

Order of Service 5th December 2021

How do you build a road?

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 5th December 2021, the second Sunday of Advent.

Lighting of Second Advent Candle (BPW 154)

We light this 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.**

Let's sing of the light Jesus brings to the world as we enjoy the song, *My Lighthouse*.

Song My Lighthouse

Verse 1

In my wrestling and in my doubts,
In my failures, you won't walk out.
Your great love will lead me through.
You are the peace in my troubled sea, (Whoa oh)
You are the peace in my troubled sea.

Verse 2

In the silence you won't let go,
In my questions your truth will hold.
Your great love will lead me through.
You are the peace in my troubled sea, (Whoa oh)
You are the peace in my troubled sea.

Chorus

My Lighthouse, my Lighthouse (Whoa-o-a-oh)

Shining in the darkness.

I will follow You. (Whoa oh)

My Lighthouse, my Lighthouse (Whoa-o-a-oh)

I will trust the promise

You will carry me safe to shore, (Oh-a-oh-oh-o)

Safe to shore, (Oh-a-oh-oh-o)

Safe to shore, (Oh-a-oh-oh-o)

Safe to shore.

Verse 3

I won't fear what tomorrow brings;

With each morning I'll rise and sing.

My God's love will lead me through.

You are the peace in my troubled sea, (Whoa oh)

You are the peace in my troubled sea –You are my light!

Chorus

Bridge

Fire before us; You're the brightest;

You will lead us through the storm.

(REPEAT 4X)

Chorus

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Lord, I sometimes think my light is not very bright. Thank you that you are the light of the world. You guide us away from danger. You draw us towards home.

I'm sorry that sometimes I don't let my light shine. Help me to join the light you put into my heart, to your light, already shining across the world. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as 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 for ever.
Amen.

We sing our next hymn celebrating the liberation that comes with Jesus, *Hark the glad sound!*

Hymn (WT 289) **Make Way**

1. Make way make way for Christ the King
In splendour arrives
Fling wide the gates and welcome Him
Into your lives

Chorus. Make way, Make way
For the King of kings
Make way, Make way
And let His kingdom in.

2. He comes the broken hearts to heal
The prisoners to free
The deaf shall hear the lame shall dance
The blind shall see.

3. And those who mourn with heavy hearts
Who weep and sigh
With laughter joy and royal crown
He'll beautify

4. We call you now to worship Him
As Lord of all
To have no gods before Him
Their thrones must fall.

5. Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your coming shall proclaim;
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name.

Offering

Thank you Lord that, this week, we may give to the food bank as well as sharing our regular offerings to church. May all these gifts speak of your love for the world.
Amen.

Our prayers of intercession today are led by Roger Woodward.

Prayers of Intercession

For me prayers of intercession are not only about sharing with God the concerns of our hearts and minds but also for listening to hear where God may be calling us to action. In our prayers this morning there is a response, to the words, **Speak Lord**, will you respond, **Your servant is listening**. Following that response there will be a time of silence that we might hear that still small whisper of God's voice.

Let us pray to the God of all time and space, in whose love we exist and by whose love we are saved.

As we prepare ourselves for the time when Christ is coming amongst us as a baby, we pray for the grace and honesty to see what needs transforming in our lives as individuals, as members of God's Church and as the people of this planet earth.

Speak Lord,

Your servant in listening.

May all church leaders, ministers and teachers be directly inspired and upheld by your living Spirit , and may there be a deepening of love and commitment in all Christians the world over. In this Advent season may we deepen our understanding of Emmanuel, God with us.

Speak Lord,

Your servant in listening.

May the leaders of this nation and of all the nations, endeavour to put into action decisions reached in Glasgow and be drawn increasingly to understand your ways of justice and righteousness, and be filled with the longing to do what is right and honest and good for your planet earth.

Speak Lord,

Your servant in listening.

May all the families on earth be blessed with mutual love and caring consideration of each another; may arguments and misunderstandings be properly resolved, and difficult relationships refreshed and healed both in individual and international relationships. We remember how soon after your birth your parents had to flee to Egypt for safety and became refugees. Today we remember refugees the world over, particularly those on the Poland-Belarus boarder, and at Calais. We remember the homeless in our own city who spend endless days and nights on our streets.

Speak Lord,

Your servant in listening.

May those for whom the days and nights creep past in pain or sorrow, be given comfort and hope; may the frightened find reassurance and the anxious find peace of mind.

