

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December 2020

3rd Sunday in Advent

Haddington West with Garvald and Morham



**Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ**

**“The Lord is good to those who look to him, to anyone who seeks him; it is good to wait in patience for deliverance by the Lord.”** Lam.3,25-26

**Collect:** God of power and mercy, you call us once again to celebrate the coming of your Son. Remove those things which hinder love of you, that when he comes he may find us waiting in awe and wonders for him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN

**O God beyond all praising**

1 O God beyond all praising,  
we worship You today  
and sing the love amazing  
that songs cannot repay;  
for we can only wonder  
at every gift You send,  
at blessings without number  
and mercies without end:  
we lift our hearts before You  
and wait upon Your word,  
we honour and adore You,  
our great and mighty Lord.

2 Then hear, O gracious Saviour,  
accept the love we bring,  
that we who know Your favour  
may serve You as our king;  
and whether our tomorrows  
be filled with good or ill,  
we'll triumph through our sorrows  
and rise to bless You still;  
to marvel at Your beauty  
and glory in Your ways,  
and make a joyful duty  
our sacrifice of praise!

Gustav Holst

**Jn.1,6-8.19-28**

**There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.**

**Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.' They**

asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you a prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, '*I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."*'

Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' 'I baptise you with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

**This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.**

Dear friends

A declaration is made, plain and clear, which everyone must understand – that John "*was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*" This is a distinction necessary to his witness and is lying at the heart of it – the distinction between what was the light and what was not. It was necessary then and it is very much necessary today.

However, making such a distinction is not popular today, I would say it is properly frowned upon, because we believe that anyone should believe what they will and as they want, that everyone chooses their own light as a matter of preference. Nevertheless, the distinction is vital, because it rests upon the distinction between God and man, between what is from God and what is from man (- do we think there is none?). The cost of ignoring the fact that a distinction needs to be made, and needs to be made truthfully, between what is the light and what is not, is to be left in the dark.

John was not the light! You see, it is not about any, or even the many, lights and luminaries of the world – people who hold the light to reason, to science and technology, education and leadership, glitz and glamour, beauty and appeal, influence and power etc. etc., and neither is it about the light adorning our houses inside and out, nor the things that delight us, like trees, gifts, food, carols, the ceremonies. For all they bring we must recognise that they are *not* the light; they must be distinguished from the light that shines in the darkness and truly penetrates it, that comes into the dark and with its brightness lifts it from us.

But what is this darkness which neither John nor any other of the 'lights and luminaries' can lift? Must it not be clear to us what our darkness is if we are to look out for and receive the light to which John testifies and if we are to reject as the light that which is not? It is a darkness, after all, which in its own eyes (in the eyes of the world) is not darkness but light. As the witness of the light points out, verse 5: "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*" That is, the darkness has tried: meaning it is darkness in that it considers the light darkness and itself the light. Does this not describe the world to a tee? Does it not in utter clarity show us our predicament, our darkness? For let us ask: Is there a greater and truer indictment of human darkness than its rejection of Jesus Christ? Than the rejection of the one truly human life offering to redeem us, bring us to God and through his death enable us to live a new life, and to choose instead the life of Barabbas, the life of the rebel, revolutionary and murderer, the life of self-making and self-rule? Than to reject the way of faith and obedience – the way of Christ – and choose instead the way of unbelief and disobedience?

This is the darkness of the world, is it not, that we are in bondage to sin and to death, that we reject as though it was dark the way that leads to life and choose as though it was light the way that leads to death.

Dear friends, John came as a witness to the light, which shines in the darkness, and is not overcome by it but overcomes it. Jesus is indeed the Redeemer, and there is plenty of redemption in him for

all! But this connection between witness and the coming light is of great importance and is a real help for us when we ready ourselves to grasp the light, which, as John explains, we do through faith – by way of believing. *“He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him all might believe.”*

The point becomes clearer, hopefully, as we wonder at John’s persistent refusal to play ball with those who want to know who he is, want him to witness to himself as though that “explained” John, who John is and what he lives for and is about, as if that would bring light into John’s life and theirs. Because: Who can make sense of John’s existence but John himself? But John is John as a witness to the light; not in answering ‘Who is John?’ but in testifying to ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ Who John is and what the true meaning of his life is, that has its answer in who Jesus Christ is and is for him, in the fact that his life is ordered in the direction of Christ. That is faith, and one through which the light shines into the darkness and lifts it.

Dear friends, we have what we need, the witness to the light, the witness to Jesus Christ – who he is and what he has done for us. We have it in Scripture, in the *“faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people”* (Jude 3). It is given so that through it our lives be ordered in the direction of the coming light, of Christ and his coming; it is given because where the witness is and finds faith, there Christ comes, in the fulness of God’s love and mercy to help and redeem, to come into the depth of our darkness, our sins and our death, our despair and lostness, to save and heal us and bring us into his glorious light and direct us in the way that leads to life. AMEN

### **Joy has dawned upon the world**

1 Joy has dawned upon the world,  
promised from creation:

God’s salvation now unfurled,  
hope for every nation.

Not with fanfares from above,  
not with scenes of glory,  
but a humble gift of love:

Jesus, born of Mary.

2 Sounds of wonder fill the sky  
with the songs of angels,  
as the mighty Prince of Life  
shelters in a stable.

Hands that set each star in place  
shaped the earth in darkness,  
cling now to a mother’s breast,  
vulnerable and helpless.

3 Shepherds bow before the Lamb,  
gazing at the glory;  
gifts of men from distant lands  
prophesy the story.

Gold, a king is born today,  
incense, God is with us,  
myrrh, His death will make a way,  
and by His blood He’ll win us.

4 Son of Adam, Son of heaven,  
given as a ransom,  
reconciling God and man,  
Christ our mighty champion!  
What a Saviour, what a friend,  
what a glorious mystery:  
once a babe in Bethlehem,  
now the Lord of history!

Stuart Townend / Keith Getty

Lord God, You destined man to be Your image, to love You and all that You have made and to rule in justice and righteousness, You made them for the praise and glory of Your name, that their works should be such as to show Your goodness and holiness. But we have forsaken Your light, through the sin of ingratitude and pride we have become subject to desires and lusts that have taken us far from You. In making our own destiny we have lost the one we had and we have lost our way, we dwell in the darkness of sin and death. But in Your great mercy You sent the light to bring us back to Yourself, to lift our darkness from us and restore us to our true destiny, to the praise and glory of Your name and the joy of all creation. Prepare us, we pray, for the coming of Your light and open our heart to Christ our Redeemer, to Whom with You and the Holy Spirit be all our thanks and praise.

- time of prayer / intercession –

***'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen'***

*Look forward in hope to the coming of your Saviour, prepare the way for Christ your Lord; welcome him with love and faith when he comes in glory.*

***And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.***

**AMEN**