

**ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH**  
**Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2023, Advent 2B**  
**Morning Service 1100**  
**Transcript**

**Welcome and Intimations**

Good morning. Wherever you come from today, whether you come regularly, or occasionally, you are welcome to our worship. Your presence enriches us in this time of celebration together.

**Advent Hymn/Candle**

We light the first two Advent Candles and sing the first two verses of our Advent Hymn:

**Advent Candle Song** – (Tune "O Worship the King, All Glorious Above!")

The candle of hope we light in this hour  
Proclaims that the Lord is coming in power.  
We wait for a future, now hidden from view,  
When Christ in his glory will make all things new.

The candle of peace shines bright with God's plan;  
The wolf will lie down and dwell with the lamb.  
Our guns and our weapons, our hatred and war,  
Will give way to gardens that heal and restore.

**Gathering Words and Prayer**

Today's reading from Isaiah begins with the words  
*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.*

For most of us, this is a happy time, looking forward to the Christmas season and all that it means, but we know also that, for some people, this is a difficult time of year, with little of the joy and excitement we anticipate at Christmas. Yet we read about a God who will '*feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep*'. (Isaiah 40.11). As we consider the arrival of our Saviour during Advent, let us display his compassion towards those in need of comfort, tenderness and love.

Let us be still, and know the presence of God;  
*Pause*

We thank you, Father God, that you are our shepherd, and we are your sheep.  
Wherever we may wander, your loving arms will find us and gather us to your bosom. Give us your patience and persistence to keep on loving, caring and hoping. Amen.

**Call to worship**

United in our Christian fellowship, we join our voices with the whole church, across the world and across time:

**Hymn 273** O come O come Emmanuel

**Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer:**

It was our Generous God who inspired the vision that brought this church to birth long ago, placing it as a visible beacon of hope and new life within this community.

We give thanks for the generations who came before us;  
for their sacrifice and resilience over many years  
in the face of social change, the tragedy of warfare,  
through the restrictions of a pandemic;  
through a falling away of Christian commitment.

In these present times of change for the Church in Scotland and in Orkney, may God inspire us to reimagine a worshipping community ready to share the good news of his love in fresh ways to meet the needs of the people of today, and wisdom and courage to grasp new opportunities wholeheartedly. May the Holy Spirit inspire us with enthusiasm and a holy boldness to look forward to developments in our church and community; to see the people around us with a renewed vision, and to invite others to come and follow the way of Jesus. In everything we do, may we reflect the values of the gospel, that we ourselves and the wider life of this community may be transformed by the Spirit.

In the busyness of this time of year, as we look to Advent and to Christmas, may we remember all the people who find this time difficult.

When we ourselves are busy with other things, as we prepare our homes, and think about cards and presents, and think, perhaps, that our own preparation for Christ's coming can wait, may we hear the voice crying in the wilderness and make room for God in our celebrations.

In these times, and in all times, may we know again the assurance of the renewing grace of God, so that, in the wilderness of our world, and in our lives, we may prepare a way for Jesus.

May God grant us patience to wait upon his word, the sensitivity to hear it, the courage to act upon it, and the wisdom to apply it.

So may we follow more nearly in the example Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose words we pray:

*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

**Readings: Shona will read for us:**

**Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSVA): Words of Hope**

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her

that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'  
See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.  
He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. *Amen.*

**2 Peter 3: 8-15a (NRSVA): *The Promise of the Lord's Coming***

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. *Amen.*

**Hymn 290** The race that long in darkness pined

**Gospel Reading: Mark 1: 1-8 (NRSVA): *The Proclamation of John the Baptist***

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight"',

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'  
*Amen. Thanks be to God.*

**Message:**

Today, the second Sunday in Advent, we continue our journey towards Christmas. Advent is a time of expectation, and waiting, and looking forward. The Old Testament reminds us of people looking forward – people in the desert, in the wilderness, people feeling lost, and their heart-felt crying to God.

In his Gospel, Mark doesn't waste time on preliminaries. Straight in there: '*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*' But he doesn't really start at the beginning: no mention of the birth of Jesus, or the beginning of his ministry.

Instead, he tells us about John the Baptist, this strange, hairy man, striding out of the desert, quoting Isaiah, shouting about repentance, about turning away from our sins, and being baptised, and about the Holy Spirit. This is alarming stuff, a real wake-up call.

It was a wake-up call to a people who had been telling over and over again the Exodus story of how God had rescued them from Egypt and brought them to the promised land, and who were now looking for a Messiah who would come like a conquering king to rescue them from the Romans, but here was a man telling them to get ready for a *different kind* of freedom; telling them that they, the Chosen People, had lost the place, were looking in the wrong direction, *going* in the wrong direction. They had to make a U-turn, turn around and go in the right way – reminds me of the Sat-Nav in the car when you go the wrong way: 'Do a U-turn'. That's what the word *Repentance* - *metanoia* in Greek - really means – because someone extra special was coming very soon, and they needed to get ready. John was a bit like the royal messenger of his time, going ahead of royalty, getting everywhere and everybody ready for the one who was coming after him. It used to be a standard joke that wherever our Queen went she smelled fresh paint. I don't know if that will apply to King Charles, but you get the picture.

John is seen as Isaiah's "voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". "The one who is coming after me is more powerful than I: I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals". John doesn't seem to be absolutely sure who it is that is coming, whether God himself, or his Messiah, but John was quite clear about what this person would do: "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

A promise – and a threat as well – that picks up on the Old Testament images of God not only setting his people free, but *coming to live among them*. God's presence lived with Israel in the Pillar of Fire, but this time God's Spirit would live *with* people, *in* people, the air they would breathe, the fire in their hearts. This was the promise – the dream – they had had for generations, and here was John proclaiming that it was about to come true.

But – were the people ready? Clearly John didn't think so. Matthew quotes John as saying, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*" Yet John wasn't entirely clear *who* was coming, and, he doesn't seem to have recognised Jesus when he came to be baptised. Meanwhile, the people heard about the Voice, and the water of baptism, and they came flocking in droves, but they still had to prepare for the coming of the one who would make sense of it all, but in ways very different from their expectations. The main thing that Mark gets us to do in these first few verses of his Gospel is to appreciate the sense of shock that it must have been to these people to try to understand this new thing that God was doing. It was a wake-up call.

Advent is a wake-up call for us too. A time of expectation, as I said, and of waiting, and looking forward: looking forward to Christmas, and to the Second Coming as well. John the Baptist came to a people suffering under the oppressive rule of the Romans, coupled with the corruption of the Jewish religious authorities, who colluded with the Romans in operating a '*domination system*' that ensured that more than half of the wealth from agricultural production went to the ruling classes through taxation and exploitation. A society where change was needed. Maybe we can see some parallels with our world in 2023.

In our world, many countries are at war. Irrespective of causes, people, including innocent people, the elderly, small children, are being slaughtered. '*Collateral damage*' I think is the expression. In our world - and in this country - there is a growing gulf between rich and poor, and there are plenty of figures to prove it. In 2020, the Office for National Statistics calculated that the richest 10% of households hold 43% of all wealth. The poorest 50%, by contrast, own just 9%.

We are one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet we have thousands of people dependent on food banks, having to choose between eating and heating, people being evicted because they cannot afford their rent; people sleeping rough in shop doorways. Meanwhile, the climate really does seem to be changing. Heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, hurricanes, floods and all the rest.

We live in a society where teenagers – even children – carry knives ‘for protection’ – and don’t seem to hesitate to use them. Teenage murders: what does that do to the families involved? Where was the parental supervision in the first place?

We are a society where, increasingly, God has ceased to be part of our lives. My wife and I have three of a family. Our daughter is a kirk elder, active in her church and in the community. Each of our two sons has told me, in so many words, ‘Sorry Dad, I respect what you do, but the church and religion have no relevance in my life’.

A few weeks back we had the Harvest Home in the Village. A great night. I’m told that over 160 attended, ages from pre-school to eighty-plus, and a big number of children and young folk. Next morning, Remembrance Sunday, fewer than 29 felt it worthwhile to come to the War Memorial or the Kirk. *We are getting something wrong.*

Like these people in the time of John the Baptist, *we are getting something wrong.* The Church of Scotland is in crisis – again: Orkney now one single parish; Presbytery of Orkney disappeared, gobbled up into the huge Presbytery of the North East and Northern Isles.

Advent: a time of expectation and waiting. But waiting for what? How many folk really look forward to celebrating the arrival of the Christ Child, the birth that changed the world for ever, that separated time into time before and time after?

Advertisements for Christmas gifts start in October, or even before, and we see all the usual commercial build-up, encouraging us to spend more money on gifts, food, drink and all the rest. On Friday, in Perthshire, Alison and I went with our Granddaughter, husband and peedie Great-granddaughter to two big farm-shop Christmas Fairs. Lots of Santas and reindeer and goodies of all kinds, and eye-watering prices. We looked quite hard, but no sign of anything to do with Jesus or the Nativity. *We are getting something wrong.*

For Christian people, Advent is a time of anticipation of looking forward, and a time of preparation, waiting for the coming of the Day of God, for the Kingdom of God, but also doing our best to make it come soon. We are not meant to be onlookers. We are to be participants. We, in our day, are called to “Get the road ready for the Lord”

Advent ends at Christmas. *But the birth that comes at the end of Advent is not the end, but the beginning.* When we welcome Jesus at Christmas, we don’t pack everything away until next year. We start our journey with him, watching him grow, finding out more about him, waiting to see the story unfold. We know the story, but it is a story that has to be re-told, and reflected upon, again and again. **The birth that began an era: A.D., Anno Domini** – in the year of the Lord. Then the ministry of Jesus, which seemed to end at the cross, but suddenly transformed into another beginning, in the resurrection, and the beginning of the Christian Community, living by the Holy Spirit.

Somebody has said that Easter begins at Advent, and Christmas lasts until Easter. At Advent, at this time of year, we remember the entry of Jesus into the world. We remember the Word that became flesh and lived among us. As we look forward, we look forward not only to Christmas, but to the New Year, and to Easter. Without Christmas, without Jesus, there could be no Easter. In our Christmas celebrations we remember not only the infant in the manger but the crucified and risen Christ. Amen. *Soli Deo Gloria.* To God alone be glory.

**Hymn (Offering): 334** On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

**Dedication of Offering:**

All that we have comes from God.

We offer to him tokens of our work and our prosperity,  
asking that we may be blessed in the giving, and that these gifts may be blessed and that they  
may be used to advance the work of Christ in the Church and in the world.

In his name we ask. Amen.

**Prayers of Intercession:** *Please note responses:*

**L:** Lord, come among us:

**All: Come, O come, Emmanuel.**

*Let us pray:*

Creator God,

You have entrusted us with the fragile beauty of the earth.

Help us to open our hearts to the lives and lands laid waste by human action,  
by the tide of storm and tempest; by disasters resulting from climate change;  
those who have lost homes and loved ones through famine, and fire and flood, and desolation.  
May governments, Leaders, and all who cherish the earth, act justly, wisely, and quickly  
to heal the earth.

**L:** Lord, come among us:

**All: Come, O come, Emmanuel.**

Transforming God,

whose Spirit brooded over the face of the waters before the world began,  
we hold before you the wounded places of this world:

Israel and Gaza, all the Middle East; Ukraine; Sudan, Yemen,  
and all places affected by violence.

Hear the cries of all peoples: bring peace in war; restore hope in despair;  
loosen bonds of oppression, injustice, and fear.

Inspire all who bear burdens of leadership to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with  
their God, that your ways may be known throughout the earth,  
your saving power among all nations.

**L:** Lord, come among us:

**All: Come, O come, Emmanuel.**

Abiding God,

be beside all who are far from home, and with all who have no home to go to.

Protect those fleeing injustice, violence, disaster or poverty;  
all who have left behind loved ones and possessions,  
seeking refuge, opportunity, or a sense of belonging.

Transform fear and suspicions of strangers  
into welcome as brothers and sisters that all may find a home.

**L:** Lord, come among us:

**All: Come, O come, Emmanuel.**

Loving God,

comfort all who mourn.

Give peace in despair, restore lives dragged down by regrets for the past or fears for the future;  
support all who feel anxious, lonely, or abandoned;

all in mental distress, or struggling with addiction,  
those who cannot see your light within their darkness, or your hope beyond their fears.

**L:** Lord, come among us:

**All: Come, O come, Emmanuel.**

In a few moments of quiet, we turn our minds to the problems and the people we carry in our hearts today.

*Pause*

Into our homes as we prepare for your coming,  
to our loved ones, especially those far away;  
into our work, our leisure, our pleasures,  
that they may show forth your presence:  
to all who are in need;  
to the sick, and those who care for them,  
to all who suffer in body, mind and or spirit;  
to the poor and the hungry,

**L:** Lord, come among us:

**All: Come, O come, Emmanuel.**

In anticipation of Christ's coming, that we may know that life is eternal,  
that loved ones departed are in your keeping;  
that we may rejoice in hope, that we may come to your glory,

**L:** Lord, come among us:

**All: Come, O come, Emmanuel.**

Hear us, O gracious God, and according to your will, grant our prayers,  
in the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

**Hymn (4) 277** Hark the glad sound!

**Choir:** the Choir will sing for us:

**Afterthought: 'He comes to us as One unknown'**

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands: Take up your cross. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable [inexpressible] mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

- Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* p. 403.

**Closing Hymn: 236** March on my soul with strength

**Closing Words and Benediction**

May the urgency, the passion and the commitment of John the Baptist  
be reflected in the lives of us all.

May you stay safe in the way of Christ,  
And the blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be with you, and remain with you, now and always. Amen.

**Doxology:**

May God's blessing surround you each day,  
As you trust Him and walk in his way,  
May his presence within guard and keep you from sin,  
Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.