

ABBAY INTERNATIONAL BAPTIST CHURCH, READING

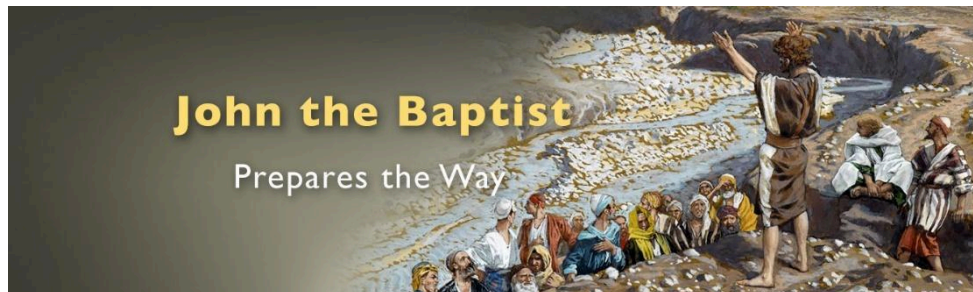
Second Sunday of Advent Gift Service

10.30 am 8th December 2024

Bridget Gurney leading and Rev Dr Julia Binney preaching

www.abbeybaptistchurch.org.uk.

Find us on Facebook @ Abbey Baptist Church, Reading



Theme: The God Who Disturbs (Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 3:1-6)

Advent 2:

The second Advent Candle reminds us of John the Baptist and of all God's messengers who prepare the way of the Saviour's coming.

We light this candle for all God's messengers, preparing the way for change, declaring peace with God, signs pointing to the new age to come.

Pause to reflect

CALL TO WORSHIP

This is the time to worship God

He brings us life

This is the time to sing his praise

He brings us joy

This is the time to pray to him

He brings us forgiveness and renewal

This is the time to hear his word

He brings us guidance and hope

This is the time to show your love for him

He brings us love beyond our deserving

Hymn BP&W 144:

O come, O come, Immanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

*Rejoice, rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, O come, Thou Lord of might
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud, and majesty, and awe.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save
And give them victory o'er the grave.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

TR. JOHN MASON NEALE, ALTD.

Prayer of Praise: Psalm 8:1-8

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him. You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands. You put everything under his feet, all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

O Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Prayer of Confession

Father, when we consider all you have done for us, what have we done for you? Lord, there are many times when we have turned our backs on you and tried to do things our way. There are many times when our attitude is not worthy of you. There are times, even today, when our words have not been worthy of you, and we call ourselves your followers! Lord forgive us. We have marred your image. We haven't shown the care that you show to us. We feel so useless when we think of all the mistakes we have made in thought, word and deed.

Father we are sorry for all we have done wrong. Forgive us we pray.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Father, your word says if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all our wrongs, so we say thank you for cleansing us, for restoring us and giving us your peace. Your goodness, mercy and love are overwhelming, and we just raise our faces to you.

Thank you for your goodness to us all. Amen

Hymn BPW 590: *from the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)*

Father in heaven, be your name hallowed;
bring in your Kingdom, reign here in love;
help us to give you, joyful obedience,
as they obey you in heaven above.

Give to us daily food for our bodies;
grant us forgiveness as we forgive;
you know our weakness, spare us the testing,
save us from evil each day we live.

Yours is the Kingdom, Father eternal;
yours is the power, maker of men;
worship we offer, praises we bring you,
yours is the glory for ever. Amen.

STELLA READ

FAMILY TIME: Care for Calais - Sam Jonkers and Madison Carter

(An offering taken during the following song, and after the song Abbey Kids will leave for their groups)

Hymn MP 605:

Soon, and very soon,
We are going to see the King;
Soon, and very soon,
We are going to see the King;
Soon, and very soon,
We are going to see the King;
Alleluia, alleluia,
We're going to see the King!

No more crying there ...

No more dying there ...

Alleluia, alleluia, Alleluia, alleluia,
Soon, and very soon ...

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Prayer of Dedication

Bible Reading 1: Isaiah 40:1-5

Bible Reading 2: Matthew 3:1-12

Hymn BP&W 147:

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin:
make straight the way for God within.
Now let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out your hand,
and bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth, and let your light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

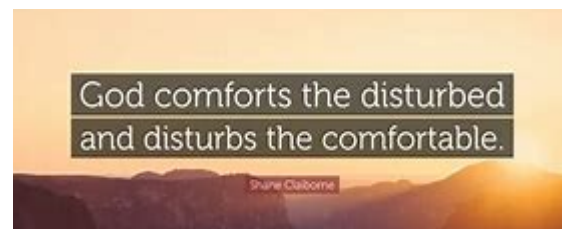
All praise to you, eternal Son,
whose work of freedom as begun,
whom, with the Father we adore
and Holy Spirit evermore.

CHARLES COFFIN (1676-1749) TR. JOHN CHANDLER (1806-76) AND OTHERS.

