



WELCOME TO ST PETER'S ASH



THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AT ST PETER'S IS CALLED TO CELEBRATE, LIVE AND REFLECT THE LOVE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

6th DECEMBER 2020

ADVENT 2

<u>READINGS FOR TODAY</u>		PARISH OFFICE: Please phone or use e-mail to make contact TEL: 01252 331161; e- mail: office@saint-peters-ash.org.uk BOOKINGS OF WEDDINGS & BAPTISMS – phone for an appointment on 01252 321517 or 331161 WEBSITE: www.saint-peters-ash.org.uk
Isaiah	40 v 1 - 11	
2 Peter	3 v 8 – 15a	
Mark	1 v 1 - 8	



CHRISTMAS ARRANGEMENTS

We will be putting a Nativity Themed Service online for use on Christmas Eve afternoon, as there can't be the usual Christingle Service in church this year.

There will also be **NO** Midnight Mass in church either. Instead we shall be posting a link to the Midnight Mass from Guildford Cathedral. Also, we shall be putting a service of Evening Worship online for you to use on Christmas Eve evening, or at any other time during Christmas.

On Christmas Day there will be an 8 am Holy Communion in St Peter's Centre and at 10 am a said Holy Communion in church. We will be asking you to book in for these services as space will be limited, due to social distancing rules.

On Sunday 27th there will be an 8 am Holy Communion in St Peter's Centre and a 10 am Holy Communion in church.

CHRISTMAS CARDS – we cannot use the usual pigeon hole system this year. Please hand your cards to a steward at the door, they will then be sorted and handed out to recipients at the next service i.e. handed in on Sunday, available on the following Wednesday or Sunday. Please don't look for them yourself, or handle other people's cards. Please **do not** give them to others in church personally, to keep contact down.

ONLINE ADVENT COURSE CONTINUES THIS TUESDAY

The course is entitled 'Hope' and is by John Birch – a theme which seems particularly relevant this year! There are two more Bible Studies and discussions: Hope in the Gospel promises Tuesday 8th; Hope for the future Wednesday 16th at 7 – 30 pm. You can join online by following the link on the website.

NATIONAL CHRISTINGLE SERVICE

SUNDAY 13TH DECEMBER at 9 am

You may wish to join in with this National Christingle Service, by registering, following the links below. The service will last 45 minutes.

Location: The Church of England's Facebook and YouTube channels Register to attend: www.christingle.org/attend

Also here is a link to the Facebook group too
<https://www.facebook.com/events/2695266214024562/>

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK – ADVENT 3

Isaiah 61 v 1 – 4, 8 - end; 1 Thessalonians 5 v 16 - 24;
John 1 v 6 – 8, 19 - 28

ST PETER'S PRAYER CHAIN - If you would like prayer for yourself or somebody else please phone: 01252 322292 or 01252 323037 This is a confidential service.

CARE AND SHARE - If you would like to donate any tins, packets, UHT milk, tea, coffee etc. for the shelves outside church, please leave items on the doorstep of the Rectory.

It would be nice to have some Christmas treats to put out this month! Thank you.

ST PETER'S CHURCH CALENDARS

Ideal Christmas presents, our calendar for 2021 has pictures of St Peter's and room for appointments. Only £5 they are now available – at the back in church.

FROM A CHURCH BULLETIN

Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on October 24 in the church. So ends a friendship that began in their school days.

Pot-luck supper Sunday at 5:00 PM - prayer and medication to follow.

100 CLUB – NOVEMBER WINNERS

1st Prize – Joy Savage; 2nd Prize – Terry Hirst;
3rd Prize – David Crow

Please pray for the souls of all the recently Departed, among them: ELIZABETH STOKES (Liz's mother)

Morning Prayer at 10 am on Sunday

If there is more than one person present, someone may wish to read the parts marked (L), everyone says the rest together. You can say alternate verses in the Psalm and in the Canticles. Please have a Bible to hand.

(L) O Lord, open our lips

All: and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

(L) Reveal among us the light of your presence

All: that we may behold your power and glory.

The second candle on the Advent Wreath, or another candle, is lit, and this prayer is said, reminding us of The Prophets:

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true:
to you be praise and glory for ever.
Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets,
but in our days you speak through your Son,
whom you have appointed the heir of all things.
Grant us, your people, to walk in his light,
that we may be found ready and watching
when he comes again in glory and judgement;
for you are our light and our salvation.
Blessed be God for ever.