Speak Lord,

Your servant in listening.

May those who have reached the point of death be given the knowledge of God's closeness on that last earthly journey, and may those who have died know the eternal peace and joy of heaven.

Speak Lord,

Your servant in listening.

May we, this Advent time, all be given a new enthusiasm for walking and listening to God, our Father.

Speak Lord,

Your servant is listening. Amen

Many thanks for those prayers Roger. We hear our Bible readings now from Philipians, Malachi and Luke.

Bible readings

Philippians 1: 1 - 11

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving and Prayer

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. **4** In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy **5** because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, **6** being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Malachi 3: 1 – 4

3 “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— ² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And all people will see God's salvation.”

Whether Paul was in chains, or defending the gospel, he said we all shared in God's grace. Whether there be mountains or valleys, God's highway will be built across the wilderness. In a time of change and challenge, as we look for the Lord's coming, we sing, *Keep the banner flying high...*

Song **Keep the Banner Flying High**

Verse 1

Give me strength when I'm weary, O my Lord,
Lift me up when I fall, O my Lord,
Light a fire in my bones
That an ocean cannot drown,
Give me hope, give me strength,
Until my work is done.

Chorus

*O Jesus be my vision,
O the passion and the fire in my soul.
We'll keep the banner flying high,
The banner flying high!*

Verse 2

In the valley of shadow, O my Lord,
You will walk by our side, O my Lord.
If we love not our lives,
Rather die than to deny,
There'll be crowns, there'll be glory
When the morning comes.

Chorus

Verse 3

Those who wait on you patiently, O my Lord,
Those who trust in your word, O my Lord,
They will soar, they will glide,
Like an eagle in the sky;
They will walk, not be weary,
Till the work is done.

Chorus

*O Jesus be my vision,
O the passion and the fire in my soul.
We'll keep the banner flying high,
The banner flying high!*

Bridge

For His glory, standing shoulder to shoulder,
Proud to bear His holy name,
Sound the victory, our God is among us now!
Sound the victory, our God is among us now!
Among us now!

Chorus

Lord, may my own words and all of our thoughts be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

Sermon

How do you build a road?

Christmas is coming! Have you got a Christmas tree up yet? Booked an online supermarket delivery? Put up your fairy lights? Written your Christmas cards? Planned any visits to family?

I was reading about a church getting ready for Christmas by putting up a star on its tower to shine across the city. No, I'm not talking about Hearsall Baptist, but the Sagrada Família Cathedral in Barcelona. They are raising a seven metre 12-pointed star and it will be illuminated on 8th December, along with the tower's 800 windows. But the Cathedral is not universally popular with locals. As Gaudi's masterpiece nears its conclusion, some locals resent plans to install a giant entrance stairway involving the demolition of local homes. By the way, **their** building project has been going on since 1882.

I noticed the local Labour party featured Hearsall's star on their ward Christmas card this year. A church building doesn't exist in isolation from its architectural context. In a small and sentimental way, passers-by have a soft spot for our buildings. Our own preparation for Christmas involves the hoisting of our iconic seasonal landmark.

For a church like ours, getting ready for Christmas involves rotas, choir rehearsals, candle lighting, cleaning, and so much more. It's no wonder with everything else going on that we can feel stressed. And when we are stressed, how easy it is for this season of Advent to be squeezed dry of its delicious spiritual flavour. The very thing we are seeking to share can be lost in the process of preparation!

And that's the real irony of Advent! In this time of spiritual opportunity, we experience a great deal of push-back from life. So, how do we go about preparing spiritually during this very busy season?

The letter to the Philippians was probably written from Paul's final imprisonment in Rome, so Paul, the writer, was a prisoner of conscience very likely facing capital punishment. The planting of the church in Philippi had been a colourful story, described in chapter 16 of Acts. Called to the region by a vision of a local man asking for help, Paul had met a group of women praying by the river in this Roman colony in Galatia, in modern day Turkey. One of these women, Lydia, invited Paul and his team to meet in her home. Soon after, Paul released a slave girl from an evil spirit.