SERMON: The God who Disturbs (Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 3:1-6)

Sometimes in life things can come upon us as a bit of a shock and shake us up. In our minds, we fear the unknown; we find it threatening, destabilising and disturbing. We seek God to be our rock, our stability, our certainty in times of change, and our security when we feel insecure: 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble' (Psalm 46:1). As the message interprets this verse, 'God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him.' God comforts us like a loving parent; he makes us feel safe when the storms of life hit us. He is described as 'the God of all comfort' (2 Corinthians 1:3). As the Apostle Peter exhorts us, 'cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you' (1 Peter 5:7). God cares for us.

The message from the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 40 starts as a message comfort: 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem' (40:1,2). These words from the prophet are addressed to people who have experienced the loss of nearly everything in their lives



through political turmoil; the loss of things that gave a sense of meaning in life. Community, cultural and religious identity lost through the Assyrian invasion of Israel in 721 BC and the later exile of Judah in Babylon. Psalm 137 records the lament over the loss of their homeland: 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars, we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy: they said, 'sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (vs 1-4). For those who have experienced loss, God speaks words of comfort. He **can** be trusted, he **is** faithful, loyal, secure, safe, dependable, tender, loving and caring: 'the Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield, the power that saves me, my stronghold, my place of safety' (Psalm 18:2).

However, God, as well as being a God of safety and security, is also **the God who Disturbs**. This is our theme for today. Advent is a time in the Christian year when we prepare ourselves for the wonder of Christmas. Each of the four Sundays in Advent has a different traditional theme. On this, the second Sunday in Advent, we are thinking about John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus and the one who was to prepare the way for him. Through him and his ministry we see **the God who disturbs**.

In his gospel, Luke tells us that when Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was also pregnant with her first child, 'the baby leaped in her womb' (Luke 1:41). This was in recognition that the promised Saviour was soon to be born. The child Elizabeth was carrying grew up to be John the Baptist. That uncomfortable moment, that Elizabeth experienced as the child leaped in her womb, was a taster of what John the Baptist would do throughout his life and ministry, that is disturbed people!

Even the events surrounding his birth made waves for everyone around. Elizabeth, his mother, getting pregnant even though 'well on in years' (Luke 1:7). Zechariah, the father, struck dumb as he was serving in the temple because he refused to believe the angelic messenger, the miraculous healing of his muteness, the breaking with tradition in naming his son 'John,' and the immediate speaking powerfully and prophetically to the nation about the imminent arrival of the promised Messiah ((Luke 1:67-79). It is all drama and disturbance.

John the Baptist continued to make waves as he grew up, coming from the wilderness, living out an unorthodox lifestyle of a prophet in the Old Testament pattern. We are told of his eccentric behaviour: 'his clothes were made of camel's hair... his food was locusts and wild honey' (Matthew 3:4). If his chosen way of life and behaviour were disturbing for some, it was nothing to the effect that he had on the people of Judea when he started preaching publicly attracting huge crowds. He is the voice of the prophecy from Isaiah 40:1-5.

What started as a message of comfort, of speaking tenderly, then becomes decidedly uncomfortable: 'Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!' (Isaiah 40:3 The Message). This is not an easy message of comfort and reassurance; it is thoroughly disturbing. By taking these verses to himself, John is blatantly telling people that they were all sinners and needed to repent and was calling them to be publicly baptised as a sign that they were turning back to God. Matthew tells us that, 'people went out to him from Jerusalem, and all Judea, and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the river Jordan' (Matthew 3:5,6). Even the very religious people responded to John's message and he caused a huge disturbance. So much so that when he declared Jesus to be the long promised Saviour (John 1:29), the authorities arrested him and threw him into prison (Matthew 4:12).

Now of course, the reality is that it wasn't really John doing the disturbing; it was God doing the disturbing through John. John the Baptist was the messenger, the forerunner, the advanced guard, the preparer of the road, the vehicle through whom God disturbed people out of their spiritual ignorance, indifference, lethargy, and hypocrisy.

It is really very disturbing to be asked to repent, to turn, and to admit that we have been wrong. Joan Puls (an American Franciscan writer) writes of the disturbance that repentance causes to our personal and collective psyches. She describes it as, 'so jarring that we tend to exhaust every other available

possibility before we give in. We dread the honest admission of our wrongdoing!' According to John Hull in his book *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning*, people don't want to change because they don't want to admit that they had been wrong. Nothing requires more courage than admission of fault. But disturbed we must be because God is **the God who disturbs**.

God graciously refuses to allow us to walk through life indifferent to him, his ways or his plans for us, all that would enable us to find our real purpose in life. He is not content to allow us to sleepwalk our way through life. If love's appeal fails to draw us to himself, then he shakes us up. Like John the Baptist bluntly telling people that on the inside we are no better than 'poisonous snakes' (Matthew 3:7). This is no message of comfort. In fact John's whole message is disturbing: the axe is ready to fall, winnowing forks, unquenchable fire – all referring to judgement. All imagery chosen to shock and shake up his hearers.

