



This short act of worship has been produced by Revd Dr Jonathan Dean for you to use at home and beyond and if you are unable to worship in a church building.

Call to Worship:

Across the universe
creation waits
for the prophets to speak
their words of expectation
and their vision of renewal.

May we gather round them today
once more
and let their longing grip us
and lead us
into birth and blessing.
So come now my friends
this is the meeting place

of promise and prophecy
let us listen through the ancient words
that we might be ready to hear
a baby's cry.

(Roddy Hamilton)

Opening Hymn: On Jordan's Bank (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)

Prayers

Psalm 96

Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.

**Sing to the Lord and bless his name;
tell out his salvation from day to day.**

Declare his glory among the nations
and his wonders among all peoples.

**For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;
he is more to be feared than all gods.**

For all the gods of the nations are but idols;
it is the Lord who made the heavens.

**Honour and majesty are before him;
power and splendour are in his sanctuary.**

Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad;
let the sea thunder and all that is in it;

Let the fields be joyful and all that is in them;

let all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the Lord.

**For he comes, he comes to judge the earth;
with righteousness he will judge the world
and the peoples with his truth.**

Generous and gracious God, you come to us, amid the world's pomp and pomposity, in simple ways, in humble ways, and in ways we often resist. You come as a voice in the wilderness; you come as a prophetic voice from among a marginalised community; you come as a child. You come, disrupting our longing for comfort and self-sufficiency. You come, challenging our assumptions, our prejudice and our received wisdom.

As we hear the prophets' words today, and recall the way in which you came to us in Jesus, and in those who prepared the way for him, convict us. Lead us beyond our comfort zones. Draw us out of our complacency. Show us our need to be remade, refined and reborn, into the fuller life of your Kingdom.

In the silence, we offer our sorrow for the ways we have resisted your call and rejected your voice. We have failed to hear you, to know you, to follow you. We need to repent, and begin again.

Silence is kept

We hear the prophets' words with gratitude and hope: in Christ, all things are being made new. Beginning with us. Lead us onward, generous God. **Amen.**

God our healer,
Whose mercy is like a refining fire:
Touch us with your judgement,
And confront us with your tenderness;
That, being comforted by you,
We may reach out to a troubled world,
Through Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

(Janet Morley)

First Reading: Malachi 3: 1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Second Reading: Luke 3: 1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

Second Hymn: Wild and lone the prophet's voice (Singing the Faith 189)

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtTEGi2tbCA>

Wild and lone the prophet's voice
echoes through the desert still,
calling us to make a choice,
bidding us to do God's will:
"Turn from sin and be baptized;
cleanse your heart and mind and soul.
Quitting all the sins you prized,
yield your life to God's control."

"Bear the fruit repentance sows:
lives of justice, truth, and love.
Trust no other claim than those;
set your heart on things above.
Soon the Lord will come in power,
burning clean the threshing floor:
then will flames the chaff devour;
wheat alone shall fill God's store."

With such preaching stark and bold
John proclaimed salvation near,

and his timeless warnings hold
words of hope to all who hear.

So we dare to journey on,
led by faith through ways untrod,
till we come at last like John
to behold the Lamb of God.

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Reflection on the Readings

Today, the scriptures, through the voices of the prophets, are asking us the hardest question of all.

It's a question which one of my tutors, when I was training for the ministry, used to ask us regularly. We'd be pontificating about our opinions on this or that, or confidently assuming that we were going to be the answer to all the Church's problems, once we were in circuit somewhere, and he would stop us, and pause, and look us in the eyes, and ask: "tell me, Jonathan, under what circumstances would you ever be *wrong?*"

It's a very good question to be asked. And it's a very hard one to answer, truthfully. Because although, alongside death, being regularly wrong is about the only thing we can rely on happening to us, the human culture we live in has made it fearfully difficult to admit. We don't need to be Elton John fans to know that "sorry" really is the hardest word. We'd often do anything, just to be, and to feel, right. To be vindicated. To have the superiority of not being in the wrong.

And that's one of many reasons why we need Advent. Not the fluffy, candlelit, tinsel-wrapped, expectant side of Advent, which is good too, but the Advent we get in today's readings. Two prophets, stern, uncompromising, rooted in prayer and the life of God, who make us stop for a moment, and pause, and look us in the eyes, and ask: "might you be *wrong*, about this?"

