



Order of Service
12th December 2021
Advent 3

INTROIT: TIS. 449 *'Stand up and bless the Lord.'* [vs 1 & 4]

CALL to WORSHIP : [Based on Zephaniah 3]

Sing, shout, and rejoice with all your heart! **We have much to celebrate!**

God is among us, and we have nothing to fear.

We have been brought home, gathered into the heart of divine Love.

Here, our deepest longings are fulfilled. **Let us praise God! Amen.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of COUNTRY : We respectfully acknowledge that we gather on Bangerang country of the Yorta Yorta nations. We honour the custodians of the lands and waterways; and pay our respects to their elders – past, present and emerging.

HYMN : TIS. 596 *'Fill thou my life, O Lord my God.'*

PRAYERS of THANKSGIVING and CONFESSION :

Holy and wonderful God, you tell us that the world as it is, for all its beauty and joy, is not yet the world as you intended it.

You are the God who never lets us go. You never finish creating, or working, or forming, or speaking, and we praise you.

We pray for patience, as we wait for your loving purposes to be fulfilled – both in our lives and in our world. Teach us how to wait, we ask. And open our eyes to see, and our ears to hear, how Christ is always coming among us in new ways. May we not presume that we know how and when this will be.

In the meantime, we offer you our praise and thanks – for you are the One who gives our lives their ultimate significance. During this Advent season, remind us that true joy comes from knowing you; from knowing you are faithful, and will never let us go.

Gracious God, over recent months we've found that waiting is hard for us.

We would like to be more confident of what the future holds....

You call us only to be faithful, but we're still tempted to look for success in our efforts.

We often struggle to recognise the small, vulnerable beginnings of good in ourselves and other people.

And there are times when we walk with our eyes on the ground, as though angel songs will never be sung.



Forgive us, O God, when we are anxious or pre-occupied. Set us free to hear your word of love, so that every day we grow more like you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

ASSURANCE : Scripture assures us, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'. Through Christ, in Christ, because of Christ, our sins *are* forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

ADVENT WREATH : **Reader:** May the light from this candle say to all that God's joy is coming on earth as it already is in heaven.

Reader: Brothers and sisters in Christ, be not afraid, God's joy is at hand!

EARLY WORD : Christmas Bowl – work of ACT for PEACE in GAZA.

HYMN : TIS. 265 'O come, o come Emmanuel' [Words : Rev. Dr Barbara Lundblad.]

SCRIPTURE READINGS : *Philippians 4 : 4-7; Luke 3 : 7 - 18.*

MESSAGE : 'Don't give up on us!'

John the Baptist called his hearers 'A brood of vipers' and warned them of 'the wrath to come.' I doubt that at first they thought they were hearing *good news!*

But that's how the gospel writer describe John's preaching [*Luke 3: 18*]. *Good news* – not only because the Messiah is coming; but because ordinary people could help prepare for this world-changing event. Notice how John challenges them, not to be complacent, but express their desire for change in their actions. 'Share what you have with those who have less,' he tells them. 'Do your job well, whether you're a tax collector or a soldier. Everyone can play their part; everyone can treat others justly.'

And when we follow this lead, we find living rightly brings us joy, today's Advent theme. It brings joy because it takes the focus off ourselves. And because it reflects God's nature, and how God continues to work in our world....

During this season of Advent, over a billion Christians across the world will turn their attention to **Bethlehem**, anticipating the joy of Jesus' birth. But very few, including those who've visited the Holy Land, have any idea of what's happening at the moment for those living in Bethlehem.

Palestinian people who have lived in the land for millennia, are now concentrated in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. They've lived under Israeli military occupation for 54 years [the longest military occupation in the world's modern history]. The Israeli people are constantly told that the Holocaust is not just their past. It's their present and their future. So they live in fear of 'the other', thinking everyone is a threat to their existence. This is especially applied to the Palestinians who share the land with them.

Palestinian Christians now make up less than 2% of the country's population [from 25% when the State of Israel was founded in 1948]. They continue to work non-violently for justice and peace, and to advocate for the liberation of both the oppressor and the oppressed. It's hard to encourage the young people to have hope in a better future, when they've only known life under Occupation. But still, the Christian leaders say, *'Resistance to the evil of Occupation is integrated within Christian love; Christian love refuses it and corrects it.'* Now that takes courage!

Bethlehem itself is part of Palestine's West Bank. In Jesus' time, the land of Israel was under Roman occupation. Now Israel has become an occupier itself! This means today's Palestinians in Bethlehem have seen their economy shattered. For decades, their rights to free speech and movement have been disabled by Israeli policies.

Here's an example – this Christmas, Israel is shutting down all overnight stays in Bethlehem, under the guise of Covid security. That has such devastating consequences for tourism, which is the main source of livelihood for most Bethlehem residents. To add insult to injury, all hotels in Israel itself are free to operate as usual over the holiday season. So much for Covid security!

For pilgrims to enter Bethlehem from Israel today, they must pass through a massive Israeli military checkpoint. It's part of the illegal wall, 8 m. high, which snakes around Bethlehem and impedes all movement for its residents. Palestinian labourers leaving the town to get work, pregnant women trying to access medical appointments, students trying to get to school or university, all endure humiliating, time-consuming queues at checkpoints. The frustration, fear and stress that arises can lead to being denied passage or being detained, depending on the mood of the young Israeli soldiers.

If Joseph and Mary attempted to seek shelter in Bethlehem these days, it would be a struggle. They might be detained, interrogated, imprisoned. This is daily life for people travelling to and from Bethlehem.

It's important that we place the good news of Jesus' birth in the context of present reality. We certainly don't overlook the dangers that Mary and Joseph faced back then, in protecting their newborn. But we need to acknowledge the danger in today's context, for people following the way of Christ who live in the town of his birth. As I often heard while living for 3 months in the West Bank some years ago, *'Don't give up on us! Tell Christians we're here!'*

There is good news though, and some of it comes from among Jewish people. *'Jewish Voice for Peace'* is a group based in America. The Jewish festival of Hannukah [Festival of Lights] began this year on Nov. 29th, just as we began Advent. It's a time for sanctifying and re-dedication: originally of the Temple. But *J.V.P.* calls on its members to sanctify and re-dedicate themselves; to practise justice, freedom and equality; and to continue to work for justice and peace in Palestine-Israel.

More good news: in Israel itself, an organisation called ‘*Rabbis for Human Rights*’ acts to protect the human rights of many vulnerable people, including Palestinian Christians and Muslims. Each year, *R.H.R.* takes volunteers, many of them young people from synagogues and Christian churches in Israel, to assist Palestinian farmers harvesting their olives. These people experience joy by living rightly. And get a glimpse of hope for the future, where all people share the land in peace and enjoy equal rights.

Prayer: God of freedom, God of justice, remind us that to have the fair and just world which is your desire, we need to be involved. May we find joy in our daily lives as we act with compassion and challenge injustice everywhere. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

HYMN ; TiS. 282 ‘The voice of God goes out to all the earth.’

OFFERING DEDICATION : Generous God, thank you that you invite us to share in your work to bring your realm on earth. Please take and use the gifts we offer to bring you glory. Amen.

NOTICES ; JOYS and CONCERNS.

PRAYERS for OTHERS :

‘*O come, o come Emmanuel*’, we sing as a prayer. The anticipation of this season is deep within us. We give thanks that you formed the world out of your great love; and it was that same love which brought you to earth, to live as one of us, and to share the messiness of human life.

Although we often pray for peace in our world, we’d prefer peace just to be dropped in our laps. We’d like justice for everyone to fall out of the sky.

We forget the hard, day-to-day work of bringing in your realm on earth, the day-to-day work which Jesus’ life showed us. It’s easier for us to come up with simplistic answers for the world’s complex troubles.

Please remind us that peace and justice begin at home, with our own lives and our own actions. Guide us and stir us to take action, locally and globally.

We pray for those in our community for whom the Christmas season is difficult – people separated from families overseas; those whose relationships have broken down, or who have been bereaved. Please gather them in your loving arms.

We remember other congregations across our Presbytery, and pray especially for the people and leaders at Rutherglen, Chiltern–Springhurst, Howlong & Corowa.

In silence, we bring to you now those for whom we have particular concerns.....

Please give us hearts for the Christmas message, not only during this season but all through the year. Today, tomorrow, this week – open our eyes to someone waiting to experience your love in action through us.

As we gather all these prayers, we say together the family prayer your Son taught us:
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; and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.

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

HYMN : TIS. 468 *'We are your people, Lord, by your grace.'*

WORD of MISSION and BLESSING :

Go now, and live your daily lives with grace and courage. Prepare your hearts, and make even more space for God.

As you go, may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

BLESSING SONG: TIS 781 *'Father, bless us as we go,
Jesus, walk beside us, Holy Spirit guide us.'*