God's shaking is because he loves us and doesn't want any of us to waste any of the precious gift of life he has given us. He wants the best for us. As the perfect loving parent, he wants us to achieve our potential and become the best versions of ourselves that we can be. Because he loves us so much, he comes to us and challenges us in the way we live so that we might truly live by God's values and model a Spirit filled life of faith and purpose, even if it is uncomfortable for us and for others.

God also comes to shock us at times out of our complacency, our comfort zone, even out of our place of safety - if it has become an idol, that is something we are trusting in other than God. For example, looking to people or institutions for our security instead of God. Or when we are clinging to that which we think is safe and secure rather than stepping out in faith in response to God's call and being ready to be courageous and take risks because we know that God is with us to support and resource us. God comforts us and speaks tenderly to us (Isaiah 40:1,2) but God also discomferts and disturbs us. God comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable.

With the message of Christmas comes the promise of peace. As the angels sang, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven! Peace on earth among people of goodwill!' (Luke 2:14 JBP). God gave us his son, Jesus, born in Bethlehem's manger to die on Calvary's cross. **There is nothing so disturbing as God dying on a cross for the sins of the world.** It was through this so, so disturbing event that God made peace for the world possible. This peace comes to us disturbingly 'through the blood of Christ shed on the cross' (Colossians 1:20). So this Christmas, may the peace of God thoroughly disturb you!

Advent Response:

If you want to hear the Good News of Christmas, come on out into the wilderness.

See the man dressed in camels hair, hear him calling, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!'

If you want to be transformed at Christmas, taste his recipe of honesty and truthfulness,

live courageous lives, bearing the fruit of repentance,

and be touched by the tenderness of our disturbing God.

Hymn BP&W 148:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near.

Wait for the Lord: be strong, take heart.

TAIZÉ COMMUNITY

PRAYER FROM THE MARGINS ~ Led by the Rev Dr Jim Binney

Living God, we praise you today for all those who prepared the way for your coming; all who made a straight path in the wilderness so that the hearts of many were ready to receive you in the Person of your Son, Jesus Christ.

We praise you for John the Baptist – for his willingness to speak the truth no matter what the cost, his readiness to point away from himself and towards your light, and the integrity of his lifestyle which testified to the truth of his message in a way that words alone could never begin to.

You call us to prepare a way for Jesus in turn: gladly we respond.

Living God, we thank you today for those who have the courage to stand up and speak out against evil and injustice; those who are ready, if necessary, to stand alone for their convictions, enduring mockery and rejection, suffering sacrificing status and security, willing to risk everything for what they believe to be right.

We thank you for their vision, their determination, their willingness to be a voice in the wilderness.

May your glory be revealed and may we all see it together.

Living God, we thank you for those who have the compassion and concern for others to reach out and bring help – ministering to the sick, comforting the bereaved, visiting the lonely, providing for the poor, giving hope to the oppressed, bringing laughter to the sorrowful. We especially pray today for organisations such as Care4Calais, Reading Red Kitchen, Refugee Support Group, Amnesty International, and other such groups associated with our work here at Abbey.

We thank you for their dedication, their understanding, their goodness their willingness to speak your word in the wilderness.

May your glory be revealed and may we all see it together.

Living God, you call us to reach out to your broken world – to those walking in darkness, wrestling with despair, craving affection, thirsting to find purpose in their lives. We especially pray for those amongst our congregation, and within our town, who have been forced to leave the countries of their birth, family and friends, financial security and purpose in life, because of injustice and oppression. Comfort them in their sense of loss and restore a sense of hope for the future.

Give us faith, wisdom, tenderness, and love to meet that challenge. Help us to venture into the wilderness ourselves, and there, gently but confidently, to speak your word of life.

May your glory be revealed, and may we all see it together, in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Saviour. Amen.

Hymn BP&W 139:

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,

hope of all the earth thou art:
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child, and yet a king,
born to reign in us for ever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all-sufficient merit
raise us to thy glorious throne.

CHARLES WESLEY (1707-88)

A BLESSING

As we all wait on the Lord, may he bless you and keep you in his loving care until we meet together again. **Amen**

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

This week and dates for your diary:

Today there is a fair trade stall after the service and on 15th December there will be Joyce; stall

Church Prayer Meeting:

- Tuesday evening 8- 8.30 pm Zoom – see church WhatsApp group for link or Meeting ID: 862 1518 8882 Passcode: 657161

Christmas Programme: details are on the publicity flyers. Please give others a copy of the flyer as an invitation to the Advent and Christmas services.

The Leadership Course continues with Session 4 on:

- Tuesday 17th December – 2.30 pm in person in the Brookside room.
- Friday 20th December – 7.30 pm on Zoom (ID: 828 1505 7805 Passcode: 41165).

Baptismal Service: Another baptismal service is being planned for January. If you would like to be baptised and/or become a Church Member please speak to the Minister or one of the Deacons.

If you would like to contribute financially to Abbey International Baptist Church electronically, please use the card reader at the back of the church or scan the following QR code below to pay:

QR Code for Offering:

