**5th December 2021**

Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the crooked will be made straight,
and the rough ways be made smooth.
All people shall see the salvation of God,
and we come now to worship.



**A gathering prayer**

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

As we light this Advent candle,
may its flame be a light that shines for all to see –
a sign that Jesus is for all.
May we know God’s presence and power as we gather in the name of Jesus,who is the light of the world. **Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

We come to praise you, Lord, God of Israel and all the nations.
We come to you who set your people free.
We come to you who guides us into the way of peace.
We come to you as we journey through Advent
and prepare to welcome, once again, the Christ child. **Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Advent God,
you prepared your people for your coming,
you gave your Word to us through prophets and priests,
through stories told and retold,
through the history of time,
through the written word,
through the spoken word,
but always your word.
As Christmas lights begin to dazzle us,
we know that your glory is way beyond their transfixing power.
Advent God, we adore you,
and we bring ourselves before you just as we are. **Amen.**



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

**A prayer of confession**

There are signs of God and we are blind to them,
there are voices that cry out and we close our ears to them.
There are signs of people’s need and we do not see them,
and cries of those in pain and we pass them by.

There are signs of God’s kingdom to be seen,
and the voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard:
O God, forgive us when we ignore you
and ignore our neighbours, near and far. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God spoke through Zechariah, saying, ‘Tell the people:
they will be saved by the forgiveness of their sins.’
God’s promises endure for ever and ever;
so, let us be assured, our sins are forgiven. **Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

We thank you, God, for your richness.
We thank you for the way your light lets us see the world and its people.
We thank you for diversity and difference in people and places.
We thank you for signs and symbols and glimpses of your kingdom.
We thank you for bolts out of the blue that reveal you to us
and for the tiny flame that offers us assurance.
We thank you for your care through the hands of others,
hands of family, hands of friends and hands of strangers.
We thank you that in others we see you
and that through seeing you we see them in different ways.
We thank you that in wilderness experiences you come to us,
that you come in word or deed, that you come in touch or gift,
that you come in cacophony or whisper, but come you do.
We are all your people, all your children, all your flock,
and for us all you care – to you we give our thanks and praise.
**Amen.**



**Luke 3.1-6;**

Congratulations Liz and Gary on getting married. It’s been a long time in preparation but finally you have done it. You have gone through difficult times, valleys of grief in the loss of partners. Jan and Paul, and rough roads to get to this point. Faith and love has brought you together and we are delighted you shared your day with us, family, friends and the church that means so much to you.

Our scripture passages today are all about making preparations.

How are your preparations going for Christmas?

A middle-aged woman posted her Christmas wish list on the fridge for her husband to read. Rather than list certain items of desire she requested ‘something that will make me look sexy and beautiful’. When Christmas rolled around, she expected to open a package with some fancy lingerie inside. To her surprise, he gave her an exercise bike instead! They are now divorced!

An eight-year-old girl was asked what she was going to give her brother for Christmas. ‘I don’t know’ she answered.

‘What did you give him last year?’

‘Covid’ was her reply.

Charles Swindoll writes:

Some gifts you can give this Christmas are beyond monetary value:

Mend a quarrel;

Dismiss suspicion;

Tell someone, ‘I love you’.

Give something away – anonymously.

Forgive someone who has treated you wrong.

Turn away wrath and anger with a soft calm answer.

Visit someone in a nursing home.

Apologise if you were wrong.

Be especially kind to someone with whom you work.

Give as God gave to you in Christ, without obligation, or announcement, or reservation, or hypocrisy.

Enter into the true Spirit of Christmas – the Spirit of Jesus. The one who came to bring peace and to Save us from our sins.

It needs a transformation of our desires and outlook. It needs a transformation of the heart – to prepare for peace and peace-making.

Our scripture passages today are all about making preparations.

According to the gospel of Luke, John the Baptizer comes as a messenger preparing the way for the Lord. He preaches that people should prepare themselves for the Lord’s coming by receiving baptism as sign of repentance.

Luke puts John the Baptist firmly located within history. Luke lists Tiberius, Emperor of Rome; Herod, the ruler of Galilee; Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea; and high priests Annas and Caiaphas as contemporaries of John. These details would have offered credibility to John’s prophetic word in the minds of the first readers of Luke’s gospel and, in turn, would have strengthened the authenticity of the stories attributed to Jesus in this gospel.