This hymn is said or sung:

Hills of the north, rejoice;
river and mountain spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland, sing;
though absent long, your Lord is nigh;
he judgment brings and victory.

Isles of the southern seas,
deep in your coral caves
pent be each warring breeze,
lulled be your restless waves:
he comes to reign with boundless sway,
and makes your wastes his great highway.

Lands of the East, arise,
He is your brightest morn,
Greet Him with joyous eyes,
Praise shall His path adorn:
The God whom you have longed to know
In Christ draws near and calls you now.

Shores of the utmost West,
lands of the setting sun,
Welcome the heavenly guest,
In whom the dawn has come,
high raise the note, that Jesus died,
yet lives and reigns, the Crucified.

Shout, while ye journey home;
songs be in every mouth;
lo, from the North we come,
from East, and West, and South.
city of God, the bond are free,
we come to live and reign in thee!

(L) The night has passed, and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind:

All: As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
so may the light of your presence, O God,
set our hearts on fire with love for you;
now and for ever. Amen.

(L) When the Lord comes,
he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness,
and will disclose the purposes of the heart.
Therefore, in the light of Christ let us confess our sins:

All: God, through Jesus Christ,
will judge the secret thoughts of all:
Lord, have mercy.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,'
will enter the kingdom of heaven:
Christ, have mercy.

Let anyone who has an ear
listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches:
Lord, have mercy.

All: May God our Father have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

We now say 'A Song of Baruch' together:

All Lead us, O God, with joy
to walk in the light of glory.

- 1 Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height: ♦
look to the east and see your children,
- 2 Gathered from the west and the east ♦
at the word of the Holy One.
- 3 They rejoice that God has remembered them ♦
and has brought them back to you.
- 4 For God has ordered that every high mountain ♦
and the everlasting hills be made low,
- 5 And the valleys filled up to make level ground ♦
so that they may walk safely in the glory of God.
- 6 The woods and every fragrant tree ♦
have shaded them at God's command.
- 7 For God will lead his people with joy
in the light of his glory ♦
with the mercy and righteousness
that comes from God.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All Lead us, O God, with joy
to walk in the light of glory.

We now say the collect for today Advent 2:

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power
and come among us,
and with great might succour us;
that whereas, through our sins and wickedness
we are grievously hindered
in running the race that is set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Read Isaiah 40 v 1 - 11 followed by Psalm 85 v 1 - 2 & 8 - 13 concluding with:

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Read 2 Peter 3 v 8 - 15a

(L) Alleluia, alleluia.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

All: Alleluia.

Now read Mark 1 v 1 - 8

Here are some thoughts on today's readings from Revd. Carol:

Well here we are then, second week of Advent, two weeks closer to the day when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, His first coming into the world. And this is the week as the second Advent candle is lit, we think about the prophets and their foretelling of Jesus' coming into the world and of who He is. Isaiah talks of the voice in the desert who will be setting things straight ready for the 'glory of the Lord' to be revealed. This particular reading of course has always been associated with John the Baptist, who we traditionally celebrate next week. And the Mark reading is most definitely about John the Baptist too, the prophet in real time if you like. He was the one saying that the Messiah was coming pretty soon, and that people should be ready for Him. Not only did John tell people of this coming of the Lord, but he put some action behind his words, he got people to think about their sinful ways, helping them to be prepared for this great event by encouraging them to be baptised.

Now for us as Christians today it could be very easy for us to look back on these two prophets and say the message they were giving was for the people of their time and we only take them as just being part of our tradition in church, we look at them in Advent as one of readings we always have in the lead up to Christmas. But if we do that and ignore these stories as being not for us, then we are most certainly being complacent in our faith and relationship with God. We must always keep in mind the idea that Jesus is coming again one day and that we should be prepared for His return. Part of the being prepared is us doing what John the Baptist did, maybe not quite in the same way, but definitely we should be telling people about Jesus, the promise of His coming again and the hope that He brings in our lives day by day in this world and beyond. Not only being disciples (followers of Jesus) but being prophets too.

You don't need me to tell you what a challenging and painful year this has been for all of us. Not being able to do what we want, when we want, not being able to go where we want, when we want, and not being able to meet up with whoever we want, when we want. We have had to learn new ways of protecting ourselves and our families from the unseen and we have had the very real pain of not being able to worship in the way we always have. Earlier in the year we were deprived of Holy Week and Easter and now Christmas is going to be completely different too! This all sounds a bit 'woe is me', which is a bit how Isaiah and John the Baptist would have come across to those who were first hearing the messages from God that they were giving. Yet we know that actually they were foretelling the good news. There were changes afoot on a scale no one could imagine, and for Isaiah, he would not see that prophesy being fulfilled as it was some seven hundred or so years before his message came to fruition. On the other hand, both John and the people he led towards a new start and whom he encouraged to look towards the man who would bring light and hope to the world, would actually see that prophecy fulfilled. They would experience Jesus in the flesh.

How can this help us in our current situation? Well, as the motto of the boy scouts says, 'Be prepared', and as followers of Jesus we do that by not taking our eyes off of Jesus. We should endeavour to keep ourselves fixed on Him

and the promise of His coming again, and in order for us to do that we need to be prepared. Prepared not only for ourselves, but also helping those around us to be prepared too.

Now, I don't know about you, but this time of year is usually about being prepared. There is full on preparation going on! And in my case preparation of lists – lists of thing I need to do, places I have to go, people I have to meet, presents I need to buy, cards that need to be written, food and drink that has to be bought and prepared, the house needing a good clean, spare bed made up for and prepared for extra guest(s). But this year it is different, it has all taken a bit of a slower pace. Because of the second lockdown, I actually got my Christmas cards in the post by the 1st of December, and have most of the food and drink (which will be far less this year, not having to cater for the many people who would usually pass through our house during the Christmas period). There has not been the mad dash from one gathering to another and because church itself is different this year, there hasn't been the usual pressure of the many different services that St. Peter's has for the various schools and organisations that come here for their Christmas services. And although this means there are missed opportunities to meet with people who perhaps only come to church this time of year, I feel that God has given me, and us, an opportunity to take a bit more time out for Him. Because we have had to slow down, do things differently, we are able to prepare ourselves in a different way, not only for Christmas, but in our relationship with God. Being able to slow down has meant time to perhaps spend a bit more time in prayer or reflecting on His influence in our lives and the lives of the world around us. This can only be a good thing as by drawing closer to Him we can all become better disciples and maybe even better prophets, telling people of the hope that Christ brings now and when He returns to us once again in the flesh. AMEN.

Now pause for your own reflections.

(L): We now affirm our faith in the words of the Creed:

All We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit
and the Virgin Mary and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son

is worshipped and glorified,

who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic
and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

(L) Now it is time to awake out of sleep,
All: for the night is far spent and the day is at hand.

(L) Now is our salvation nearer than when we first
believed,
All: for the night is far spent.

(L) Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness
and put on the armour of light,
All: for the day is at hand.

(L) Put on the Lord Jesus Christ
and make no provision for the flesh,
All: for the night is far spent and the day is at hand.

We now say 'The Benedictus' together:

All: Look towards the east, O Jerusalem,
and see the glory that is coming from God.

- 1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, ♦
who has come to his people and set them free.
- 2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, ♦
born of the house of his servant David.
- 3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old ♦
to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all that hate us,
- 4 To show mercy to our ancestors, ♦
and to remember his holy covenant.
- 5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
- 6 Free to worship him without fear, ♦
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.
- 7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the
Most High, ♦
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
- 8 To give his people knowledge of salvation ♦
by the forgiveness of all their sins.
- 9 In the tender compassion of our God ♦
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
- 10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the
shadow of death, ♦
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All: Look towards the east, O Jerusalem,
and see the glory that is coming from God.

*Now we turn to God in a time of prayer, adapted from
Common Worship:*

In joyful expectation of his coming to our aid
we pray to Jesus.

Come to your Church as Lord and judge.
We pray for this diocese and our Bishops Andrew and
Jo, we pray for our friends at St Mary's, St Paul's and
Holy Angels, that we may be bold in proclaiming the
good news of Jesus this Christmas with joy and in
safety. Help us to live in the light of your coming
and give us a longing for your kingdom.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to your world as King of the nations.
We pray for all who are in positions of authority and
power, that in their decision – making they will work
to see justice and peace prevail.
Before you rulers will stand in silence.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to the suffering as Saviour and comforter.
We pray for those with the Covid virus and the people
who are caring for them. We pray for the homeless,
the hungry, the lonely and the isolated. Break into our
lives, where we struggle with sickness and distress,
and set us free to serve you for ever.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to us as shepherd and guardian of our souls.
We remember all who have died recently, especially
Elizabeth Stokes, and those whose anniversary of death
occurs at this time. Give us with all the faithful departed
a share in your victory over evil and death.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come from heaven, Lord Jesus,
with power and great glory.
Lift us up to meet you,
that with Mary and Peter and all your saints and angels
we may live and reign with you in your new creation.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Silence is kept.

