

6th December 2020: Second Sunday of Advent

Hearsall at Home

Hello, and welcome to Hearsall at Home.
As this is the second Sunday of Advent, you might like to have a couple of candles ready to light with me at the start of our service today.

Our time of fellowship this Sunday is on Zoom from 11:30am.

Please go to:

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85454368639>

Meeting ID: 851 6681 8535

No password is required for this session.

And now let us be still, and wait on God.

Order of Service 6th December 2020

Getting Going

Lighting the Second Advent Candle

We light the Second Advent Candle to remind us of God's gift of the Bible - the Bible points us to Jesus - the Light of the World.

The apostle Peter writes: The word of prophecy was fulfilled in our hearing! You should give that word your closest attention, for it shines like a lamp amidst all the dirt and darkness of the world, until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Call to Worship

2 Peter 3: 8 - 9

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

We await with patience the coming of our Lord... Let us sing, *Hail to the Lord's anointed.*

Hymn (BPW 142) **Hail to the Lord's anointed**

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 transgression,
And rule in equity.

He comes with comfort 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 turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Are precious in His sight.

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.

In all the world 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.

Prayers of Praise and Confession

In our impatience when waiting, we praise you.
In our yearning for a better world, we adore you.
In our state of imperfection, we bless you.
In our condition of uncertainty, we thank you.
For you, though you are coming, are already here.

Your grace is enough for our yesterdays.

Your promise is enough for our tomorrows.

Your presence is enough for our today.

Accept the adoration of our human hearts. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

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.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Doors Ajar

I'm delighted that our Doors Ajar feature this week is a long-overdue contribution from our dear friend, Denise Rée.

Good morning, today's Doors Ajar is one of mixed emotions. It seems like an eternity since we were last together as a church, we have had the first lockdown where I tried to work from home for the first term, then after spring break back in school on the key workers' program. September brought a full return to the classroom, however this was short lived for many children and staff.

We went into a month long lockdown with the doors slightly ajar at the beginning of November which did concern me, as Keith had just received his redundancy on the 31st October. We went out the next weekend and used some of his redundancy money to get him an electric folding bike, so we could go out on our bikes together. This potentially gave us an escape during the month-long lockdown, however, this was all about to disappear from view.

We had had a few cases of Covid at work among staff and students, so our

department were all asked to get a test done, even if we had no symptoms, on the advice of the health professionals. So on the 18th November I booked my test and with no symptoms and no close contact with the students that had tested positive, I wasn't too worried; well that was my big mistake. I went into work, as I hadn't been told I needed to stay off till I got my results on Thursday, as normal, however around 2pm I received a message saying my test had come back positive. At this point I informed my line manager, phoned Keith to pick me up, collected my things from my locker and left the school site as per instructions.

As I walked towards Leamington for Keith to pick me up, my thoughts turned to what am I going to say to Mum - she won't be best pleased about having to isolate with us for 14 days, then to thoughts of where had I got it from, had I already given it to mum and Keith or any other family members? At first I had a blame mentality but remembering my faith, I soon realised blame would not change the fact I now had COVID. Now at home the door no longer ajar but firmly shut, the isolating began. Friday and Saturday I felt fine but later on in the evening I had an almighty headache and was continually thirsty. I kept away from Mum and Keith the best I could which was difficult with cooking etc. but wore gloves, face covering and used utensils to pick things up etc. Mum started to show symptoms around the same time, as did Keith, so now I was wondering whether it had come from school or a contaminated delivery to the house.

For the next week and a half it has been really strange - three people in one house: Mum mainly asleep in the living room, me in the back room watching catch up TV on my laptop and Keith upstairs in the bedroom watching TV - none of us feeling too bad, as symptoms thankfully have been mild but at the same time not great.

At times I felt like putting a big sign saying UNCLEAN in the window but decided that wasn't a good idea.

It has been difficult and as for the online Sainsbury's delivery - that was interesting to say the least. I may be a little tech savvy but I'm definitely no good at online grocery ordering.

Needless to say we had things I had forgotten, things I didn't need and the people picking my fruit and veg must have had their eyes closed when picking my order which has confirmed to me that I may be a bit of a snob where my grocery order is concerned.

Thankfully Nick and Anne, David, my children and my niece all came to the rescue. The hardest part for me was actually asking the question and I am eternally indebted to all of you.

