

ST. MARY OF NAZARETH /ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI – WEST WICKHAM

11th December 2022: 3rd Sunday of Advent

Hazel writes:

It's a bit daunting doing a sermon at the end of my first week back after sabbatical. I can't cover all I did, and in any case, I'm still processing much of it. Added to that I have much still to learn and experience through putting into practice a more contemplative way which is what I was reading about and seeking to implement in my life. Some of the things that I write or say over the next weeks and months may give you an insight into this – please do ask and speak about anything you see or hear that you are interested in.

Next **Sunday 18th December**, we will have a Holy Communion service at 8am in St Mary's Church and Carol Services at 10.45am in St Francis' Church and at 4pm in St Mary's Church.

Morning Prayer is held each week in St Francis' Church on Wednesday morning at 9.30am, followed by the church being **open for private prayer** from 10.30-11.30am. It is also held at St Mary's Church on Thursday morning at 9am.

The **Bereavement Support Group** will meet on Wednesday 14th December at 2.30pm in Emmanuel Church, The Grove.

Resources and updates for the week ahead – This week our service will be livestreamed on YouTube from St Mary's at 9.15am. All other files for this week have been combined and included in this pew sheet which will be sent on paper to those who have told us that they are not on-line.

We are holding a '**knit and natter**' as part of the Warm Space initiative on Wednesday 14 December between 11.00am-1.00pm at St Francis – please do come along and let others who enjoy knitting know they are welcome to come along and join in.

Churches Together in West Wickham are hosting **Warm Spaces** on five days each week (normally 9am-5pm) providing somewhere warm for people to meet in for free. If you could help with this for a couple of hours on a rota basis, please contact the following:

- For a Monday – Jon Hills (jon@wwsbc.org.uk or 020 8777 5705) at West Wickham & Shirley Baptist Church
- For a Tuesday – Ian Hamlin (ianh2102@hotmail.com or 07543 561868) at Coney Hill Baptist Church

- For a Wednesday - Kate Dyer (katedyer41@hotmail.com or 07808 468591) or Nicky Nightingale (nicholanightingale@hotmail.co.uk or 8916 9855) at St Francis' Church
- For a Thursday – Laura MacBean (laura.macbean@googlemail.com) at West Wickham Methodist Church
- For a Friday – Pat Best (patbest@btinternet.com or 020 8464 7208) at Emmanuel United Reformed Church

We will be preparing **Christingle bags** at 2.15 pm on 23rd December in St Mary's Main Hall. Please do come and help, joining in to spread the Christmas cheer/load.

Croydon- Zimbabwe Link: for some time, we have had a link with St Andrew's Church in Gweru, Zimbabwe, as part of Croydon's link with the Central Diocese of Zimbabwe, whose Bishop, Ignatius Makumbe, used to be the incumbent of St Andrew's.

Information about the current situation in Zimbabwe, how the church is faring and appropriate subjects for prayer can be found in the Croydon-Zimbabwe Link bulletin, now available here: <https://www.stfranciswestwickham.co.uk/about-us/the-wider-church/zimbabwe-link/>

Please bring **Foodbank donations** to the Vicarage or St Francis' Church. Currently they require milk (long life), coffee, sweets, cooking sauces, soup, rice, tinned potatoes and other vegetables. They are well stocked with pasta, cereal, tea and biscuits. Please do not bring any fresh or frozen food, or baby milk as the foodbank cannot pass this on. You can also donate financially here: <https://bromleyborough.foodbank.org.uk/give-help/donate-money>. Thank you for your continuing support.

Ann & Tony Sibley, who both died during this week, will have a joint funeral service on Wednesday 21st December at 3.30pm in Beckenham Crematorium.

If anyone would like a pedestal at either church in memory of a loved one or to commemorate a special anniversary etc., please contact Merri Womack (8777 8772) for St Mary's (or there is a list to sign in the vestibule at St. Mary's) or Nicky Nightingale (nicholanightingale@hotmail.co.uk or 8916 9855) for St Francis'.

Any items for the joint pew sheet to Beryl berylbolton@hotmail.com and items for the websites to brian.griff19@btinternet.com or Gifty office@stmarywestwickham.co.uk.