Come, Lord Jesus, do not delay;
give new courage to your people,
who trust in your love.
By your coming, raise us to share in the joy
of your kingdom on earth as in heaven,
where you live and reign with the Father and the Spirit,
one God for ever and ever.
Amen.

As Jesus taught us, so we pray: Our Father in heaven....

This hymn may be said or sung:

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
The Saviour promised long!
Let every heart prepare a throne,
And every voice a song.

He comes the prisoners to release,
In Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before Him burst,
The iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure;
And with the treasures of His grace
To enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim;
And Heaven's eternal arches ring
With Thy beloved name.

Let us pray:

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us
in great humility; that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Lord Jesus, light of the world,
the prophets said you would bring peace
and save your people in trouble.
Give peace in our hearts at Christmas
and show all the world God's love.
Amen.

Father in heaven,
who sent your Son to redeem the world
and will send him again to be our judge:
give us grace so to imitate him
in the humility and purity of his first coming
that, when he comes again,
we may be ready to greet him
with joyful love and firm faith;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(L) May Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon us
scatter the darkness from before our path,
and make us ready to meet him when he comes in glory;
And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us, and
remain with us, today and always. Amen.

(L) Let us bless the Lord.
All: Thanks be to God.

All: May the souls of the faithful departed, through the
mercy of God, rest in peace, and rise with Christ in glory.
Amen.

Evening Prayer for this week

O Lord open our lips,
and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

O God make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

Reveal among us the light of your presence
that we may behold your power and glory.

A lamp or candle may be lit.

Blessed are you, Sovereign God,
creator of light and darkness,
to you be glory and praise for ever.
As evening falls, you renew your promise
to reveal among us the light of your presence.

May your word be a lantern to our feet
and a light upon our path
that we may behold your coming among us.

Strengthen us in our stumbling weakness
and free our tongues to sing your praise.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

That this evening may be holy, good and peaceful,
we pray with one heart and mind:

Silence is kept.

As our evening prayer rises before you, O God,
so may your mercy come down upon us
to cleanse our hearts
and set us free to sing your praise
now and for ever. Amen.

A Psalm is said: Mon 144; Tue 11; Wed 10; Thurs 73; Fri 90; Sat 94 ending with:

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

*Two Scripture Readings now follow (see below). Between
the two readings we say:*

All Our hope is not in vain,
because God's love has been poured into our
hearts.

- 1 God reckons as righteous those who believe, ♦
who believe in him who raised Jesus from the dead;
- 2 For Christ was handed over to death for our sins, ♦
and raised to life for our justification.
- 3 Since we are justified by faith, ♦
we have peace with God through
our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 4 Through Christ we have gained access
to the grace in which we stand, ♦
and rejoice in our hope of the glory of God.
- 5 We even exult in our sufferings, ♦
for suffering produces endurance,
- 6 And endurance brings hope, ♦
and our hope is not in vain,
- 7 Because God's love has been
poured into our hearts, ♦
through the Holy Spirit, given to us.
- 8 God proves his love for us: ♦
while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.
- 9 Since we have been justified by his death, ♦
how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath.
- 10 Therefore, we exult in God through
our Lord Jesus Christ, ♦
in whom we have now received our reconciliation.

All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.

All Our hope is not in vain,
because God's love has been poured into our
hearts.

Readings:

Monday Isaiah 30 v 1 - 18; Matthew 14 v 1 - 12
Tuesday Isaiah 30 v 19 - end; Matthew 14 v 13 - end
Wednesday: Isaiah 31; Matthew 15 v 1 - 20
Thursday: Isaiah 32; Matthew 15 v 21 - 28

Friday: Isaiah 33 v 1 - 22; Matthew 15 v 29 - end
Saturday: Isaiah 35; Matthew 16 v 1 – 12

After the second reading we say:

My soul is waiting for you, O Lord:
in your word is my hope.

All My soul is waiting for you, O Lord:
in your word is my hope.

There is forgiveness with you,
so that you shall be feared.

All In your word is my hope.

Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit.

All My soul is waiting for you, O Lord:
in your word is my hope.

Gospel Canticle: The Magnificat (The Song of Mary)

All Lord Jesus, you are the one who is to come,
the one whom we await with longing hearts.

1) My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit
rejoices in God my Saviour; he has looked with favour on
his lowly servant.

2) From this day all generations will call me blessed; the
Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his
name.

3) He has mercy on those who fear him, from generation
to generation.

4) He has shown strength with his arm and has scattered
the proud in their conceit.

5) Casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting
up the lowly.

6) He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the
rich away empty.

7) He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, to
remember his promise of mercy.

8) The promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and
his children for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever.
Amen.

All Lord Jesus, you are the one who is to come,
the one whom we await with longing hearts.

*Prayers of thanksgiving are made for the day that is
ending. Intercessions are offered for the church, the world
and for individuals, the sick and the departed.*

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

The Collects for this week:

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power
and come among us,
and with great might succour us;
that whereas, through our sins and wickedness
we are grievously hindered
in running the race that is set before us,

your bountiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit,
be honour and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us
in great humility; that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

This hymn may be said or sung:

Hail to the Lord's anointed;
Great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
To set the captive free,
To take away transgressions,
And rule in equity.

He comes, with succour speedy,
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy,
And bid the weak be strong:
To give them songs for sighing,
Their darkness turned to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Were precious in His sight.

He shall come down like showers
Upon the fruitful earth:
And love, joy, hope, like flowers,
Spring in His path to birth:
Before Him, on the mountains,
Shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness in fountains,
From hill to valley flow.

Kings shall fall down before Him,
And gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore Him,
His praise all people sing;
To Him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend;
His kingdom still increasing,
A kingdom without end.

O'er every foe victorious,
He on His throne shall rest;
From age to age more glorious,
All blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever
His changeless name of love.

Let us pray:

Loving God, at this time of crisis when so many are
suffering, we pray for our nation and our world. Give our
leaders wisdom, our Health Service strength, our people
hope. Lead us through these parched and difficult days to
the fresh springs of joy and comfort that we find in Jesus
Christ our Lord. Amen.

Loving Father God be with us in our distress: with our families, friends and neighbours, our country and our world. Give health to the sick, hope to the fearful, and comfort to the mourners. Give wisdom to our frontline and key workers, insight to our government and patience to us all; Overcome disease with the power of your new life, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A Family Prayer

Loving God, you know us and all that we are facing. We thank you that we can come to you as we are – with all our fears and concerns, our difficulties and challenges. Please draw close to each of us and those we remember before you now. Bring to us your peace and comfort. And fill us with your Spirit that we may be bearers of your grace and hope to others. As a country protect us, encourage us and keep us. In the name of your Son Jesus we pray. Amen

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

May the Lord, when he comes, find us watching and waiting and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.

May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo for Sunday 6th December in the Diocese of Guildford

Advent begins in the dark: the darkness of sin, the darkness of a world that is lost without a Saviour. I used to live in the denominational marketplace of the United States, where at this time of year you'd find two kinds of churches. Perhaps it's the same here but I first noticed it in the States. Many are twinkling with fairy lights and singing 'have yourself a merry little Christmas'; while others resist all signs of Christmas and do Advent with purple hangings and readings all about sin, judgement and the wrath of God. It takes a certain courage, a bit of practice, and a lot of liturgical determination to choose the latter, but if and when you do you will settle for nothing less. Advent shows us that the meaning of Christmas is diminished to the vanishing point if we aren't willing to take a fearless inventory of the darkness. This year above all years – when yes, we are desperate for some joy and gladness – perhaps also we feel the depth of darkness and desperation in our world in a new way. I want to urge you today: not to run away.

In that darkness we hear a voice that speaks out for light. There is the Advent hope. That voice is the voice of John the Baptist. You won't find him popping out of any Advent calendar window, yet he is the foremost figure of Advent. He doesn't fit with the rounds of shopping and wrapping and baking that so easily preoccupy us at this time of year. He lives in the wilderness on locusts and honey (here is my local rewilding wilderness in Shalford, the best I could do for a visual aid today). His voice is dissonant and

uncomfortable because it just doesn't fit with anything 'normal'.

Listen again to the opening words of St Mark's gospel: *'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'Behold I am sending my messenger before 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'. And John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'*

All four evangelists agree: there is no good news, no gospel of Jesus Christ, without John the Baptist. John's whole life was lived with one purpose: he was born to declare the imminent arrival of the Messiah. And he pursues that vocation with a single-mindedness that is startling. He's a firebrand who pursues his mission unto death – unafraid of King Herod nor even his wife. Yet utterly submissive before the One whose coming he lived and died to illuminate. John said, 'One is coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not fit to untie' (Luke 3:15-16).

There's not much about John that is likely to appeal to any modern sensibilities. But there never was. He is utterly out of sync with his age or our age or any age. There's nothing loveable or cuddly – with his diet of locusts, a leather belt and a camel's hair shirt. Yet it's not his person that marks him out, but his location.

The description of John the Baptist in Mark is the same description as Elijah in 2 Ki 1:8 – Elijah the prophet who did not die but who was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Jewish expectation was fixed on Elijah coming back, as the sign that the end of the world was at hand. So here we begin to understand what is going on: John the Baptist is the new Elijah, standing at the edge of the universe, at the dawn of a new world, the turn of the ages. That is his location – as a sentinel, the one who declares the Advent of God, the coming of the once and future Messiah.

So John's location is on the frontier of the ages as God arrives in his world to turn it away from its past sin and bondage, toward a future of promise and freedom. John's proclaiming the coming reversal of the downward spiral of human history, the invading Son of God, the beginning of the end. For those in the know, the import of J the B as the opener of Mark's gospel could not be more clear: when Elijah comes back, the next person to appear will be God, and that will be the first day of the age that is to come.

So John the Baptist is the preview, the warm-up act, the curtain-raiser. With his brusque and staccato style, Mark the evangelist is telling us this version of Elijah, with his single-minded life and horrendous death at the hands of the principalities and powers, is a preview of Jesus. The Advent message is that in the suffering and death of God's servants at the hands of despots and tyrants, is made manifest the new rule of God.

I think of an event five years ago that horrified the world, the news story of 21 Christian men kneeling in a line on a beach in Libya, wearing orange jumpsuits with a row of masked executors all in black standing behind them. After the Islamic State released a video of their murders, images of this massacre of Coptic Christians reverberated around the world. There's an Advent story. I vividly remember the reaction of Archbishop Angaelos, the Coptic bishop based in London who saw this as part of the persecution his church has experienced since the third century. "We realise that it is the cross of Christ. ... we live it with a sense of resilience, refusing either victimhood or triumphalism," he said. "It's not the end of the road because there is a resurrection that comes after the cross and the empty tomb. And so it's in that hope that we continue to live." You know their last words? They were words of repentance, 'Lord have mercy'.

Those Coptic Christians were like John the Baptist. Though they were detained and pressed to recant their faith, they paid the price for holding their positions on the frontier where the goodness of God's coming age opposes the rulers of this present evil age (Gal 1:4). They knelt and prayed in order to bear witness to the One whose coming John the Baptist lived to illuminate. On that beach they proclaimed with their lives the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This Advent season you and I are invited to reflect on our own positions. Where am I located along that frontier? Where do we stand on the great divide between this age of despotism, disease and death and God's coming kingdom of truth, liberty and love? Our lives are hardly dramatic compared to our Coptic comrades. So far as I know here in the diocese of Guildford, no one is asking us to confront gunmen. Yet the Advent warfare is also conducted here. There are other fronts. I think of a friend in business who refuses to go along with corrupt company policies even though it would bring huge financial benefit – that person is holding their place on the Advent frontier. I think of those teachers working their socks off night and day to keep schools open for the sake of children's wellbeing, even teaching from home when they're obliged to shield, when it would be so much easier to sign off sick. I think of the prayer warriors keeping vigil during this 10 day period on behalf of those caught up in Gender-Based Violence, as well as those who speak out at great personal risk. I think of the colleague who has given the whole of their salary back for a year in order to help the charity they serve to survive through these lean times. These are Advent people, holding their positions in spite of personal loss. They are on location with the One who is to come, the One whom John announced at the price of his own life.

As we get ready for Christmas, let's make space in our hearts for that strange, lonely sentinel on the frontier of the ages, who points away from himself to the One

who is to come, identifying for us the place we are to stand. Whenever we do the right thing in spite of its cost, we are doing what Christian soldiers do: we are standing our ground. It may not be a very big piece of ground, but it is the one God has given us to hold, and it will be part of God's new world in the Great Liberation. Kneel there, and proclaim with your life the baptism of repentance that brings the forgiveness of sins.

Whenever anyone is willing to emerge from the paralysis of fear and anger into courageous active participation, there is the Advent spirit. Wherever there are voices in the darkness speaking for light, there is the Advent hope. Wherever there are people willing to face danger for freedom, there is the Advent frontier. It begins in the dark. It certainly does not end in the dark.
