

Worship 20th December 2020 – Advent 4

Aberlour Parish Church

Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Intimations:

Buildings closed 27th December & 3rd January

In light of the recent escalation in Covid-19 restrictions due to happen immediately after Christmas, the Kirk Session have taken the decision not to hold worship in person on Sundays the 27th of December or 3rd January. A decision about services thereafter will be made nearer the time.

In the meantime, video services will continue to be uploaded to the Church Website, Facebook and YouTube, and paper copies will be available to those who wish them.

Bittersweet Christmas Service – 23rd December, 7pm at Aberlour Church

Christmas is a difficult time for many of us. Even among choruses of ‘Joy to the World’ there are many reasons why some of us will have reasons to pause in sadness, memory, or simply find ‘enjoying’ Christmas impossible. And yet the Gospel of John tells us ‘the Light shines in the darkness’ – in this quiet and reflective service there will be space for memory and reflection for those who will struggle with Christmas this year.

If you intend to come, the same process of ‘booking’ as has applied to Sundays is involved.

To book: email aberlourchurchbooking@gmail.com

Or call Jane Tweedie 01340 871515

Heather Cruikshank 01340 871898

Rev Andrew Kimmitt 07752306462

Christingle

We are holding a digital All-age Christingle service this year on **Christmas Eve, 3pm** over ‘Zoom’.

We can sing carols, share in the story of Jesus coming, and make Christingles together with our special ‘just add an orange’ Christingle kits. For more information see:

www.aberlour.video/christingle

Introduction

Hello and welcome to worship this Sunday, the 20th December

This week is the 4rd week of advent.

NB – for the in-person services and on the videos, worshippers are encouraged to join in with the leader for the words in UPPER CASE

Advent Litany

Among the poor,
among the proud,
among the persecuted,
among the privileged,
Christ is coming,
HE IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

In the private house,
in the market place,
in the wedding feast,
in the judgement hall,
Christ is coming,
HE IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

With a gentle touch,
with an angry word,
with a clear conscience,
with burning love,
Christ is coming,
HE IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

That the kingdom might come,
that the world might believe,
that the powerful might stumble,
that the humble might be raised,
Christ is coming,
HE IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

Within us,
without us,
among us,
before us,
in this place,
in every place,
for this time,
for all time,
Christ is coming,
HE IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

Godly Play story – advent 4

In our in-person and recorded services, Andrew is telling the ‘Godly Play’ stories for each week of advent. To see a recording, go to www.aberlour.video/services

Lighting the advent candle

[CH4 284, v1-4]

*Hope is candle, once lit by the prophets,
never consumed though it burns through the years.
Dim in the daylight of power and privilege,
when they are gone Hope will shine on.*

*Peace is a candle to show us the pathway,
threatened by gusts from our rage and our greed.
Friend, feel no envy for those in the shadows -
violence and force their dead-end course.*

*Love is a candle who light makes a circle,
where every face is the face of a friend.
Widen the circle by sharing and giving –
God’s holy dare: love everywhere.*

*Joy is a candle of mystery and laughter
Mystery of light that is born in the dark
Laughter at hearing the voice of an angel
Ever so near casting out fear*

Richard Leach
CCLI Licence No. 649173

Reading

Luke 1:26-56

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflection

Who knows why it was that Mary went to Elizabeth? We could make multiple guesses that range from heavenly piety to gritty: maybe after Mary heard the angel tell of Elizabeth’s miraculous conception she thought it only natural to go; maybe she sought comfort and reassurance about what was happening to her and turned to the only person that might understand; maybe she doubted that she really was pregnant – how could she be? - or fearful that she was, and went to Elizabeth, secretly hoping that what was said about her wasn’t true. After all, Mary whom we call Mother of God, was less conventional matriarch and more a young teenager.

But Mary’s visit was no wee going round for a cup of tea. Snuck in at the end of this passage is Luke’s observation that Mary stayed with Elizabeth three months. Three months with no Joseph on the scene as she experienced the strange and sometimes distressing progression of pregnancy. Three months away from her own family – assuming she had one. Had she been outcast? It’s not a stretch to imagine so. Was she effectively banished? You don’t need to dig deep into even our recent local history to learn how cruel society can be to young unmarried mothers; the stories of many lives which began at Aberlour orphanage involved mothers who knew the sort of isolation Mary likely experienced.

