**Service for Advent Sunday 29th November 2020 prepared by Revd. Pam Siddall**

***Greetings in the words of St. Paul****:*

Brothers and sisters, “...grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Jesus Christ, for in every way you have been enriched in him….so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1Corinthians 1, v. 3, 4 & 7)

According to the media in recent days of lock-down, we are soon to find out whether Christmas will be ‘allowed to happen’ this year. Well, we have news for them: Christmas has happened, once for all about 2 millennia ago (probably not on 25th December though!) so, whether or not Covid rules allow us to get together for the razzmatazz and partying of contemporary practice, Christians world-wide will still be remembering the birth of Jesus and worshiping Immanuel, ‘God with us’, even if it has to be only in the quiet of our own homes. Real Christmas can never be cancelled.

Meantime, though, there is another very important season beginning today and while some see the run-up to Christmas as a time for frantic shopping and preparation, for us it is a time of waiting in spiritual preparation for the coming of Christ and practicing the recognition of his presence in our lives. It should not be over-looked. So, on this first Sunday of Advent, when we look not to the birth of Christ, but to his return at the end of time, let us worship God together.

***Sing, read or listen to ‘Lo He Comes’*** *(STF 177, H&P 241 or on You-tube)*

***We pray together****.* First, please take a time of quiet to centre your thoughts on God and wait in his presence.

God is with us! We praise you Lord: from the outset of all things you have been present with your people, in the midst of your wonderful creation.

God is with us! We praise you Lord: you have come to rescue us in person in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God is with us! We praise you Lord for the wonderful comfort of your Holy Spirit, present with us even now this minute, as in every moment of our lives.

God, you came to us, you are with us, you have promised you will come again in full glory. In the waiting time, we praise and thank you Lord. Amen.

***Scripture****.* Today we start a new series of Bible readings for year B in our lectionary and it is the turn of Mark’s gospel primarily this year. Today’s gospel reading points us to the end of time and calls us to ‘keep alert’ and ‘keep awake’ (verses 33, 35 and 37) for as we proclaim in our communion service, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

Read Mark 13, verses 24-37 (especially v.33-37 which says servants should not be caught napping!)

***Our prayer of confession****.* Lord, with all the anxiety of the current times, we are tired and weary. In these challenging days, we find it hard to keep awake and alert as good, watchful servants should. We are sorry that so often, like your disciples in Gethsemane, we disappoint you when you come, but find us sleeping. (We *take time for quiet thought.)* Lord Jesus, we thank you that in your humanity you understand all our weakness and so we come to ask your forgiveness. As we hear those words of grace, “Your sins are forgiven”, may we be renewed and re-invigorated for mission and service at this special time of year. Amen

***Sing, read or listen to ‘O come, O come Immanuel’*** *(STF 180, H&P 85 or on You-tube)*

***Reflection* Patience, Practice, Peace, Presence.**

Apparently, we waste as much as 3 years of our life waiting in queues for one reason or another. I am not a patient person and I hate waiting. The worst is hanging on the phone while appalling music jangles at you out of the ether! Our Advent waiting has a fine purpose, though, to allow our growing awareness of Christ’s presence with us now, and our expectation of his greater coming at the end of time, to determine the way we live day by day. So, I, and perhaps you too, need to learn **Patience**; our first Advent watch-word for today.

My second watch-word is **Practice.** We can hone our waiting skills by setting aside special times for extra prayer, Bible study and meditation. There are many excellent daily Advent study materials available: just one very light-hearted but thought-provoking example is Stephen Cottrell’s ‘Do Nothing; Christmas is coming!’ The following ADVENT acrostic might prompt you as you meditate and pray:

**A**doration: simply dwell and gaze on the love of Jesus.

**D**edication: offer yourself utterly to him afresh each day.

**V**ision: expect to catch glimpses of his glory.

**E**nlightenment: listen for his guidance, his purpose for your life.

**N**urture: tend and nourish the (sometimes guttering) candle of your faith.

**T**rust: in Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, and rest in him.

With such practice comes **Peace**, our third watch-word, the ‘peace that passes understanding’ that deep, inner peace in the midst of the current turmoil which only Jesus can give. He says, “My peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives…”. T.S. Eliot writes of the “still centre of the turning world”. That describes for me the calming sense of true communion with Jesus, the stiller of the storm. Surely, we are called to seek that place of calm, a deep well from which to draw blessing not just for ourselves but to resource our Christian duty to help still the storms of life in others around us.

Finally, in such peace, we deepen our awareness of his **Presence**, a presence which we are called to carry with us into our daily living. “The best of all is, God is with us”: this is our Methodist theme for this year. That fact should influence the way we respond to the needs of others, reaching out to our communities in this troubled world with his loving kindness in our every word, thought and action. “In him is life, and that life is the light of all people.” (John 1, 4 alt.) and our task is to carry and shine out that light of **his** **Presence**.

***A story:*** I heard of a failing monastery whose few monks were losing heart. The abbot consulted a rabbi who lived as a hermit not far away. He had no advice to give, but said, “you are holy men and do good works, so I know that Messiah is among you.” Over the coming days and weeks, the monks each pondered his words and began to wonder which of them could possibly be the Messiah in their midst. Could it be the wise old abbot; Brother John, sometimes disagreeable but always ready to lend a hand when needed; Brother Thomas, skilled at nurturing the garden; Brother David, so gently tending the animals? Then another possibility occurred, “Surely the rabbi couldn’t have meant me. But what if it is? What should I do?” Since any one of them, they thought, might have been the Messiah they began to treat each-other with a new reverence and respect. A more gentle, warm-hearted, loving concern somehow grew up among them, noticed by visitors who felt heartened to be in their presence and came to walk in the garden or sit quietly in the chapel. A radical change had come in hearts, minds and behaviour, restoring the soul of the monastery and its influence on others. Indeed, Messiah was among them, and it showed.

God is among us too. How will he shine out through you this Advent? Are his servants awake and ready?

***Our prayers:*** Psalm 80 verses 1a, 2b and 19

“Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock...Awaken your might; come and save us… Restore us Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us that we may be saved.”

In your hearts, thank our Lord that he is **H**ere with us. Pray for his **H**ealing for the many suffering due to Covid 19 or other illnesses, including those known personally to you. Ask for his **H**elp and guidance for all world leaders seeking the way forward, for all people striving to serve the needs of others throughout the pandemic and for all those striving to make a living and fearful for their livelihoods. Lift to Jesus all the needs you know. Finally pray for us, his church, that we may so live in the glorious **H**ope of his promises that we may shine the light of his presence into the needy darkness of our communities. In Jesus name, Amen.

***Sing, read or listen to ‘Great is the darkness’*** (*STF 405, SoF 742 or on You-tube*)

***Blessing***: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you; the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you his peace, now and evermore. Amen.