**4th December 2022**

**Call to worship**

God is here – present always and everywhere.
Let us make God the focus of our thoughts and worship.
Blessed be God’s glorious name;
may God’s glory fill the earth.
May the earth be filled with the knowledge of the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea.

**A gathering prayer**

Lord Jesus, you are the head of your body, the Church.
Sometimes we can make it seem that church is all about us –
who we are, what we believe and do –
but in truth it’s always about you, Jesus.
We come to give you honour and praise.
We come to bring ourselves into line with your example.
We come now to worship you. **Amen.**

**A prayer of approach (whilst lighting Advent candle)**

We light this candle to affirm our faith in Christ.
May his light shine brightly in our sin-darkened world,
and bring hope, healing and joy
this Advent and always.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

God of urgency and truth,
at this darkest time of year
we thank you for your light shown in Scripture,
shown in those who seek not their own glory
but who point to you;
shown in the ways you bless us in the ordinariness of our lives,
and in the big moments.
You are the light that no darkness can overcome,
and we thank you for inviting us to share your flame of love. **Amen**

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

**A prayer of confession**

God of humility, we are sorry for times
when we behave as if life was all about us,
when we show off all we do and hide all that we neglect,
when we put others down instead of building them up,
when we dwell on what others have done wrong,
with hardly a thought to our mistakes.
Forgive us, we pray, and grant us the will to change,
and the courage to act after the example of John the Baptist
who lived out his calling with faithfulness and courage,
always pointing to your Son Jesus,
in whom he trusted –
and in whose name we pray.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Loving God,
you promise us healing when we turn away from the things that harm us;
you promise us a welcome when we leave behind the things that separate us from you;
you promise us forgiveness when we find the courage to name our sins;
for you are full of love and long to see us whole,
living life to the full, generously and compassionately.
**Amen.**

**Isaiah 11:1-10.** **Matthew 3:1-12**

**Sermon**

I was once at a Christmas Party and someone found out I was a church minster. They decided to have some fun with me. ‘The Christmas story – you don’t really believe it do you? Choirs of angels, virgin births, wish upon a star and all that? Its just a big children’s story. You may as well start it with the words ‘once upon a time’’.

‘Well, elements of the Christmas story are fantastic and sadly they can be dismissed as just a children’s story’ I said. ‘I have no idea whether it happened that way’ I continued. ‘But the message of Christmas I do believe in. That God is with us, we are not alone. We are loved whoever we are. There is hope even in dark places.’

‘Who do you put your hope in?’ I asked back.

They then started to talk about football as a diversion from the serious personal challenge I made to them and the conversation got shut down.

This week it was revealed that the proportion of people in England and Wales calling themselves Christian has dropped below half for the first time since the Dark Ages.

The 2021 census data, released on Tuesday, suggests a huge increase in the number of people that do not identify as religious, compared to a decade ago.

Just 46.2 per cent of people consider themselves to be part of the Christian faith - in 2011, the figure was 59.3 per cent.

Around 37.2 per cent said they had no religion at all, up by a quarter from the last results.

Despite Christianity still being the largest grouping, the Guardian newspaper has now labelled England and Wales "minority Christian countries".

With the number of people identifying as Christians continuing to plummet, you might think the latest census is bad news for the Church. But Peter Lynas[[1]](#endnote-1) has a different perspective on the figures

He said: *many of us were surprised that the figures remained so high.*

*In our increasingly secular country there is no benefit to cultural Christianity. There is little reason to tick the Christian box based on some nominal identity. And yet 46.2% of the population did tick that box on the census form. Now, if we could understand these figures better that would be news.*

*The Evangelical Alliance, along with others, was part of a piece of research called*[*Talking Jesus*](https://talkingjesus.org/)*. It found that 6% of the population can be described as practising Christians. This means they worshipped as part of a church community at least monthly, and prayed and read the Bible at least weekly. This equates to four million people who are passionate about sharing their faith and meeting the needs of others through food banks, debt counselling or providing a warm welcome during the cost of living crisis. The research found that 25% of practising Christians are from black and non-white minority groups. The church is bigger, more impactful and more diverse than many realise.*

*We also discovered that 45% of the population were willing to tick the box to say they believe in the resurrection. Also, 54% believe that Jesus was a real human being. Note how closely this ties in with the latest census figures for those who identify as Christians. The majority of those who ticked the Christian box in the census may not attend church regularly, but there is likely an openness to Jesus and the history defining moment of the resurrection.*

*It is also interesting to note the rise of the ‘nones’ in the census. The census tells us that the Christian population has dropped by 13.1%, which is a lot. But most aren’t off to follow a new religion. The biggest rise, up 12%, was in those who ticked ‘no religion’. The census only found 32,000 agnostics, 14,000 atheists and 10,000 humanists. Most Christian denominations are bigger than these groups, despite the generous media coverage they receive.*

*So the census figures may show that nominalism is dying. But that group, representing almost half the population, likely believe in Jesus and the resurrection. Even the 22.2 million who ticked ‘no religion’ haven’t opted for another religion. Some aren’t convinced by the version of Christianity they have been offered, but they also aren’t convinced by anything else.*

*Of course, these census figures aren’t unmitigated good news. But our plural public square is a strange mix of cultural Christians, nones and the deeply religious. One of the challenges is that Christianity has*[*historically provided the scaffolding on which our society has flourished*](https://www.premierchristianity.com/features/christianity-is-the-air-we-breathe-even-your-objections-to-christianity-are-christian/13185.article)*. It has laid the foundations for justice, freedom, rights, democracy and the dignity of every human life. A loss of cultural Christianity puts some of these key ideas at risk. The secular story simply*[*cannot provide a grounding for human rights and equality*](https://www.premierchristianity.com/features/who-created-human-rights-and-why-its-a-problem-for-atheists/908.article)*. Our culture is taking the fruit from the tree of the Christian story while attacking the roots at the same time. That isn’t sustainable over the long term.*

*But, the fields are white unto harvest. Despite our increasingly secular culture, 27.5 million people ticked the Christian box. They might not mean what I did when I ticked that box, but it suggests a lot of openness. Talking Jesus also found that one in three non-Christians are open to talking more about Jesus.*

*The media coverage is likely to be largely negative, but behind the headlines, the picture is much more interesting. And the Christmas season is a great time to invite people into the wonder of Emmanuel - God with us. They are more open than we might imagine.*

Our Bible reading on the second Sunday of advent focuses on John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for Jesus.

John the Baptist and Elijah (1 Kings 17:1) are often compared. They are both wild and woolly characters who seemingly appear out of nowhere to deliver their prophetic word. John the Baptist could have auditioned for a part in I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here: His clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt round his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. A real bushtucker trial if ever there was one.

And he doesn’t mince his words. John calls the religious leaders of his day a ‘Brood of vipers.’

Many people respected John as a prophet—such as Elijah. Our word ‘prophet’ comes from the Greek, πρoφήτης (*prophetas*), which means ‘mouthpiece’ or ‘one through whom God speaks.’ This is certainly appropriate for John as he does not seek followers or sycophants but is pointing towards the Messiah. ‘The one who comes after me is mightier than I am, whose sandals I am not worthy to remove’ (3:11). Even Jesus didn’t come to start ‘Jesuanity’ per se, but to call people into a closer relationship with God and to live as a forgiven, reconciled and compassionate people

Our society is undergoing a huge change in thinking and outlook. Not only in its view of Christianity and religion and belief in God but a lot of other things are shaking and decaying. Trust in institutions such as the state, the government, the political system, the police are at an all-time low. There is widespread loss of faith that these institutions can fix things and make a better society. People feel fragile and exposed. There is fear that pensions will fail, that hospitals can’t cope, that if you need care you will not be caught by the state or your nieghbour. People are priced out of housing; they fear for job security. As for fixing the planet and reversing climate change – not a chance. All that leads to huge anxiety and anger.

The modern world was formed out of Christian beginnings but which has dispelled that in the belief that all life can be lived without the need for God’s involvement. The future lies in our hands. Human beings are the primary driver of social cultural political and economic life. We are free, free from external authorities, free to make out own way in life and be who we want to be.

Yet that optimistic view is shaking because of the mess we are in.

John the Baptist in the reading from Matthew comes preaching repentance. What is repenting? Literally the Greek (*metanoeo*) means, "to change one's mind." However, given Matthew's emphasis on "bearing fruit," his idea of "repentance" probably goes back to the Hebrew *shuv* -- "to change one's ways and turn around – or go back home." It involves more than just thinking in a different way. Often we think of repentance as an "I can",  (I can change, I can improve, etc.).  Better to think of repentance as an "I can't"...(I can't do it alone, only God can give me new life).  "Repentance" means "to return" - that is, to return to life in the presence of God, to a life centred in God.

To repent is to come to our senses: about our priorities; about the things that we allow to draw us away from worship and the work of the Gospel – and to put us back in a space where God can come to us again.

How then can we find God? How can truth reach us? How then can the meaning of Christmas penetrate us? How can we stay open to wonder, to faith?

‘What I am’ may be blocking ‘who I might be’. I might be seeking God, I might be seeking truth, but find myself denied it by the very person life has made me.

John the Baptist cried out – the voice in the wilderness – ‘repent of your sins for the Kingdom of God is here!’

Sin is often misunderstood today. It’s a bit like mud on a window. God's love and mercy is like the sun trying to shine through to us to light our way, cheer us and give us life. But the mud keeps the sun from shining through the window. The mud stops the rays from reaching us. It doesn't stop God from trying to shine on us but it stops us from being able to receive the light of the world. With the tears of repentance we ask forgiveness and the mud is washed away. So the reason repenting is so important is because without it we have obstacles between us and God's grace. Repentance is an inner state that returns us home to what we are – a child of God which then bears fruit in our lives.

Imagine a house whose inside was a peeling wreck of dirt and squalor The householder was offered some beautiful gold curtains, made of the finest silk, and took them. She put them up in the front room for all to see. They were most striking curtains – and the word on the street, as everyone saw them in the big window, was that everything else inside had changed as well. The householder had changed everything!

This wasn’t so, however. Nothing else had changed. The house was still damp, still dirty and still overrun with vermin. The householder had not lifted a finger to sort things out and with her marvellous new curtains, there seemed even less need than before to do so. The gold curtains on public show were surely change enough.

But because the house didn’t change, the curtains did. The house did not get better so the curtains got worse. The damp, wrinkled and rotted the fabric, the dust settled layer by layer, dimming the shine, whilst the vermin treated it as a brand new toy, running up and down, snagging thread with their claws. It was not long before the once glorious curtains had been reduced to the level of the rest of the house. And in time, the householder came to resent the gold curtains. She had had such high hopes of them, but really they had made very little difference at all.

If we are not ready to receive great truth in our lives, the truth of the gospel, the truth of Christmas, we will only spoil it as it is incorporated into our shabby inner life. In such a state, life’s vivid and penetrating truths become tired and faded. We cannot understand them, so we reduce them to something we can grasp – Knowledge, information, regulations, rules - and something that we can keep at arms length.

They say Christmas is for children.

In the eyes of a child nothing is yet fixed or rigid, and nothing yet a threat. Instead, everything is new, everything is open and everything a possibility. It is not surprising therefore that Jesus encouraged us to become a child. Repent – return home to what you were and still are – a child of God. No wonder Christmas is for the children.

Children are open to receive. How we receive our impressions is significant. Impressions are opinion formers of considerable influence. Impressions determine much consequent attitude and action. So how they are received and formed is crucial.

A dirty doormat makes for a dirty home, and negative impressions make for a negative soul. People don’t tend to question their impressions. Most assume that their impressions are true. Just as they assume that summer follows spring. They are correct in only one of those assumptions though. A pleasing exterior may well accompany a dubious interior, and vice - versa.

Most of our impressions of people and events, our impressions of Christmas, are the stale reaction of our personality, with its fixed and random rules.

Being open to God, being open to surprises, being open to wonder, being spiritual - is the art of making new connections. Some people can be more alive at eighty than they were at fifteen because their spirit does not age. It is eternally youthful. The body may be far from youthful, but the spirit is. The body may be tethered, but the spirit is free. In this state they become today’s child, again and again, receiving impressions fresh every day – born again, born again.

It is a most wonderful thing to set out in search of the truth, and to follow where it leads, no matter what. In our journey we will clash with our fixed ideas and attitudes, our prejudices and the various authority figures in our past. Surely wolfs cannot lie down with lambs. Surely God cannot be made flesh? When we were born we were a clean slate of possibility.

The search for truth, the search for God does not need us to strive. God will find us when we let God. Striving does not work. The search for God is usually a quiet and non-demonstrative business. It’s usually all in the preparation – the will to repent – to come home.

Prepare the way for the Lord,
    make straight paths for him

And this is a spiritual action – the work of the Holy Spirit and fire!

It’s not really a search or a business at all – but an unveiling. It is the fearless and simple exposing of reality, especially the reality of ourselves, exposing our errors and motives and allowing a new space to develop in which we can receive new impressions – be open to be loved- to experience God.

We may begin to notice things. We may notice when we hurt people. We may begin to become aware of the negativity that blights our days. We may become aware of our endless self-justification, we may become aware of the same life lived again and again.

And as we notice, and refuse to avert our eyes, we will find truth and find God. We will find a strengthening presence that fills us with hope and joy.

Truth cannot come quickly. How often people will say something like this: ‘I would have laughed in your face if you had said that to me two years ago! I see it now, of course, but then? No way.’ We recognise a truth, not because it is suddenly true, but because we are ready at last to receive it. Until then, we laugh in its face.

We can only receive what we are ready to receive.

May this advent time be a time to prepare your inner life, to repent, to come home, to become a child once more, open to surprises, open to new possibilities, where wolves lie with lambs, where Word is made flesh. May you be open to wonder, open to love, open to truth, and open to God.



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Gracious God,
for your call on John the Baptist’s life,
**we praise you.**
For his call to us to change our mind and our ways,
**we praise you.**
For your Son Jesus, who calls us to serve him in your
world today,
**we praise you.**
For calling each of us by name and for the fellowship of
your church,
**we praise you.**
Today and everyday as we journey towards Christmas,
we praise you. **Amen.**



**Prayers of intercession**

*The following*[*Taizé chant*](https://hymnary.org/text/prepare_the_way_of_the_lord_prepare)*could be used either after each bidding or at the beginning and the end.*

**Prepare the way of the Lord;**
**prepare the way of the Lord**
**and all people will see the salvation of our God.**

God of hope,
though the night seems very long,
and though cold winds blow, light fades
and spring seems a distant dream;
you will never leave us.

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**

God of hope,
though the poor are so often denied justice,
and the needy are without relief from their distress,
though we often have different priorities to those of your kingdom,
turn our hearts again to you and renew our trust.

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**

God of hope,
though politics sometimes does not connect with our daily lives,
when leaders fail us,
prioritising the rich over the poor
and leaving inequalities unaddressed,
may we believe that a new world is possible.

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**

God of hope,
though we are far off our climate targets,
though there is little climate leadership,
and we have failed to protect this fragile earth,
its peoples and all its creatures…

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**

God of hope,
though we live in such troubled times
when so many parts of the world are at war or in conflict,
the suffering of Ukraine continues as the weather gets harsher,
and no peaceful outcome seems close…

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**

God of hope,
though life is a daily struggle for many,
choosing between heating and eating,
constantly worrying about debt and rising prices
and feeling overwhelmed by worry,
may we find rest in you.

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**

God of hope,
though many are lonely and in distress,
persecuted or in danger,
some sick or far from home,
bring your healing to all who are in need today,
remembering in our own community…[*add names*]

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**

God of hope,
you come to us as a child
and reveal to us the wisdom of the powerless.
Though many children across the world are suffering,
and many lament the destruction of their futures because of climate change,
teach us to walk more humbly with you.

Give us faith to watch for the morning.
**We wait for you, O God.**



**A sending out prayer**

Lord, lead us and help us to follow you.
Lord, lead us and help us to keep our eyes on you.
Lord, be at the centre of our lives, our thinking and our actions.
Make us useful in your service,
and show us how we can live
so that our lives point towards Jesus.
**Amen.**

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1. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/think-the-census-results-are-bad-news-for-christians-think-again/14402.article?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=13640348_Voice%20of%20hope%2030.11.2022%20TCBM%20ad&dm_i=16DQ,84CYK,KCOFX7,X93KJ,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)