**12th December 2021**

**A gathering prayer**

*This prayer may be used with an Advent wreath. Light the third candle this week.*

As we light this Advent candle,
may its flame be for us a sign of the light
that reveals to us our path through life,
that inspires us to live simply and generously,
after the example and call of John the Baptist,
that we ourselves may be signs of the good news we proclaim.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

O Lord our God,
God of the prophets and God of the now,
you are with us.
Your power gives us victory.
You take delight in us.
And in love, you give us new life.
Hear us as we come to you today.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

To you, O God, we lift our hearts; how great you are.
You are our saviour; you are our power; you are our strength.
You are the giver of life-giving water to quench our spiritual thirst.
You are a bounteous one beyond our imagining.
You are the giver of gifts beyond compare.
To you, O God, we lift our heart, we raise our eyes, and we shout in adoration.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Blessed God, hear our prayers of sadness and regret for times when we have been blind to the needs of neighbours, deaf to the cries of the distressed, silent at the sight of the abused, careless with the frightened and supportive of greed and corruption.
We confess our obsessions with things material and frivolous, fripperies wrapped in tissue paper.
Open our ears and eyes, and our hearts, to be more receptive to what we see and hear from those we meet.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God knows the depths of our sorrow.
God knows the depths of our grief for wrongs done.
God knows the pains of regret for deeds undone.
God knows the depths of our hearts.
To God we repent, and forgiveness is given.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of thanksgiving**

Praise to you, Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
We praise you for the gift of witnesses to your love.
We give thanks for the witness of John the Baptist and his message to the people and its relevance for us today.
In his story and his teaching, we see the heart of your being, fairness and justice and equality for your people.
We give you thanks for the ordinary everyday life that witnesses to your power and glory.
We give thanks that you are always surprising us and meeting us right where we are.
We give thanks for your light in our times of darkness, for your hand in times of aloneness, for your leading in times of uncertainty.
To you, our triune God, we offer our praise and thanksgiving.
**Amen.**

**Luke 3.7-20**

The repeated question in our Bible passage is ‘What should we do then?’ The crowds have come out to John the Baptist, who has called people to change their lives in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. They all say to him ‘Well what should we do then?’

What are we going to do?

If you have arranged a Christmas Party, you are in a bit of a dilemma. Should you cancel it, or should you go ahead with it? If you are supposed to work from home and wear a face mask if you meet up with anyone indoors yet you are exempt from wearing them down the pub: what should you do? The Sun newspaper had as its headlines on Friday – Go and work down the pub!

It’s beginning to feel a lot like Christmas – like last Christmas in fact. You know, the one that got cancelled!

I’m beginning to feel sorry for our politicians. Faced with a [new and vicious Covid variant](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59563939), after a miserable eighteen months, and just before Christmas, what do you do?[[1]](#endnote-1)

* **Keep relaxed rules** and you are [endangering public health](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/05/new-covid-travel-rules-too-late-to-stop-potential-omicron-wave-in-uk) or [specifically shop-workers’ health](https://www.usdaw.org.uk/About-Us/News/2021/Nov/The-Government-was-wrong-to-water-down-safety-in-s).
* **Add some new restrictions** and you’re discriminating against someone, the [travel industry](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-59545418), or [African nations](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59545457).
* **Throw everything at the situation** and you’re [crushing the nation’s hopes while collapsing the economy](https://www.bighospitality.co.uk/Article/2021/12/03/Operators-count-the-cost-of-mixed-messages-over-Omicron), offering widespread [mental distress instead of Christmas cheer](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/boris-johnson-poised-confirm-christmas-25623415).

Of course, they haven’t helped themselves by seeming to have one rule for us and one rule for them: the damage over the alleged Christmas Party last year risks undermining the message to be cautious this year.

You’ve got to laugh – or else you’ll cry.

Should you have a Christmas party: the 20 funniest new Christmas cracker jokes for 2021[[2]](#endnote-2) have been revealed :

Why is Christmas dinner vegan this year? Because Turkey is on the red list, but vegetables are all green

Why won't Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Richard Branson see each other this Christmas? They all want space

Which relative will not be at Chris Whitty's Christmas dinner? Aunty Vaxxer

Which vaccine did Father Christmas get? Mince Pfizer

Why did Rudolph's nose have too self-isolate? It failed the lateral glow test

Sadly, one of last years best Cracker jokes didn’t come true:

Why is it best to think of 2020 like a panto? Because, eventually, it’s behind you.

Not yet I’m afraid.

What should we do then?

Does John the Baptist have any advice for us today as we prepare for Christmas.

Last week we looked at the proclamation of John the Baptists to prepare the way of the Lord and we thought about how we need a change of heart and mind; repentance means a change of direction. We thought about making peace and being peace makers – really following the spirit of Christmas, the spirit of Jesus.

This weeks’ bible text is a continuation of the ministry of John the Baptist – the fore runner of Jesus, who came to prepare people for his arrival. People came out to him in the wilderness to hear his message and be baptized as a sign of their willingness to change.

What does he say to them?

*‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’*

Why ‘vipers’? (A bit harsh, John.) Vipers are venomous and, if surprised by a threat, will strike out. If looking for dinner, they will use surprise and strike, paralyze, then eat. It is a vivid and unpleasant image of pure selfishness, pure self-preservation – and it turns our stomach.

John the Baptist aims this at the religious leaders who have come out to hear him and to criticize.

 ‘Who warned you to come?’ he shouts, seeing their religious life as self-preservation rather than devotion.

Most fiercely, he challenges the puffed-up self-image that is made of nothing but nostalgia: ‘Don't tell me who your ancestors were. WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?’

A prophet challenges privilege and a sense of entitlement. We have Abraham as out father….

The parable of the axe being laid to the root of the tree that doesn’t produce good fruit, is a prophetic word – reminding anyone who has responsibility, leadership not to rest on your titles and postions: that if you are not judged trustworthy, you don’t keep your word, you are not a person of integrity – you will come tumbling down. People may be seduced by your charm for a while but if they can’t trust you, they will get fed up with you.

But suddenly, after fierce, challenging language he changes tone the moment people ask him ‘What shall we do?’, and his answers are disarmingly simple. *Share if you have more than enough. Tax collectors, take only your due. Soldiers don't bully.* Very simple.

Let’s see if we can put that in context and then apply to the present situation.

*Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”*

In the ancient world, possessing two coats indicated immense wealth. Having excess food was also a luxury, though John does not instruct his hearers to share from plenty, but simply to share what they have. His instructions cover all people, whatever their means.

In our consumerist and competitive society, it is hard wired into us to accumulate more and more and have the latest and we fear being left out or left behind by our peers.

Inequality in society and the vast differences in wealth in a society lead to a society not at peace with itself and its neighbours. If you want a more peaceful society you have to address that issue.

Marys’ Magnificat, speaks about how the Lord:

has brought down rulers from their thrones
    but has lifted up the humble.
53He has filled the hungry with good things
    but has sent the rich away empty.

Some dictators, such as General Pinochet, the Chilean dictator, banned the reading of this scripture – because of its subversive threat.

Share if you have more than enough.

**What should we do? Be more generous?**John demands sharing. Some blame the rise of the omicron variant on the lack of sharing of vaccines with the poorer countries of the world. It comes back to bite you.

They say it is more blessed to give than to receive. So be blessed in giving.

Of course, some people are generous with other people’s money. During his first year a university, Ollie couldn’t get home for Christmas, so he sent his father a set of inexpensive cufflinks and a note reading, ‘Dear Dad, this is your Christmas gift. It isn’t much but it’s all you could afford!’

What should we do? Be generous? If in doubt be generous.

**Secondly: be honest.**

Tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

**13**“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

Tax collectors, take only your due.

Tax collectors in those days were known to extort money and make false claims. Theft and extortion still exist, but perhaps a greater and more pervasive threat – particularly in terms of false allegations – is the anonymity that the internet affords us, enticing some people to behave in ways that they would not if they could be identified.

Our criticisms of others should always be measured and fair. Because we are facing another frustrating Christmas when we can’t relax and do what we want, that weariness is likely to express itself in many inappropriate ways, including being unfairly critical and angry towards others. Be honest with yourself as much as you are honest with others. Let’s all admit we’ve had enough – but we must encourage each other to keep going.

Laughter is often important in helping you gain perspective and coping with intolerable situations. I know from a previous life, when I worked in social work the humour in the office was often very bleak and dark. It helped us to cope with some very bleak and dark situations. You hoped that no one was taking a recording of those jokes to share with your clients because they would have been horrified.

I can well understand staff at No 10 joking about Christmas Parties at a time of national lockdown and tension – not that I would condone those comments.

But honesty on all sides is needed to help understand.

Then some soldiers asked John the Baptist, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

**Thirdly: don’t bully**

John demanded honesty from officials and leadership in upholding the law from soldiers. He held them **to account.**

Cyberbullying is insidious in its nature and ever present, with young people particularly susceptible. Research has linked soaring levels of mental health problems to unhealthy social media use. Do we need to reconsider our own online behaviour in any respects? What can we do to protect and support the young and vulnerable in making good choices online?

There is discussion about mandatory vaccination to help our common immunity and to stop hospitals being overwhelmed, as 90% of those admitted for Covid complications are unvaccinated. It would be a dangerous precedent in my opinion and would smack of bullying – although I can understand the move and other countries have made it mandatory to be vaccinated.

[Scientists seem more humble, cautious, and downbeat](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-59542211) than politicians. Do we, both politicians and public, need to stop pretending that we are in control and, like John’s frightened hearers, admit we have gone wrong? Humanity needs to be constantly reminded that only God is the author and destiny of life. Vaccinations, science, may give the illusion that we are in control, but God is in ultimate control. Is God a divine bully? Or have we been bullying God and others to believe that we are in control?

Shouldn't these three suggestions of John be obvious? They're not a high standard. They should be the normal base line. But selfishness is normalized. That is the terrible place our world is in and why John speaks out.

John gives mundane daily advice on behaviour. It is as if Luke, through John, wants to underline the importance of consistency and detail. We might like to think that our lives are directed by big decisions and grand gestures, but the reality is that our character is set by a million small daily choices. Don’t make the grand gesture, rather share your extra coat, and act justly and fairly in your job. Holiness dwells in the detail of these doable actions.

The shock is that the tax collector collaborators and even soldiers, agents of brutal occupation, are there at all, and ask the moving question: ‘What shall we do?’ God is at work in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

John recognizes the spiritual dynamic at work and the power of the spirit and the one who will come baptizing others in that Spirit. Let us not lose faith that God is at work in our age by the power of the Spirit.

Rabbinic teaching said that a disciple should carry his master’s sandals, but only a slave should untie them. Luke’s John the Baptist is therefore declaring himself unworthy even to be the slave, let alone disciple, of the Messiah.

Do we forget the awesome majesty of God? Are we really prepared for the one who is to come?

Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit, can bring awesome change in people’s lives, in peoples’ hearts.

What should we do? Be generous. Be honest. Don’t bully. Pray and hope. God is with us. God is at work.

Let us meet with our God,
whose Spirit is with us now and throughout our daily lives.
Let us pray for opportunities to share the blessings we receive,
for God to provide the words with which we might speak them,
and inspire actions through which we might share them,
that all might be drawn to the God we serve.





**Prayers of intercession**

O Lord our God,
so many memories of people and places flash through our thinking as we move through Advent and prepare for Christmas, many happy memories intertwined with sadness and loss.

We pray today for those who have been part of our lives, our loving, our living, our growing and maturing; for those who have died we give thanks; and for those who are living we pray with gratitude, that they may find comfort, love, purpose, joy, hope and meaning this Christmas.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

For those families who suffered so much in recent storms, who lived without basic comforts of light and heat and warm food; for those who had to moved house and leave their own home comforts; for those who stayed put and struggled to exist; for those who rallied round and helped and supported their local community in its hours of need.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

For lives damaged, ruled, destroyed by illegal drugs; for those who supply, who run, who use; for those who pick up the pieces and catch the criminals and live forever with the consequences; for those who seek to help and heal, to care, to love, to support and understand.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

For families suffering abuse and harm, neglect and cruelty, be they old or young, victim or perpetrator – may each of us look out for need, look out for signs and be brave enough to speak out and stand up and be counted; for medics, teachers, social workers and all on the front line of care, give them wisdom, insight and strength in the heat of the storm to do their very best for all who are in need.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

For countries who seemingly choose to self-destruct, who choose to rule in ways we see as harmful, cruel and wrong; for countries who seek to establish power and influence by corruption and violence and greed; for countries who seek to show support and help and who seek peaceful ways of resolving simmering situations that look likely to explode.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

For all who feel the weight of illness and pain, of death and dying; for those impacted by Covid in all its forms and those whose treatment for other conditions have been side lined or at best delayed; for those who have to prioritise and choose who has what care; for care deliverers and providers pushed into crisis by Covid and winter and increasing demand.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

For family and friends who are walking through Advent uncertain what Christmas celebrations they should arrange or embrace or cancel; for those who face Christmas alone or ill, sold or hungry, fearful of the now and more fearful of the future hardships and pain.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

Finally, we pray for ourselves that we may have eyes to see need, mouths to speak words of comfort, smiles to say ‘I love you’ when hugs are out of bounds. May we O God be your eyes, your ears, your mouth to those who share this Advent with us and those whose lives touch ours; may we be the bringers, the signs of ‘good news’ to them.

O Lord our God,
**this is our prayer.**

These are our prayers for all you people.
**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

The world says, ‘You can never have enough money’; but we say,
**‘Let’s share. Let’s dare to be different.’**
The world says, ‘You can never have too many clothes’; but we say,
**‘Let’s share. Let’s dare to be different.’**
The world says, ‘Enough is never really enough’; but we say,
**‘Let’s share. Let’s dare to be different.’**
In Jesus’ name,
**‘Let’s share. Let’s dare to be different.’
Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Lord, help us to go into the world in peace;
to be of good courage;
to hold fast to that which is good;
to strengthen the fainthearted;
to support the weak;
to honour everyone;
and to love and serve the Lord.
Be within us and among us,
and remain with us always.
**Amen.**

1. *Brenda Vance is a retired university teacher and URC elder living in Sussex.*

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/116-november-december-2021-b/advent-3/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/top-20-topical-christmas-cracker-22386556> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)