The older prophet is rather obscure. Malachi is actually just the Hebrew for "my messenger", so it may not even be his name, unless his parents had remarkable and insightful powers of foresight when he was born. Nor has he left us very much to go on: just 55 verses, tucked in like an afterthought at the closing page or two of the Hebrew Scriptures. If it hadn't been for

Handel's *Messiah*, we probably wouldn't remember anything he wrote. But we remember these verses, about how, when God comes, in the person of a messenger, there will be a great process of refinement that takes place. A winnowing out. A cleansing. A purification. In the process, we will be transformed. It won't be easy or painless, but the end result will be better than before.

We do think we know *when* Malachi offered this prophecy. He's about 450 years before Jesus, just after the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. You'll probably recall that the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians as they took the Israelites off into exile: only decades later, as the Persians let them come home, was it rebuilt. But the Israelites didn't return home the same people they'd been before the exile. They'd dreamed then of world domination – now they knew they were a small and powerless nation. They thought then that, because God was with them, and they were God's people, no disaster could befall them – they returned with a quite different sense of the God who sits with us amid the wreckage, but doesn't spare us from it altogether. Their leaders at least seem to have been the sort of foolish braggarts, who claimed all was well even as the Babylonians marched in; after exile and long years of pain and

grief, the people returned, chastened, broken, sorrowful and uncertain.

Malachi seems to be saying to them that even in this, God is not finished. Yes, there has been a refining in the hot fire of setback and destruction. But there is hope. Because now, having been wrong, there is a chance to rebuild, and to be remade, to be right again, with God, and with God's purposes. But never again must they face the world with only an arrogant certainty about their own point of view. Never again must their trust or faith in God be allowed to silence their conscience or the possibility that they need to change. Never again. And he seems to suggest that a process rather like this is to be expected, and even longed for, by all of us, as God's people. Rather than resisting the refining, we might even come to welcome it. Because only thus do we obtain the fullness of life which is God's desire for all of us.

Beneath the uncompromising language, of course, it's fullness of life that John the Baptist desires and offers too. We know far more about him, and Luke gives us very precise historical and geographical co-ordinates so that we can identify *exactly* when and where he appeared, and made way for Jesus. Here are two

more Malachis – messengers of God – and it doesn't much matter to identify which one of them the prophet may have meant, because they both fulfil a similar function. They both ask Malachi's question too: "please consider the possibility: are you perhaps in the wrong? Might it be time to change?" They both offer an invitation to life, in all its fullness. But you can walk through the gate to that, only when you begin by unlocking your own heart, and considering that you may, up to now, have been wrong.

We could go on all month – and we will, if we follow our Advent lectionaries! – about what this all means for the world, about what in particular Malachi and John might think is wrong with us, about *how* we need to change. John's imagery is more about "levelling up", to coin a phrase: about an earthquake in our affairs which radically reshapes the landscapes of our hearts and overturns our inequalities and injustices. But he's equally clear that the revolution that God is bringing about in the life of all Creation begins in the space of our own lives, and in our own willingness to be wrong, to say sorry, to be changed, to start afresh.

I think about this often in relation to the story of Pastor Martin Niemöller. You may know his famous reflection, which talks about not standing up for others under persecution, because their cause was not his, until, finally “they came for me. And there was no one left to speak out for me”. He said that, of course, in the context of Nazi persecution of the Jews during the 1930s. And it was an incredibly hard-won conviction. Niemöller grew up a normal German Lutheran of the early 20th century, believing that Jews were innately inferior, and spiritually cursed, and therefore deserved the sufferings that inevitably came upon them. After Hitler rose to power, he did criticise the government, but not for its anti-Jewish policies, which he found far less problematic. Nevertheless, he was sent to Dachau, the first concentration camp, to be punished for his rebellion.

He was punished brutally, as a relatively high-profile member of the clergy. He endured beatings and torture, solitary confinement and starvation, humiliation and degradation. It was a harrowing experience, and reduced him down to his bare soul.

He also made new friends – Jews, incarcerated in Dachau simply for being Jewish. And the experience was searing. He came to realise the depth and the wickedness of his former views. He was purified. He emerged from the refinement a very different person, with very different views and a far richer understanding. He cultivated compassion, and cried for justice. His famous statement is the most renowned fruit of that transformation.

The theologian James Alison entitled the book in which he describes the core of his understanding of the Christian Gospel, *The Joy of Being Wrong*. The *joy* of being wrong. It’s such a paradox. And so true. The gate to fullness of life – not just for me, but for all God’s children – is unlatched and swings wide with that one admission. I am wrong. I need refinement. I need to change.

I do not believe that God inflicts suffering on any of us – on anyone at all – in order to make us realise our wrongness. Rather, I believe in what Paul once wrote about God’s miraculous capacity to turn any experience, no matter how painful or difficult or demanding, into a place of renewal and a portal of grace. Even the wilderness. Even a stable. Even a

criminal's cross. And even finding out – horror of horrors – that we might just be in the wrong: and need to change. It's how God revolutionizes what we've made of being human, of being alive. Valleys are lifted up, and mountains are laid low. And though tried in the fire, by grace we emerge more deeply aware of all that God is doing, all the time, to bring us hope.

Let me suggest an Advent discipline for us in these challenging days, of so much division and polarisation and conflict and tension. As we read the news, as we hear of the ways in which we perpetrate our divisions and foment injustices in the world, let's just hold our own perspectives humbly before God, and ask, "might I be wrong? Do I need to change?"

And, if the answer might be yes, don't be afraid. Don't hold back. Entrust yourself to the process of refinement. Be purified by divine Love. And have faith in the God, our God, who is always at work to bring us a message of renewal, of life, of grace.

A Time of Prayer

We bless you, our God,
mighty sovereign, power,
gentle caring mother.
You do not forget your children.

We bless you our God,
for your great gifts to us:
creation—fragile and fascinating,
Scripture—revealing your truth.

You bless us with your forgiving love,
with the vision of your kingdom,
shedding light in our darkness.

Bless us and disturb us O God,
with that vision of your kingdom
and as we voice our hopes to you now,
may they strengthen us, reassure us and move us...

We pray for those caught up in wars around the world;
soldiers, refugees and those who hold fast
to the reasons for the fighting ...
(Silence)

We pray for homeless folk:
excluded from what the rest of us are doing,
cold, struggling to keep a hold of who they are ...
(Silence)

We pray for folk who are ill,
coping with pain, fearing the worst,
and for those in the NHS who worry for the future ...
(Silence)

We pray for those folk struggling in relationships,
especially at this 'family time',
when the cracks are kept just below the surface ...
(Silence)

And for the deepest hopes of our hearts, we pray now
(Silence)

Into the mess of this world a fragile child will come -
yelling in the night for his mother,
needing milk and clean linen.

We pin our hopes on you, little baby,
our God, pushed out into the world, through pain and into
poverty.

Our God is with us and our hope is re-born. **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.

Closing Hymn: Into the darkness (Singing the Faith 173)

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xh89fzSEXbE>

Into the darkness of this world;
Into the shadows of the night;
Into this loveless place You came,
Lightened our burdens, eased our pain
And made these hearts Your home.
Into the darkness once again,
Oh come, Lord Jesus, come

Chorus

*Come with Your love
To make us whole.
Come with Your light
To lead us on.
Driving the darkness
Far from our souls.
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Into the longing of our souls;
Into these heavy hearts of stone;
Shine on us now Your piercing light,
Order our lives and souls aright
By grace and love unknown.
Until in You our hearts unite,
Oh come, Lord Jesus, come.

Chorus

*Come with Your love
To make us whole.
Come with Your light
To lead us on.
Driving the darkness
Far from our souls.
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

O Holy Child, Emmanuel;
Hope of the ages, God with us,
Visit again this broken place,
Till all the earth declares Your praise,
And your great mercies own.
Now let Your love be born in us,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

Chorus

*Come in Your glory
Take Your place.
Jesus, the Name above all names.
We long to see You face to face,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Maggi Dawn (b.1959)
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Closing Responses and Blessing

Into our world
as into Mary's womb...
Come, Lord Jesus.
Into the forgotten places,
as into the stable...
Come, Lord Jesus.

Into the lives of the poor, bringing hope;
into the lives of the powerful, bringing caution;
into the lives of the weary, bringing rest;
into the lives of the wise, bringing restlessness;
and into our lives and longings,
whatever our estate...

Come, Lord Jesus.

This is the good news:

Christ is coming,

and blessed are those who wait on the Lord.

Therefore come quickly, Lord.

Amen.

And so may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be
with us all now and always.

*[Intercessions and closing responses are ©1997 Wild Goose Resource
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Martin Niemöller's reflection:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

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