Many people today believe that our faith is make believe. That the story of Jesus is comparable to a fairy story – wishful thinking, fantasy, something for the children! Well I think there is good evidence it is rooted in history and changed history and can change us today, particularly the human heart.

This Christmas season many will despair and feel there is no hope, no light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. Covid is back – Omnicom, Megatron and all the other transformers are back to get us and upset our plans.

During the recent recession, one commentator on television began his newscast by saying, "Due to the current financial crisis, the light at the end of the tunnel will be turned off." The world turns off lights.

We have good news to share. News of peace on earth and goodwill to all people.

John the Baptists prepared the way for Jesus proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

*Repentance* is translated from a Greek word ‘metanoia’ that means “have a change of mind” or “go beyond the mind you have.” Repentance depicts a change of life and heart.

What a message for us at Advent! "Let every heart/Prepare him room" we will sing later. Perhaps we would do well to say let every heart get out the bulldozers and cranes, the rock crushers and road graders:

There are mountains that need to come down - mountains of racism, sexism, ageism, and any other "ism" that blocks our way to healthy relationships with one another and with our Lord.

There are valleys to be filled - valleys of depression, despair, loneliness, grief, pain, any of which can keep us from the rich relationship the Saviour offers and that keep us from enjoying the fellowship of the faith.

There are crooked places to be made straight - fine exteriors mask rotten interiors of abuse, neglect, immorality, even violence. The terrible story of the abuse and death of six-year-old Arthur Labinjo Hughes[[1]](#endnote-1) reminds us the cruelty that could be happening behind anyone’s lace curtains.

There are rough places to be made smooth - rough places that have come because of oppression and injustice, suffering and lack of care.

There is work to do! Bring on the heavy equipment!

But it applies to us all. The Czech writer and politician Vaclav Havel said that the line between good and evil did not run clearly between them and us but through each person. No one was simply a victim. Everyone was in some measure co-responsible. No one is irredeemably bad. No one is totally good. But we all need help to find a way.

Max Lucado tells the story of a man who had been a closet slob most of his life. He just couldn't comprehend the logic of neatness. Why make up a bed if you're going to sleep in it again tonight? Why put the lid on the toothpaste tube if you're going to take it off again in the morning? He admitted to being compulsive about being messy.

Then he got married. His wife was patient. She said she didn't mind his habits . . . if he didn't mind sleeping on the couch. Since he did mind, he began to change. He said he enrolled in a 12-step program for slobs. A physical therapist helped him rediscover the muscles used for hanging up shirts and placing toilet paper on the holder. His nose was reintroduced to the smell of Airwick and Glade. By the time his in-laws arrived for a visit, he was a new man.

But then came that moment of truth. His wife went out of town for a week. At first, he reverted to the old man. He figured he could be a slob for six days and clean up on the seventh. But something strange happened. He could no longer relax with dirty dishes in the sink or towels flung around the bathroom or clothes on the floor or sheets piled up like a mountain on the bed.

What happened? Simple. He had been exposed to a higher standard of living. That's what confession and repentance do for us. That's what Jesus does for us.

The phrase, “the word of God came to John” identifies John as God’s prophet. John recalls the words of the great Hebrew prophet Isaiah and reaffirms that the promise of God’s salvation is for “all flesh.” One way to understand this salvation is being “delivered from evil or danger,” especially any evil or danger that would separate us from God. Salvation shares the same roots as the word *salve*, a treatment for wounds that enables healing. Deliver us from evil we pray.

A parable is told of a farmer who owned an old mule. The mule fell into the farmer's well. The farmer heard the mule braying and went to the site. After assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the mule but decided that neither the mule nor the well was worth the trouble of saving. Instead he called his neighbours and asked them to bring their shovels and bury the poor mule and put him out of his misery.

The mule seemed hysterical. When the dirt struck his back, he shook it off. As the farmer and his friends continued to shovel a thought struck the farmer. After each shovel of dirt was thrown onto the mule he said, "Shake it off and step up." The mule did what he asked, after every shovel of dirt. After a time, the old mule stepped triumphantly out of the well. What seemed to bury him actually became his road to freedom.