Thankfully, we are all on the mend now and looking forward to going and choosing my own fruit - I am easily pleased; the simple things in life are brought home when you are unable to access them and we take such pleasures for granted, so often. The door is starting to creep ajar a little now and our period of confinement is nearly at an end but although difficult as it has been, I'm made mindful of those who have had to endure a much longer period and without the knowledge that there are others in the house with them.

I have missed going into work and although not back yet, as work have said to take it slow, the messages of encouragement of those I had let into my time of confinement have got me through it, along with my faith and the hope of better things to come . I am still concerned for Mum but her Covid symptoms appear to have only really been the lack of appetite, upset tummy and sleepiness and the occasional tickly cough. I continue to monitor her closely as she isn't good at letting people know she is unwell. I am now starting to gain my appetite again and have lost a bit of weight over the past two weeks, so look forward to being able to get out and get my strength back and hopefully see everyone again soon.

The door will soon be fully ajar and the light of the future can shine right in again without hindrance. I think of you all often but my big failing is my forgetfulness and I get distracted, so if I do not phone often enough I apologise but you are all in my thoughts and prayers. I will try harder (like it often said I needed to do on my school report)

Your loyal Hearsall friend, Denise

Thanks so much Denise for sharing with us today.

God's salvation plan for the world was not expected, a fact celebrated in the delightful lona carol, *Shepherds watch...*

Song (BPW 175) **Shepherds Watch and Wise Men Wonder**

(God's Surprise)- Tune: Scarlet Ribbons

God surprises earth with heaven
Coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,
Monarchs scorn and angels sing;
Such a place as none would reckon
Hosts a holy helpless thing;
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers
Watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven
Coming here on Christmas Day.

Who would think that what was needed
To transform and save the earth
Might not be a plan or army,
Proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
That a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.

God surprises earth with heaven
Coming here on Christmas Day.

Offering

We thank God for the indescribable gift of Christ, and we offer our own humble gifts to him, a tiny token of all that he has shared with us. Lord, receive our gifts and multiply them to bring blessing to your world. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Our prayers of intercession this week are led by our lovely friend, Jan Clemons.

Dear Lord, please give us strength in this time of uncertainty. Life seems to be very hard at the moment and we pray that with your love, all that feel low can be lifted up and comforted knowing that nothing can separate us from your love in our Lord Jesus, who taught us to love our neighbour and to care for those in need.

In these anxious times, give us the strength, dear Lord, to trust you and know you are with us. We pray for the elderly, isolated and vulnerable. We know, Lord, that you will be close to those who are ill, anxious or in isolation. In their loneliness be their consolation, in their anxiety be their hope and in their darkness be their light. We pray particularly for those who are known to us who are suffering or recovering from Covid 19 which can often seem to be a long process.

Dear Lord, we pray for family, friends and loved ones that are sadly missed but are thankful for the technology that enables us to speak to them and see their faces, however far away they are from us. Please give us the patience to understand why it is difficult meet up with them and the sacrifices which must be made, especially at this time of year, which traditionally is the time to be reunited with each other.

We pray for children and young adults at schools and colleges whose education is being affected by the pandemic, many of which are studying in a new town or city and are homesick, feeling isolated and often struggling with online learning. We pray that the students returning home this week will be able to spend quality time with their loved ones over the festive season.

We know that many people face an uncertain future and are struggling to keep their businesses going, especially in the retail and hospitality sectors. Many others are facing financial hardship and are relying on food banks. We thank God for those who can give help, offer their time and donate aid where it is most needed.

Dear Lord, we pray for our national and local government that with the guidance of your holy spirit you will give courage and wisdom to our leaders, so that together we can all work together for the common good, especially as we begin to roll out a

vaccination programme and will soon be leaving the European Community. As we move into the new tier system and in the New Year, independence from Europe, we pray for patience and the understanding that it is only by working together with a common aim that we as a nation can move forwards to safer and happier times. Dear Lord, we pray for the Christian Community, not just for our Hearsall congregation, but all over the world, who are people of courage, generosity, who love our neighbours and are giving and loving wherever we are, whatever it costs, for as long as it takes, whenever you call us.

We remain to be uplifted by this special time in the Christian Calendar as the second Advent candle has been lit and we delight in the thought that Jesus is coming again, and in the love and hope that he brings to our world. Be comforted by the crisp, frosty mornings, beautiful sunsets, the wildlife in our parks and gardens and the stars at night, and be transported by your creation.

We will now silently pray for those people and those concerns that are in our hearts and minds. In Jesus's name - AMEN

Many thanks Jan for those prayers.

We hear now our Bible readings from Isaiah and from Mark.

Bible Readings

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Comfort for God's People

1 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her

that her hard service has been completed,

that her sin has been paid for,

that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare

the way for the LORD;

make straight in the desert

a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,

every mountain and hill made low;

the rough ground shall become level,

the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,

and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry out.”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

“All people are like grass,

and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall,

because the breath of the LORD blows on them.

Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,

but the word of our God endures forever.”

⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,

go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem,

lift up your voice with a shout,

lift it up, do not be afraid;

say to the towns of Judah,

“Here is your God!”

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,

and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,

and his recompense accompanies him.

¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Mark 1: 1 - 8

John the Baptist prepares the way

¹ The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way' –

³ 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him."'

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

In preparation for Christ's coming, we ask him to reign in our own hearts as we sing
Over all the Earth...

Song (WT 342) **Over all the Earth**

Verse 1

Over all the earth
You reign on high;
Every mountain stream,
Every sunset sky,

But my one request,
Lord, my only aim
Is that You'd reign in me again.

Chorus

*Lord, reign in me,
Reign in Your power
Over all my dreams.
In my darkest hour
You are the Lord
Of all I am,
So won't You reign in me again?*

Verse 2

Over every thought,
Over every word
May my life reflect
The beauty of my Lord
'Cause You mean more to me
Than any earthly thing,
So won't You reign in me again?

Chorus x 2

Won't You reign in me again? x 2

O Lord, inspire us with hope in Jesus' name as we reflect on your Word together now. Amen.

Sermon

Getting Going

Well, what a 2020 we have had! A year to suck the hope out of many of us. A year of sickness, death, business failure, job losses, child hunger, isolation and soaring government debt. It can be hard to feel hope after a year like this one.

Yet we are thankful for the scientists who have invented vaccines. We sense the possibility of hope as people could become immune to Covid as early as just a few weeks away. So can we reach for the beginnings of a lasting hope, now?

Christians are people of indefatigable hope. It's in our DNA. Even those suffering 'grief in many trials' are expected by Peter to 'Rejoice greatly'. The narratives of the Old Testament may take us through lament, but only rarely will a true God-fearer stray into the marsh of self-pity or the bog of despair. That's because the stories that shape us inject hope like a vaccine against despair into our bloodstreams. In the end, God comes good! Come hell or high water, faith prevails! No Good Friday moment is ever permitted to be a full stop on our story. And so Christians are indeed people of hope.

Here's a joke I read online this week. An engineer dies and goes to hell. Dissatisfied with environmental conditions down there, he starts designing and building improvements. After a while, hell has air conditioning, flushing toilets and escalators. The engineer is a pretty popular guy.

One day God calls and asks Satan. "So how's it going down there?*" Satan says, "Things are going well. We've got air conditioning, improved sanitation and efficient transportation systems. We've got an engineer down here and there's no telling what this engineer is going to come up with next."

God is horrified "What? You've got an engineer? That's a mistake. He shouldn't have gone down there; all engineers go to heaven. Send him up here!"

"No way," says Satan, I like having an engineer on the staff. I'm keeping him."

God says, "Send him back up here, or I'll sue."

"Yeah right," Satan laughs, "and where are you going to get a lawyer up there in heaven?"

Well, I make no comment on lawyers but perhaps engineers are celebrated in the Bible. They are the ones who help to physically create the new world of which dreamers often dream.

The great vision of Isaiah 40 is expressed as an engineering project. A new road is to be built in the desert: God's highway. Valleys shall be raised up, mountains made low; and on this great civil engineering project, the glory of God will be seen.

Of course, we are not talking in the end about a literal road, but we are talking about dramatic and powerful changes in the **practical arrangements** in the fortunes of God's people. New journeys would be made. People would have to pack and prepare for them. And when they arrived back home, temples and cities would be rebuilt. It's a practical hope that the prophet is talking about.

As I think I've said before, there's a gap of about 150 years between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah 40 - that's like reading something written in 1870 and then going straight on to today's paper. During that gap, a huge amount had happened.

A superpower, Babylon, had arisen. Kings had lived and died. The leading citizens of Judea had been taken into exile. Jerusalem had been destroyed. It was a pretty hopeless situation.