Luke’s telling of the gospel, and the interpretation of Christian tradition since, does much to gloss over the gritty reality of the situation. The story is wrapped in the gilded details of angelic visitation; of a welcome from the wife of the High Priest who, like Abraham and Sarah, were blessed with miraculous old-age conception; of babies ‘leaping for joy’ in the womb at somehow recognising being near each other (it surely takes a male writer to romanticise the experience of being kicked from the inside?) – this is some fancy theological wrapping paper for a situation the folks of the day would have scorned. Mary, illicitly pregnant – banished in shame to the only person who might understand being the female pariah in a patriarchal purity culture: the wife of a holy man who couldn’t conceive, the object of mockery and scorn from a society that assumed her sinfulness for biological malady. We might rightly imagine the gossip, the exclusion, the way basic tasks like going to the market place must have taken a hell-ish turn; the cruelty of the insults, and being spat at by strangers. Elizabeth and Mary were social rejects, and they’d have known it.

Which I think, just serves to make the gloss that Luke gives the story all the more important. You could look at it as if the two versions compete, either you have the heavenly perspective of Mary the saint, or the earthly perspective of Mary the outcast teenage mum: but I think that would be to miss the whole point of Luke’s gospel, and particularly what we’re to make of the incarnation. It is precisely in the supposedly unlikeliest of places, and through the supposedly unlikeliest of people that God has chosen to enter into our world.

That is God’s judgement upon human values, and society’s estimation of worth. That is God overturning and invalidating the scorn with which Mary was seen, and all the scorn anyone with a story like Mary’s knew then or knows today. God is no God of polite society – and Mary sings a

song that proclaims it: her God is the God who lifts up the lowly, who looks kindly on the humble, who feeds the hungry, and brings judgement to the proud, the powerful, the complacent, and the comfortable. And it is a damning and excoriating judgement.

And it's a judgement we need to hear. For those of us who are Marys of the world, it is a judgement of vindication. For those of us who know ourselves to be too often complacent or comfortable it is a judgement of warning. I suspect most of us hear it as a mixture of both. And there is a real question and wrestling with what to do when we hear judgement. There are lots of unhelpful reactions that only compound the issues, and what they share in common is closing ourselves off from it: either pretending it doesn't apply to us; or wriggling our way falsely into the role of one oppressed; or getting our hackles up and being defensive. The problem with all of these reactions is that they mishear what is happening in God's judgement. Because divine judgement is truly a free-ing thing.

If we hear Mary's song correctly, those of us so bound to human pride, material wealth, and social status -hard won as these things might be- that we jump so readily to defend our reliance on them should really hear freedom from the effort and energy we put into protecting them. We should hear freedom to be released from things that bind us, and aren't of God. We should hear freedom in the opportunity to turn around and receive the blessing of God-with-us; and not the us that we strive to be; not the us that keeps up appearances; not the us who has worked hard for this or that position in life or community; but *us* our truest and most naked us stripped of all the trappings of earthly life. *Us* as God's beloved creatures. That is the blessing of Christmas, and that is the source of true joy. It isn't easy, and it isn't comfortable, and we don't get to that place without hearing the 'No' that comes in judgement.

But the freedom to hear God's 'Yes' that Mary's song gives us; the freedom to receive – as Mary did first of all – the fullness of God-with-us: is a blessing beyond compare.

This advent week – as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth – may God give us ears to hear the 'No'; grace to act upon it; and hearts open to receive the overwhelming fullness of God's Yes.

Amen.

Advent Blessing

God of the watching ones,
the waiting ones,
the slow and suffering ones,
the angels in heaven,
the child in the womb,

GIVE US YOUR BENEDICTION,
YOUR GOOD WORD FOR OUR SOULS,
THAT WE MIGHT REST AND RISE
IN THE KINDNESS OF YOUR COMPANY.

AMEN.