

2nd Sunday in Advent

Advent Candle Lighting

God will judge between the nations, and will settle disputes for many people. Today we light the second candle, the candle of peace. **We light this candle to remember God's promise of peace.** Our hope is in God's way of Shalom. Let us follow the way of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Welcome & Call to Worship

Welcome to worship on the 2nd Sunday of Advent. Some of us will meet again in church (Weoley Hill & Bournville) and some of us continue to worship at home. But we all join together in the expectancy of this season...

Hymn

Come thou long expected Jesus

Prayer

Prepare the way of the Lord, John the Baptist cries out in our gospel reading today. We come before you, o God, to prepare the way of the Lord, to make our hearts ready to hear your word, to receive your promises, your challenges and your guidance....And so we pray.....

May the warmth of our love, prepare the way of the Lord

May our will for justice, prepare the way of the Lord

May our thirst for truth, prepare the way of the Lord

May our dream for peace, prepare the way of the Lord

Gracious and loving God, you call us once again to look forward to and celebrate the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel. Help us to get rid of those things that hinder love of you and of each other. Set us free from anger, fear and faithlessness, that we may be ready to welcome him who comes as Saviour in our lives. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 40: 1-11 & Mark 1: 1-8

Hymn

On Jordan's bank the Baptist cry

Reflection

Have you ever visited Bayeux in Normandy, to see the Bayeux tapestry that represents the conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066?

While there is uncertainty about the origins of the Bayeux Tapestry, it was probably commissioned in the 1070s by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror. Bishop Odo was himself present

at the battle of Hastings, leading the soldiers into battle against Harold. As cleric, he was probably not allowed to carry a sword and shed blood and that is why there is this interesting scene on the tapestry with Bishop Odo holding a very long spear-like stick or lance poking the soldiers forward. The caption of the scene reads: "*Hic Odo Eps (Episcopus) Baculu(m) Tenens Confortat Pueros*", loosely translated "*Here Odo the Bishop is comforting the troops*". Looking closely at the scene, with the soldiers looking rather reluctant and weary, you wonder, "What comfort? What comfort is the bishop giving his troops as he prods them into battle?" What does comfort mean? What images does the word comfort conjure up for you? When you look the word up in the dictionary you find that the word comfort comes from the Latin "con fortis" which is "with strength". *Confortare* is "to strengthen, to inspire courage." I guess that is what Odo was doing with his lance, strengthening his troops! Yet, according to the dictionary, it has come to mean, consolation, relief in affliction; a state of physical wellbeing; things that make life easy or pleasant; to console, to bring relief, etc. Somehow I think that the prophets, Isaiah among them, did not share this understanding of the word "comfort." Rather their understanding would be somewhat nearer to the prodding encouragement of Bishop Odo than to our image of being comfortable or being comforted. The prophets, among whom Isaiah, and John the Baptist, the messenger who echoes the words of Isaiah, spoke "con fortis," with strength. Their prophetic message was often anything but comfortable, as we understand the word, hence they were not always very popular. But to understand their message and the strength of the words they spoke we have to remember the context in which the prophets were prophesying. Isaiah - "Second Isaiah" - to whom Isaiah 40-55 is ascribed enters the scene when Israel is in exile in Babylon. Certainly, Isaiah speaks far more "comforting" words than the other great prophets, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who delivered the uncomfortable message that the Babylonian exile was God's judgement as a result of the sinfulness of the people. Isaiah's message is proclaimed at the end of Israel's exile in Babylon when at last there was the possibility of return of the exiles to their homeland. *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term.* Comforting words, at last! But how are they "comforting?" They are words of restoration but we may wonder whether everyone was really waiting for this message of restoration? The eminent OT scholar,

Walter Brueggemann suggests the possibility that there were those who probably had started to feel quite comfortable in Babylon: "It is unmistakable that Babylon was not only a political-military superpower. It was also an advanced, sophisticated, winsome culture with its own theological rationale and its own moral justifications" The empire was a system, like all systems, that worked for some and not for others, but you had a better chance if you knew where to place your allegiance and energy. It must have been tempting to throw in your lot with the seductive culture around you (it was, after all, "winsome"!), to find ways not only to survive but to thrive, even if it meant forgetting who and whose you were. Then a prophet comes along, Brueggemann says, changing everything with the message that "re-describes the world" as "under new management, under the governance of the home-making, home-giving God and away from the deathly power of the empire." This is a comforting word, isn't it? Yet, it also disturbs and may even make us a bit anxious. For what do even "captives" have to lose, if things change too much, too quickly, too imaginatively? Is it not more "comfortable" when things remain as they are, as we got settled and life is going ok for us? And enter John the Baptist, with the same message of transformation. *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.* Quoting the words of Isaiah, John the Baptist proclaims that in preparation for the coming of the promised one, the Messiah, we have to repent, facing the truth about ourselves and changing the direction of our lives. Do we want to hear that? Is that the "comfortable" message, in the sense of strengthening us and giving us courage, that we need to hear, again and again, as we are getting a bit too much at ease how things are, how we live our "comfortable" lives? On this second Sunday in Advent we hear the call of John the Baptist and of the prophets of Israel, and perhaps of present day prophets too, to re-examine our lives in preparation for the one who came, who is coming and who will come, the Lord, the Prince of Peace. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight"...May we clear the way for God to come into our lives, to open up our lives to the transforming grace that will strengthen us to follow the Prince of Peace, praying and working tirelessly for peace in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Musical Interlude

Prayers

God of Comfort and Peace, in all of the seasons of our lives, we find you. In every moment, in every event, we find you. When we are joyful, you are there. When we are fearful, you are there. When we are afraid, you comfort us. We thank you for your abiding presence. Gracious God, we hear the call to prepare “the way of the Lord” and we know it is the way of peace and justice. Help us to realize our good intentions to change our ways and be ready to follow the prince of peace. And we join together in prayer for the world and all its people.....

We pray for those who are afraid and uncertain. We pray for those who are sick. We pray for the healthcare professionals in our community and in the world. We pray for those who are celebrating today something good and important in their lives, but cannot celebrate it with friends and family. We pray for our local, national and world leaders, that every decision they make will be to benefit the most needy and vulnerable. We pray for our church, that we will continue to be a loving, caring community in difficult times. We pray for ourselves, that we will find strength and courage to face all the challenges of today and be hopeful for the future. May we wait expectantly and prepare faithfully for the surprises you have in store for us. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray....OUR FATHER

Dedication of Offering

God of surprises, we join with you in the joy of this season of giving. You gave us a Saviour, Christ the Lord. You give us life and breath, you fill the world with beauty, our hands with bounty, and our hearts with the desire to give. Accept these gifts, and ourselves, in every season. Amen.

Celebration of Communion (in church)

Hymn

When out of poverty is born

Blessing

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord...and take with you the vision and reality of God’s peace that makes this world a better, more just place for all. May the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen.