, or a new skill you have learnt. What did it feel like the first time you had a go? What did the process of learning or change feel like? What does it feel like when you have finished learning or changing? Or have you finished?

Metanoia is the process of transformative change of heart and mind. Let us take this time of Advent to reflect on the transformation the coming of Jesus into our lives can bring. **AMEN**

Hymn: STF 471 Lord I come to you <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL1POv2eY04>

Lord, I come to You,
let my heart be changed, renewed,
flowing from the grace
that I found in You.

And Lord, I've come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
will be stripped away
by the power of Your love.

*Hold me close,
let Your love surround me.
Bring me near, draw me to Your side.
And as I wait
I'll rise up like the eagle,*

*and I will soar with You,
Your Spirit leads me on
in the power of Your love.*

Lord, unveil my eyes,
let me see You face to face,
the knowledge of Your love
as You live in me.

Lord, renew my mind
As Your will unfolds in my life,
in living every day
in the power of Your love.
Chorus

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Prayers of Intercession: We bring our prayers for ourselves and others before God.

God of the straight highways, we bring before you those areas of the world where roads have been destroyed whether through bombs, or through natural disasters such as floods or earthquake. We pray that roads and lives can be restored. We pray for those who face mountains too steep to climb, may those obstacles be removed.

We pray for those in deep valleys of depression, of poverty, of hunger or illness. May they receive a hand of love, friendship, care and support to help them out of those valleys. We pray for ourselves, for those mountains we face, for those valleys we find ourselves in. May our way be straight and may we draw ever closer to you this Advent time. Heavenly Father we thank you that you make the road straight for us, we thank you for helping us to prepare to receive you once more. AMEN

Hymn: SofF 780 How deep the Father's love for us <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gdy8Bu8Cg0>

How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss -
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.

It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life -
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart -
His wounds have paid my ransom.

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Blessing: May God give us the courage to receive him. May we greet him with joy. May we carry him in our hearts to others. And may the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us all now and evermore. **AMEN**