That sounds great, but the owners of the slave had been used to making money from her as a fortune teller. Her possessed state was the lynchpin of their business

model. The spiritual interference of these visitors to the city cost them a steady income. Well, a full-scale riot followed. Paul and his associate Silas were beaten with rods in the public square and then thrown in jail. But then an earthquake freed the prisoners, and their jailer was about to kill himself, thinking he'd lost his captives. But the captives had not scarpered, being good Christians, so instead of committing suicide, the jailer became a Christian too, and was baptised along with all his family.

So somehow, in all this chaos, the little church was established, and very likely continued to meet in Lydia's house. Perhaps the jailer and his family were still part of the church when Paul wrote his letter, maybe 15 years later. The fellowship featured characters like Euodia and Syntyche, who seem to have fought like a pair of spitting alley cats, Clement, Epaphroditus and many more. Very likely, then, it contained people from all strata of society.

But for all its external challenges, its diversity, its personality clashes, there was a lovely spirit in the little group we call the Philippians' church. They had been loyal and imaginative in their support for Paul, going the extra mile to lend their help. They were the only church who had repeatedly supported him financially. And in a lovely touch, they sent Epaphroditus to attend to Paul's needs whilst he was in prison. They went above and way beyond what polite support required.

And then Epaphroditus worried that his home church in Philippi would be worried about him. He got sick - and he missed the tender love of the church back home. So with this letter, Epaphroditus was sent home. What a spirit of love dwelt in that church! They liked being with each other. They loved each other.

And when Paul writes you can feel how he is fanning the flames of that spirit of love to blaze even brighter. He is praying for his flock, and the prayer is served with a generous side order of sheer joy.

Why all the joy? Because the Philippians were partners in the gospel... that is, partners in sharing the good news of Jesus... because that partnership began from the get-go and was integrated into their DNA as a church... because God had begun a **good** work in them and was sure to complete it, because they shared in God's Grace - becoming living, walking, expressions of God's goodness to Paul... It was all

good... They were good news to their neighbours; they were good news to Paul, their hearts were good news, they were shaped by the good news of God... They were good, positive people...

So, as I say, Paul fans the flames of this lovely spirit within the church. He tells these Philippians what he's asking God for - a fountain of abounding love... not just warm feelings of love, but love that infuses knowledge of the way the universe is, (held in the loving embrace of Christ); love that leads to a purity, an innocence, and a wholesome community life; a source of wellbeing for all.

* * *

Well, now we love the whole Christmas thing... twinkling lights, trees in our lounges, turkeys, nut roasts, Yule logs, roast chestnuts, Slade in the supermarket, children beyond excited about Santa, mulled wine, awkward uncles, cracker jokes, tipsy aunties, carols, tasteless sweaters, silly hats...

But there is one thing that we need to be preparing this season, and that is quite simply **our hearts**. Christ is coming, and he hopes to find a shelter in your own humble heart. So, what can we do to get our hearts ready for Christmas?

There's no one-size-fits all answer to this, but here are some pointers. First of all, we need to **take responsibility** for the state of our own heart. Don't think anyone else can do it - only **you** can make the decision that, as for me and my heart, I will be open to a fresh infilling of that abounding love.

Second, we need to **examine our hearts honestly**. My sister and brother-in-law have just been to stay for a couple of nights, and before they arrived I emptied my bins, picked up clutter from the back bedroom floor and made sure the fridge was stocked.

Christ would come to live in the home of our hearts. What clutter do we want to throw out before he arrives? Are we harbouring attitudes that we would be embarrassed about if Jesus is within us? Is it time to let go of cynicism, despair, and other unhelpful spirits within us?

Thirdly, it's time to **renew our partnership with the gospel**. This is an important idea. In Greek the word 'partnership' was sometimes used to refer to business partners, and sometimes to life partners. Perhaps both these elements apply here. The good news of Jesus becomes integral to our life. We need to **become** the good news before we can honestly tell others about it.

Fourthly, Advent is an opportunity to **renew our commitment to prayer**. There may not be time to go on quiet dates or to spend in lengthy prayer meetings, but we can infuse all of that busy preparation with a spirit of prayer.

We all pray differently. Some like to chatter away to Jesus as they go about their daily lives. Some like a deep silence. Some work through prayer guides. Some pray through nature.

But, however you pray, Advent is a season of prayer. When did you last feel a close connection to God in prayer? Well, whatever that was, maybe start by doing more of that. And also consider praying in a way that's new for you. Pray with coloured pens and produce Bible art. Or pray as you sing carols at home. Pray silently as you watch your room grow light with each sunrise. Pray at the end of the day, reflecting on your moods and actions and experiences for five minutes or so. Pray as you star gaze. Pray at the supermarket. Pray as you write an Advent journal. Pray as you walk through a denuded winter wood. Pray as you stroke your dog.

And pray for yourself. Not for selfish material goods, but that God shapes your heart into a stable or a crib, ready to receive Jesus. Pray that Jesus tunes your heart. Pray that he cleanses you. Pray that he readies you. Pray that your love will abound more and more in a knowledge of what is. Pray that you will know how to be.

Pray as you put up the fairy lights. Pray as you park the car or ride the bus. Pray for us as a church. Pray for that abounding love to flourish here in our fellowship.

* * *

Are you, in the words of our last song, *proud to bear his holy name*? Are you standing shoulder to shoulder with your sisters and brothers here at Hearsall? Is your heart ablaze with the fire of love? Now is the time to do something about that...

When I first accepted a call to be minister here, one of the things that drew me was a sense that here was a community of people who, for all their differences and imperfections, actually liked to be with each other. You loved each other. During my ministry, some have kindly observed that this love has deepened and broadened. It was palpable during some of our communion services. It fizzed through the activities and service of the church. I don't mean sentiment. I mean a hardworking, wise commitment to caring for each other in a spirit of kindness.

It was all going well. But during COVID, we have been denied opportunities to meet together. And when we have met together, we have had to keep our distance - to the relief of some, but to the pain of many. We did as best as we could, and used imaginative ways of expressing our care, with video parties, walks in the park, phone calls, practical support and much more.

But now? Now there is a sense of reticence, of weariness, of some drifting a little from the heart of the fellowship. Cooling, like coals removed from the fire. A sense of tiredness? Even a cynicism? What can be done? Who can do it?

You can. And you can. And you can. And I can.

The early church was not encumbered with building projects. In the New Testament, the word church never refers to a building, though sometimes a building is a metaphor for the church. The church itself is always, always, always the people.

Now we can't meet by the river as did Lydia and her praying ladies did in Philippi. In our North Atlantic island we certainly need buildings to worship within. But whether we manage with a patched-up old ruin, whether we share a building with another church, whether we partner with a developer, whether we sell up altogether and worship in a school hall, let us be good news to our neighbours and let our hearts be fizzing with good news and joy. We are not a building. We are a people.

Our proposed building project has come to seem like a mountain of work and a bone of contention. And not just a little mountain like Cat Bells. It feels a solid lump, like Skiddaw. It feels like an impossible challenge, like Everest. We feel we've been climbing forever and learn we are just at base camp!

John the Baptist declared in our gospel reading, quoting Isaiah chapter 40,

*Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.*

But what does John mean by quoting this? He goes on to call for personal repentance. For a change of heart and lifestyle. He was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The mountains and valleys and crooked paths that needed sorting out were not civil engineering projects, but transformations of the human heart. At the same time, Isaiah's dramatic re-imagining of physical reality inspires us to reimagine our own practical circumstances.

And for us, the road that God builds is a road through our heart, and we build it by repentance and prayer. Malachi declared after the return from exile that the Lord would suddenly return to the new temple. But what would he do?

He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.

Again, the message booms home. We wait for the coming of Christ... Let us be purified, ready for his coming to his temple, which is your heart and mine....

To build a road for God, to build a house for God, is to change a human heart, to change my heart, to change your heart. *Blessed are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage*, says Psalm 84. And this Advent, we need to say, may the road of God run through my heart. Let me get it ready!

My heart is **my** responsibility... My heart is a building block of this church... If I'm known as a Christian, my heart speaks a message, good or ill, about Jesus... My attitude contributes to the zeitgeist of the age... My heart colours the collective heart of the church, either making it shine ever brighter or otherwise... My heart influences my friends, neighbours and relatives either for or against Christ... My heart **matters**... This is a time to prepare my heart in a spirit of prayer...

We close with a sonnet, Emmanuel, by Malcom Guite:

*O come, O come, and be our God-with-us,
O long-sought with-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name,
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness,
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.*

Hymn (BPW 358) **Take my Life**

Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love;
Take my feet, and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold,
All by Thee to be controlled;
Take my intellect, and use

Every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine;

It shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart - it is Thine own;

It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour

At Thy feet its treasure-store;

Take myself, and I will be,

Ever, only, all for Thee.

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.