There is an alternative to every impossible situation. The way is not always visible to us. But our task is not to work miracles, that is up to God. Our responsibility is to prepare the way, committing every ounce of energy we have to the possibility of the transforming and delivering power of God, remembering that a single act of kindness can bring hope to generations yet to come.

In our personal lives we may feel that we are being swamped – that the dirt and mess keeps piling up. Where are we going to find deliverance? How can we prepare the way for the Lord? Be open to alternatives and that word from God to deliver and lead us forward.

I know a couple who had become estranged from their son. A gulf of separation had grown up. They decided to take the small step of sending him a Christmas card. They wrote on it ‘we miss you. So sorry for all that has happened. We love you Mum and dad.’

It was a small act, a gesture. But it was an olive branch. An offer of peace that thankfully he took up and responded and a work of reconciliation began.

Sometimes sadly, the olive branch is rejected.

Jesus well knows that the offer of peace can be rejected by our hurt, proud, sceptical and broken humanity. But the responsibility for those who follow Christ is to make the offer.

God’s prophets call us to prepare the way – in our lives and in our communities – for the gift of God’s saving love in Jesus the Prince of Peace.

May God give you, Liz and Gray a peaceful life together. May God work in us to bring us peace.

**Prayers of intercession**

As we have lit candles to celebrate Advent and as we have reflected on your words so, Lord God, our thoughts turn now beyond our needs, beyond our pains to those of your children’s, whose cries and anguish trouble and disturb us.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

News seems to surround us piling one tragedy on top of another, the world seems a hard place and our tears are for those whose pain is etched deeply within their being, for those cast out of their own lands, cast adrift from family and friends, thrown into the arms of strangers, some of whom are caring and some who are not.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

For those who trudge through strange lands looking for guidance with hope for a better future, straddling borders, hoping;
for those who have nothing but what they stand in and walk with;
for those who risk life and limb in fragile boats seeking escape from poverty and tragedy but so often finding both and left seeking safety, welcome, warmth and security.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

For the homeless nearer to home who have no walls to shelter them, no place to cocoon them, no safety to protect them, no warmth from the winter weather, no family to support them and little hope for a settled future.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

For those who live with hunger, not just of the spirit, but of the body;
for those families who can’t manage proper meals and nutrition, who eek out the pennies the best they can;
for those who have the courage to seek foodbank help and for those who greet and meet them when they stretch out for the food that is given;
for those who are cold and hungry, not just of body because they can’t afford heating and food, but cold of friendship and the warmth of love.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

For families impacted by Covid and all its ramifications;
for those for whom the illness itself has deprived them of health and well-being, short and long term;
for those who have seen family and friends lose their battles for life and who have not been near at the time of death and those who will have an empty seat at the Christmas table;
for those who are separated by the miles, by country and continent, who have missed so much growing up and growing old;
for those who are fearful of vaccines, those unable to have vaccines, those deprived of vaccines, those who develop and deliver vaccines.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

For countries at war with others and with themselves, where peace is a distant memory and a very distant prospect;
for those who keep the candle of hope burning believing that in the end peace will prevail.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

For those striving earnestly for Climate change to be tackled with care and justice, acknowledging the inter-dependency of nature, of plants and animals, microbes and humans;
for all who seek to quell the needless destruction of our fragile world and who strive for the best that humanity can be;
for those nearer to home feeling the impact of climate change, snow and storms and gales beyond what is expected.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

For those who have never heard the message of Advent hope, who have never encountered the presence of the Christ child, who have never felt their hearts moved by the Christmas story of Emmanuel, God with us.
May their lives be touched by those of us who meet them, whose lives touch ours and ours theirs.

Merciful, caring God
**Hear our prayers.**

**And let our cries come unto you.**

**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Father of Creation,
you have made us a little lower than the angels,
and a little higher than the creatures who live on the earth.
Give us a longing to help others to achieve the best they can.
Amen.



**A sending out prayer**

May the road we travel be smooth and straight,
every rut filled in, every bump smoothed out,
any diversions easy to navigate,
any obstacles easy to manoeuvre round.
May good companions share our journey,
and may we be voices for good in the world,
a sign of Jesus’ love for all.
We pray in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-59400890 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)