But now, after a silence of a century and a half, God speaks. Comfort my people now! The time of punishment is over! Encourage and strengthen them. The prophet - obviously a second Isaiah, writing so late after the first prophecies of Isaiah - objects.

*All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.*

But it must be God who interjects with the reply:

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.'
God has spoken. It's time for hope to rise again! Build a highway! It's time to come home. It's time to get going.

Now Mark's gospel portrays John the Baptist as a new version of Isaiah's wilderness prophet. Living like some kind of a hippy, this strange figure lives as that *voice of one calling in the wilderness*, "*Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.*"

For John, hope begins in personal transformation. He preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Turn your lives round! Change your hearts. Now when we fall in love, that changes all aspects of our lives. This is as if John's followers are to fall in love with God, with life itself, with hope. Align your business affairs, your domestic arrangements, your lives in the synagogue, everything, your attitude to the occupying Romans, the whole shebang - align who you are with in the coming Kingdom of God.

Now Mark starts his gospel with these words: The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. So often we associate Gospel - Good News - with the saving work of Christ on the cross - Paul often points us in that direction in his letters. But here the good news **begins** with the **life** of Jesus and with lives aligned with God's values. The whole of Jesus is good news.

And his forerunner - the voice in the wilderness - declares that Jesus will immerse people not in river water, but in the Holy Spirit. Their lives are to be immersed in the presence of God.

Perhaps it's time to pause. What have we seen so far? It's hard to have hope, but Christians always do! In Isaiah's message, hope was like a civil engineering project - a practical way of bringing people back home. John the Baptist says the way back home is through a transformation of a human life, a bit like being in love. And Mark says that all of Jesus' life is good news. And that we will immerse the whole life of his followers in the presence of God.

So, what about you? What about us? Towards the end of a year blighted by Covid, can we find hope? That hope is not only in the vision of heaven beyond this world... For Christians hope is practical, like an engineering project. For Christians hope is intimate, like falling in love. For Christians hope is personal, like transforming a whole way of living. For Christians all of these aspects of hope reflect the same thing. We hope because we are theists. We've aligned ourselves with the arc of

stories that, though they swing through the abyss of hell, always swing back up to the very gates of heaven.

We hope because God IS. We hope because even death is not the end. We hope because God gives us scientists who make vaccines, logistical experts who can distribute them and, yes indeed, engineers who can help shape the future we might imagine in our visions and dreams.

So as we begin to imagine 2021, let's get going on a message of hope. Recent messages here have included exhortations to invest in one another. To lead each other by sharing acts of loving service. To be awake and heaven-ready by being people who collaborate with all people of good will, who create new expressions of God's love for this world, who contemplate by thinking and praying and meditating on life, and who express love through practical caring for all who are in need.

So the Advent Message is one of hope. But as I said last week, I say again today: *the only when is Now*. Now is the time to get going! Now is the time to await our Master's incarnation by being ready. Now is the time to get going on creating expressions of hope and homecoming for all of Coventry and beyond.

Meditation

Let's take a few moments to reflect on God's Word for us today.

Settle into some stillness.

- Picture a person in the opposite of hope, that is, a person in despair.
- What sort of posture do they have?
- Can you see the expression on their face?
- How do you feel as you look at them?

Now allow Jesus to enter the scene.

- How does he approach the person in despair?
- Does he speak? If he speaks, does he whisper?

- Does he touch? If he touches, how does he touch?
- Does he just sit or kneel or stand alongside?
- How does his presence affect that other person?
- Have you sometimes been that person of despair?
- Is that person hiding within you now?
- How does Jesus approach you? Speak to you? Touch you? Stay with you?

Let his simple presence transmit hope into your heart.

Our closing carol is the highly poetic, *It came upon the midnight clear*.

Hymn (BPW 168) **It Came Upon the Midnight Clear**

It came upon the midnight clear,
 That glorious song of old,
 From angels bending near the earth
 To touch their harps of gold:
 'Peace on the earth, good will to men,
 From heaven's all gracious King;'
 The world in solemn stillness lay
 To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,
 With peaceful wings unfurled,
 And still their heavenly music floats
 O'er all the weary world:
 Above its sad and lowly plains
 They bend on hovering wing,
 And ever o'er its Babel sounds
 The blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
 The world has suffered long,
 Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
 Two thousand years of wrong;

And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring:
O hush the noise, you men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.

And still the days are hastening on,
By prophet once foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world send back the song
Which now the angels sing.

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors