Third Sunday of Advent – Year B

Sunday 13 December 2026

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Jeremy Balfour, Elder at Holy Trinity Wester Hailes, for his thoughts on the third Sunday of Advent. Jeremy is a former member of the Scottish Parliament and has been involved in politics for most of his adult life.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

At this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

Unlike any other world faith, Christianity believes that God's love for creation is so great that God took on human flesh and lived with us in our humanity.

As we journey through Advent we are reminded this week that we do not just worship a baby in a manger, but Jesus, who grew up and spoke and acted in a radical way that was to transform those who hear His words and choose to follow them.

As we reflect on our readings, are we challenged to move from a baby, 'mild and gentle', to a man who is fully human and fully God, with a radical manifesto to change the world? The same Holy Spirit who worked in Jesus' life now lives in every believer – how do we take this challenge and live it out in our lives, families and communities?

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

For many of us as soon as we read these verses our minds jump immediately to the time Jesus read them in Nazareth. However, the original hearers were in a different position. The historical and social setting was that the people had come back from Babylonian captivity to find their cities and temple destroyed, they were facing poverty, social despair, and dashed hopes. A small group of Israelites kept their faith while mourning their losses, prompting the prophet to deliver a powerful message of comfort and future restoration.

The Jubilee imagery is brought out with the phrase "proclaim liberty" (v1): it comes from the ancient Year of Jubilee, where debts were meant to be cancelled, land was meant to be returned, and enslaved people meant to be set free.

As we reflect on where our nation and world are today, how do we respond? As Christian believers in Scotland, we are a tiny minority, can we keep our faith alive and proclaim the Good News of comfort and future hope?

Psalm 126

Psalm 126 is one of the 15 'Songs of Ascents'. The Jewish people sang these specific songs as they travelled to Jerusalem for holy festivals. The singers used the memory of escaping Babylonian captivity to fuel their hope during new hardships.

Firstly, they look back: they remember the amazing grace of God, who brought the captives back to Zion. Secondly, they acknowledge the hardship they are facing now, that life remains difficult; the people still face dry conditions and struggles. Finally, their hope for the future: total restoration, comparing it to desert streams (Negev) that fill quickly after heavy rain. Sowing seeds in tears leads to a joyful harvest.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

These verses contain a short set of instructions from the Apostle Paul on how believers should live out their faith daily. We try and live in this way with the hope that one day Jesus will come again – not as baby but in all His power and glory, as Judge of all humanity, both the living and the dead.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John 1:6-8 tells us that John the Baptist was a human messenger sent by God to point people to Jesus, who is the true spiritual light. These verses introduce John's specific role in this Gospel. They separate him from Jesus to show that John was only a helper, while Jesus was the Saviour.

As we are called to point others to Jesus, does John the Baptist help us do that that in a radical but modern way? How would you respond to John's style of ministry if he appeared in your neighbourhood this Advent period?

Sermon ideas

The reading from Isaiah is picked up by Jesus in one of His first sermons recorded in the Gospels (Luke 4:16-30). Returning to His hometown, Jesus entered the synagogue and read this passage and then adopts these verses for His life and ministry. Some authors describe this as Jesus' manifesto or the Mission Statement of Jesus. These sermon ideas reflect my responses to Jesus' reading of the Isaiah passage, in Luke 4.

As followers of Jesus, is this part of our Mission Statement, either locally or nationally as the Church? As the world looks at what we say and do, is it reflected in our ministry? Jesus saw preaching as two sides of the same coin; on one side must be proclamation and on the other side must be action. As we worship on a Sunday and during the rest of the week do we have that balance in our ministry and church?

I am struck by the words of AW Tozer: “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the Church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament Church, 95% of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”

We are told that the Spirit of the Lord came on Jesus. Have we lost that anticipation, when we prepare and deliver a sermon, that it is not our ideas or words we should be communicating, but that the Spirit of God should be using us?

Luke 4:28-30 tells us how the people responded to Jesus. It was not positive! When we talk about social or economic issues, what is our motivation? Are we wanting to simply fit in and be part of the status quo? Can we create spaces where everyone can contribute, even those that we disagree with, or are we wanting to exclude certain groups and limit debate?

The sermon could be shaped with the following sections:

- The setting and context Luke 4:16–17
- The scripture reading Luke 4:18–19
- The core proclamation Luke 4:20–21
- The turning point and rejection Luke 4:22–30

Some questions to think about?

- Did Jesus’ ministry have a bias towards the poor? How might we respond?
- Healing was central to Jesus’s ministry, but He did not heal everyone. Do we anticipate individuals being healed both physically, mentally and spiritually? Writing as someone who was born with a significant physical disability, I am perhaps more aware of what we say to those who are not physically or mentally healed. What does Spiritual healing look like in our local context?
- The practical proclamation is for the prisoner, the homeless, the disabled and the needy. Are these our priorities? How do we balance the essential need for Spiritual healing with practical needs?
- Can we take the words of Jesus and challenge politicians both nationally and locally on setting their priorities?
- Who is my neighbour and how I do I love them? The person I live next to, the individual in my congregation, or someone I have never met?

Prayers

- **Prayer of thanksgiving**

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." (1 Chronicles 16:34)

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created."(James 1:17-18)

Holy Father, thank You for Your love that endures forever.
In Your Spirit, we give thanks every day.
We gather to celebrate Your goodness, Your gifts, and Your provision.
We pause to praise You that every good and perfect gift comes from You,
that we have so much for which we are thankful.
Above all, thank You for Your gift of salvation, through Your Son Jesus Christ,
from whom we receive forgiveness of our sins and life everlasting.
In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

- **Prayer for forgiveness**

I come before You today acknowledging my shortcomings
and the times I have strayed from Your path.
You know my heart, my thoughts, and everything I try to hide.
I confess my faults and ask for Your merciful forgiveness.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Remove the weight of my guilt,
the shame of my past, and the heavy burdens I have carried.

Thank You for Your boundless grace and the promise that when I confess my sins,
You are faithful to forgive and to cleanse me.
Help me to walk in Your light, to resist temptation,
and to extend the same grace and forgiveness to others
that You have so generously given to me.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

- **Prayers for our nation**

Almighty God,
we commend our nation to Your care.

Give our leaders – including the King, the Prime Minister, First Minister
and all in authority –
the wisdom, integrity, and strength to know Your will and do it.
Help them to serve the public as lovers of truth and justice,
promoting the general welfare and peace for all people.

We lift our nation before You.
Heal our divisions, replace fear with compassion,
and let integrity rise above ambition.
Guide our shared life together
so that we may lead peaceful, godly lives,
in Jesus' name Amen.

- **Prayers for individuals**

God of mercy and justice,
Open our eyes to see You in the face of the poor.
Open our ears to hear You in the cries of the exploited.

Lord God, You came to give honour to the least, the forgotten, and the lost.
Look with compassion on and comfort all who suffer
and protect those who are in urgent need.

Keep the hearts of the afflicted free from bitterness
and fill our hearts with deep empathy.
Make us instruments of Your love,
so our hands may feed, clothe, and shelter those in need.

Remind us that whatever we do for the least of Your people, we do for You.
Give us the strength to love and serve until our end. Amen

Musical suggestions

God Welcomes All (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music and words-only versions are now available; and digital resources, including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and

lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all

Our online music resource is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the Songs for Sunday blog from Trinity College Glasgow.

- A suggested playlist of songs from CH4 throughout Advent can be found on the Church of Scotland website (Advent) and in GWA 90-98
- GWA 148 – "And I will not sing alone" (I will sing a song of love)
- GWA 222 – "El mensaje que hoy proclamamos" (Hear the message we now are proclaiming)
- CH4 253 – "Inspired by love and anger"
- CH4 259 – "Beauty for brokenness"
- CH4 284 – "Hope is a candle, once lit by the prophets"
- CH4 317 – "Before the world began"

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
  Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/ intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
  What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
  Did it function well as a whole?
  How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
  What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
  Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/ community?
  How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
  How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

God Welcomes All can be ordered from Hymns Ancient & Modern

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship here

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