



This short act of worship has been produced by Helen Lunn for you to use at home or wherever you are and if you are unable to worship in a church building. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Call to worship

Rejoice, rejoice,
And again, I say rejoice.
One who is powerful is coming

With joy we draw together in worship.
May we drink deeply from the spirit of love and service we find here.
And may each be a well of refreshment to another as Christ is to us all. **Amen**

Hymn On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry (Singing the Faith 182)

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plr21lLgFpg>

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

Then cleansed be every life from sin;
make straight the way for God within,
and 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.

To God the Son all glory be
whose advent sets his people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

John Chandler (1806–1876)

A time of prayer

Let us pray

God of gentleness and strength,
May we be aware of your presence
Ready to listen for that still small voice
Among all the thoughts crowding our minds
That may be challenging us
To change something in our lives,
Or to be the change for another.

Loving and gentle God,
Our heads are full of so many voices:
The voices of the advertiser –
To grab a bargain, three for the price of two;
The voice of greed –
Take what you can, the cheapest price, never mind the cost to
the maker;

The voice of reason –
You cannot be expected to help everyone, charity begins at
home.

The voice of hypocrisy –
You pay your taxes, and give to charity,
You don't need to change anything.
Come, Lord Jesus, with your Holy Spirit,
And make us the change you want to see.

Loving God,
For the times when we feel on top of the world
And all is going well,
When we can look down and feel we are in control
And see the future beckoning us ahead,
We give you thanks.

For the times we are challenged:
When we find ourselves in a desert place,
With no landmarks to guide us;
When we draw on our resilience
And discover we can do more than we realised possible,
We give you thanks.

God of mountain top, the valley and the desert,
You are alongside us:
In our visions, hopes and dreams,

In our doubts and questions,
In our work and our endeavours,
And we give you thanks.

Amen

Bible Readings

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion;
shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The Lord has taken away your punishment,
he has turned back your enemy.

The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.

¹⁶ On that day
they will say to Jerusalem,

“Do not fear, Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.

¹⁷ The Lord your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.

He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”

¹⁸ “I will remove from you
all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,
which is a burden and reproach for you.

¹⁹ At that time I will deal
with all who oppressed you.

I will rescue the lame;
I will gather the exiles.

I will give them praise and honour
in every land where they have suffered shame.

²⁰ At that time I will gather you;
at that time I will bring you home.

I will give you honour and praise
among all the peoples of the earth

when I restore your fortunes
before your very eyes,”

says the Lord

Luke 3:7-18

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him,
“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming
wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not
begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our
father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up
children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the
trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be
cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share
with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should
do the same.”

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Reflection

There are only thirteen days until Christmas! Are you ready for Christmas?

That is a question we hear quite often these days, isn't it? What do people mean when they ask if you are ready for Christmas? Well, they usually mean things like...

- Do you have all of your shopping done?
- Have you finished wrapping all your gifts?

- Have you put up your Christmas tree and all the decorations?
- Have you sent your Christmas cards?
- Have you finished baking all of the Christmas goodies?
- Is your house clean and ready for visitors?

Are you ready for Christmas? There is another question that is much more important than "Are you ready for Christmas?" That question is, "Are you ready for Christ?"

In our Gospel reading today, we hear the voice of John the Baptist crying out to the people, "Prepare the way for the Lord. Fill in the valleys and level off all the mountains. Make the crooked roads straight and the rough places smooth."

Did John the Baptist really want the people to work on the roads? No, what John wanted was for the people to get ready for the coming of the Messiah. What he really meant was that the people needed to get their hearts right and return to God. You see, no matter how good people may think they are, there are always some crooked ways and rough places in their lives.

There are things such as dishonesty, selfishness, pride, jealousy, and many more. John wanted the people to make those crooked ways straight and rough places smooth so that Jesus could come and walk among them.

Those who came to John did not come to perform some religious rituals that would guarantee their spiritual access to God's kingdom. They were folk such as soldiers, probably Jewish rather than Roman and tax collectors neither popular nor pious, people who wanted to know what to do. John's response is simple. Tax collectors and soldiers alike are told not to supplement their income at the expense of others' misfortune.

Every form of such extortion is out. The spirit of giving is 'in'. Any possessions that exceed one's basic needs are to be given to meet the basic needs of others. John is demanding a lifestyle change that challenges the normal and expected social customs.

This mini social reform, however, is not the root but the fruit of John's prophetic message. Above all, John is preparing a people who are ready to embrace God's Messiah.

The self-destructive pride in being a descendant of Abraham, the deceptive allure of wealth, and all else that would impair the people's readiness to recognise the Messiah, are simply to be abandoned. The sense of excitement and expectation hangs in the air like an electric charge. The longed-for Holy Spirit will once again descend upon Israel. The Messiah is coming. John demands change.

Most of us know exactly who ought to change. That is what sells newspapers. The furore that accompanied the parliamentary expenses scandal, the bankers' millions and the phone hacking outrage is fuelled by the conviction that other people have it better than me and, if they changed my life would be better. Those trying to implement healthier options in food consumption or to help people stop smoking know that tact and extreme care in approach are vital, because admitting to ourselves that we need to change is so challenging.

Many of the people of his time would see John as a scaremongering prophet of doom. Led by their religious leaders, and heirs of the Scriptures, the people knew that a time of judgement was forecast, but were confident that, by keeping the law and assured by their Abrahamic descent, they would be all right. John disabuses them of this.

The people ask what they must do. John points out that, for all their religiosity, they fail in mercy and justice. They fail to live fairly, fail in loving care of their neighbour, and fail to bear good fruit. The people are impressed with his message and wonder whether he is the expected Messiah, but John points ahead to the coming of Jesus, and the salvation for all.

Universalism is another of Luke's themes, well evidenced in scriptural passages such as in Zephaniah 3 v 14 – 20 where God

in their midst would bring renewal and reversal, and in the Isaiah passage that we heard when it says make his name known among the nations.

The people must not just wait for God to act, but change their ways and help others towards the kingdom. Change is for the sake of others, not just to save ourselves.

The fair-trade movement is a stunning example of change working. Its beginning was greeted with a good deal of derision; people regarded those who bought fair-trade coffee as fanatical, but persistence paid off. The commitment to change won the day. Today some major franchises sell only fair-trade coffee. Sharing more fairly had caught on.

So, must we change, if we are to realise afresh the significance of the birth of Christ and play our part? This change is not just in the small ways by which we live in society: John speaks of baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It is uncomfortable stuff. Charity goes well with Christmas. Revolution generally does not. We must let the Spirit help us to stand out from the mores of our society, and to be critical of the comfortable tradition that nurtures us: to make us the change we want to see.

The summer of 2011 saw riots in many parts of Britain. In

Handsworth in Birmingham, three young men died when other young men drove a car at them. There could have been anarchy; but one man changed all that. Tariq Jahan, the father of one of the victims, spoke immediately to ask others to stop the violence, calling for calm and no attempt at revenge.

John the Baptist calls for similar action, putting aside personal agendas in the interest of the wider community. These are the actions of the baptised, their lives changed for good. In the competitive context of first-century society to give without expecting to receive something in return would have a big impact.

Some would be challenged to change; others would be threatened by an alternative lifestyle. John sees that those who challenge the status quo through their own lifestyle, allow the influence of God's grace to ripple out through their communities, to create change.

During this special season of the year, you and I need to make sure that we are ready for the coming of the Christ of Christmas. We need to look into our hearts and ask God to make our crooked ways straight and smooth out the rough places so that we can walk with Jesus each day of our life. Let's ask him to do that right now.

Dear Father, we want to be ready. Help us to change, make our crooked ways straight and our rough places smooth.

Amen.

Hymn When I was lost (Singing the Faith 367)

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCoIn1k0s48>

When I was lost, you came and rescued me;
reached down into the pit and lifted me.

O Lord, such love,

I was as far from you as I could be.

You know all the things I've ever done,
but Jesus' blood has cancelled everyone.

O Lord, such grace

to qualify me as your own.

There is a new song in my mouth,

there is a deep cry in my heart,

a hymn of praise to Almighty God - hallelujah!

And now I stand firm on this Rock,

my life is hidden now with Christ in God.

The old has gone and the new has come - hallelujah!

Your love has lifted me.

Now I have come into your family
for the Son of God has died for me.

O Lord, such peace,

I am as loved by you as I could be.

In the full assurance of your love,
now with every confidence we come.

O Lord, such joy

to know that you delight in us.

There is a new song in my mouth,

there is a deep cry in my heart,

a hymn of praise to Almighty God - hallelujah!

And now I stand firm on this Rock,

my life is hidden now with Christ in God.

The old has gone and the new has come - hallelujah!

Your love has lifted me.

Many are the wonders you have done,

Many are the things that you have planned.

How beautiful the place that gives to us,

All that we don't deserve,

All that we cannot earn,

God is a gift of love.

*There is a new song in my mouth,
there is a deep cry in my heart,
a hymn of praise to Almighty God - hallelujah!
And now I stand firm on this Rock,
my life is hidden now with Christ in God.
The old has gone and the new has come -hallelujah!
Your love has lifted me.*

Kate Simmonds and Miles Simmonds

Words and Music: © 2001, Thankyou Music. Administered by
worshiptogether.com

A time of prayer

Let us pray

We pray for those living in war zones, in refugee camps,
in cardboard boxes,
and we cry out to you, God of peace:
enough is enough.

We pray for children who go to bed hungry,
who wake up afraid, who live without hope,
and we cry out to you, God of peace:
enough is enough.

We pray for animals hunted, caged and slaughtered,
and we cry out to you, God of peace:

enough is enough.

We pray for your world where it is indifferent,
complacent, sinful,
and we cry out to you, God of peace:
enough is enough.

We pray for those who have lost their way,
those who are searching,
those who are asking 'What can we do?'
and we cry out to you, God of peace:
enough is enough.

Gracious God,
bring them, and us, and all creation back to you,
and embrace us afresh in your Son Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name;
Thy kingdom come;
Thy will be done;
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation;
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
The power and the glory
For ever and ever.

Amen.

Hymn There's a light upon the mountains (Singing the Faith 188)

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuvbW7gVwal>

There's a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the
spring,
when our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the King;
weary was our heart with waiting, and the night-watch seemed
so long;
but his triumph-day is breaking, and we hail it with a song.

There's a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air;
and the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of
prayer:
for the suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our spirit is the travail of his own.

Hark! We hear a distant music, and it come with fuller swell;
'tis the triumph-song of Jesus, of our King, Immanuel:

Go ye forth with joy to meet him; and, my soul, be swift to
bring

all thy sweetest and the dearest for the triumph of our King!

Henry Burton (1840–1930)

Blessing

God of the desert places,
Whose judgement was proclaimed by the prophets of old,
Help us, too, to be willing to wait for the right time,
And the right place, in which to demonstrate your love,
That has more power than words alone to challenge and
change.

Amen

All songs covered by CCL (Europe) Ltd have been reproduced under CCL
No. 674557