Collect

God for whom we watch and wait, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son: give us courage to speak the truth, to hunger for justice, and to suffer for the cause of right, with Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading:

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.'

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;

the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way, the unclean shall not travel on

it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 11: 2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' ⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed

in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

who is alive and reigns now and for ever.

Post Communion Prayer

We give you thanks, O Lord, for these heavenly gifts; kindle in us the fire of your Spirit that when your Christ comes again we may shine as lights before his face;

REFLECTION – Hazel O’Sullivan

Today I want to pick up on the themes of Advent that we follow each week during this season of preparation. To remind you: the first week was about the patriarchs and Hilary Fife talked about how we might thoughtfully prepare to open our hearts to God, so that we might have greater joy at Christmas. The second week was about prophets. This is normally focussed on Old Testament prophets, but, as it was the St Mary’s Patronal Festival, Brian had the opportunity of exploring the prophetic nature of the Magnificat – Mary’s song – all about scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful and turning the world on its head (the ‘danger in the manger’ as he called it). This kind of prophecy is picked up again in our first reading today. In v5 Isaiah prophesies that at the time of redemption the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame will leap, and the speechless will sing for joy. Just as in the Magnificat, Isaiah is promising good things to those who have been oppressed, turning the world on its head, so there’s a great link with last week.

Today our focus is on John the Baptist, who in the gospel reading for today is asking Jesus (through his disciples) if he’s the Messiah who had been prophesied by writers such as Isaiah. Jesus responds by telling them something similar. Look at the gospel reading, v5 (I do like it when there’s an obvious link in the readings and here it’s even in the same-numbered verse!). Here Jesus reminds John’s disciples to tell John about how the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor receive good news. Jesus didn’t say “Yes, I’m the Messiah”. He couldn’t come out and make that simple response because if he did that, it would be end of his ministry. The authorities would be on him like a ton of bricks. So, Jesus leaves an element of mystery, just as in his parables, in his teaching, and in just about everything he said. But for anyone who knew the prophets and could make the link that he was suggesting, they could recognise what the answer to John’s question was.

Jesus was in effect confirming to John that his job is done. This was really important because John’s job was to prepare the way for Jesus, but now he’s in prison. If John has got more work to do, he needs to find a way out, but if he’s done all that’s necessary, he can accept whatever it is that’s going to happen to him, knowing that his task is complete.

So, John’s job is done, but I’d like to look a bit further at what that job was, recognising that it’s John the Baptist that we’re focussing on this week. In v9 of the gospel Jesus recognises that John was a prophet, but more than that, as his job was to be the specific prophet that Malachi promised (Malachi 3:1). This specific prophet is one who

would prepare the way for God to come on the day of judgement. Now, when I say 'day of judgment', you might see that as a bad thing – there are lots of places in the Bible where the day of judgement is a time when there's a sorting out of the good and the bad and sadly there's often been an emphasis put on what will happen to the bad at that time. But what about the good? Well, the good are promised a path of holiness. Look again at the first reading. In v8 Isaiah promises that at the time of redemption, there will be a highway for God's people which will lead (in v10) to joy and gladness. Well, that sounds pretty good to me! And it links to another aspect of what this Sunday is all about. It's Gaudete Sunday, which is all about joy and rejoicing.

Back to our gospel reading again. Jesus is saying that John's job is done – he's set out the path for Jesus to come and this is a good thing for those who are ready for him. Those words are important. It's good news for those who are ready for him, but pretty rubbish for those who are not. So, how are your Christmas preparations going? Have you been thoughtfully preparing to open your hearts to God, so that you might have greater joy at Christmas? That's what Hilary talked about on Advent Sunday. And if you want some pointers as to how to prepare for Jesus at Christmas, she also suggested that this might start with repentance.

Now, repentance brings us back to John the Baptist. This was his message, wasn't it? But I don't think it was repentance in a negative sense. If you look at the phrase most associated with John the Baptist in Matthew 3:2 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near', the word repent is translated from the Greek word, *metanoieite*, which actually means to change your thinking. It doesn't mean to beat yourself up because of any guilty feelings. It means to change your thinking. Now that sounds rather like what Brian was talking about last week – turning the world on its head.

The normal way of thinking that's accepted in this world is that success means lots of money, winning an argument, having many friends on social media, being busy ... Our response to any challenge from this world is 'how can I achieve something good here?' I'd like to suggest that that's not the kind of thinking that God wants. You might be surprised at that but stick with me here. I think that God wants us to love him and to love our neighbour, particularly those who are downtrodden and oppressed. That's what Jesus said were the greatest commandments. He didn't say that we had to do something good to 'save' our neighbour, but that we should love them, meaning to stand in solidarity with them, so that they can experience God's love and so come to a different view about the world themselves, so they can hear a different thing, so they can see someone (you) walking a different kind of way. This is what it's like when

God's kingdom is nearby. This was John's message: change your thinking because the kingdom of God has come near. We can practice this in Advent in two ways:

Firstly by loving God, and you can't do much better than being in church, or watching on-line to worship him and opening your heart to him. The communion that we will share in a few minutes' time is a symbol of this love as we open up to him (literally opening our mouths and taking him inside us if you take the bread and wine that are offered). Watching this happen or coming for a blessing is another way of doing it.

And the other practice that we can pursue is to love our neighbour, which we can do in so many ways, but please be mindful of the teaching from the parable of the Good Samaritan, that our neighbour includes those who we may not share the same opinions or beliefs with. We may not agree with someone on something, but we can still welcome them into our space, listen to them and discuss a topic with them. But loving them will mean we do not reject them, we don't get into an argument with them, we don't think only of ourselves and what's good for us.

John the Baptist's message was to repent – to change your way of thinking, to turn the world on its head. Can we begin to walk down that holy path today in preparation for Christmas? It's not only about changing our behaviour, but about opening our hearts to God and looking to Jesus for our guidance. And doing this will lead to a life where we are loving God and loving our neighbour, which in turn will enable greater joy at Christmas – that's what Advent is for.

Some of these ideas were what I was reflecting on during my sabbatical and I'm now beginning down this path. It would be great if others joined me and said: Come, Lord Jesus, come into my heart. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

Pray for faith to look for the signs of your kingdom all around us and for hope to live out God's Bright New World in our daily lives. Pray that we may learn together to reveal your loving kindness to the world and travel faithfully as your pilgrim people.

Pray for the homeless, those living on the streets or in unsuitable accommodation especially as the weather has turned very cold. Pray for those living in fear of eviction that they may all find secure places to live their lives. Thank God for all those organisations providing cold weather shelters.

The third Advent candle lit in church on Sunday represents joy and is often called 'The Shepherd's Candle.' Pray that, like the shepherds, we may, in our gathered worship and in our homes, rejoice that Jesus comes to bring peace on earth and bring that joy to others.

Continue to pray for all who work for justice and reconciliation and all who are suffering as a result of war and civil unrest. Pray for those suffering in Ukraine, Haiti, Yemen, Somalia and in other places of conflict around the world, that there may be a just and lasting peace.

Hold before God all those who work tirelessly in our health service, especially those doctors and nurses in A and E departments. May their caring be blessed even in times of crisis. Pray for the sick in the parish and others known to each of us. In our congregations pray for these by name – Mark Outten, Vicky Pearce, Mike East, Pat Allegacone, Jane Smith, Joan Burford, Graham Stone, Rowena Griffiths, Daphne Dack, John Dack, Tony Goodchild, Barbara Goodchild, Karen Plummer and Miriam Richards (with prayer for increased mobility) – and those known to God alone.

Hold before God all those on our hearts who are struggling to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. Pray especially for the soul of Andrew Duke and for Annie and her family: for the soul of Ann Coia and for her son Stewart, Jane and Stewart's two sisters Lesley and Sheila: for the soul of Margaret White, for her daughter Kim Teare and all Kim's family; and for the souls of Anne and Tony Sibley and for their daughter Kim and their son Earl. Pray that God may be close to them and that they may know his comfort and peace.