



**DURHAM  
CATHEDRAL**

THE SHRINE OF ST CUTHBERT

# Praying Together

*during the week beginning Sunday 6 December  
The Second Sunday of Advent*

*During this time of great anxiety and uncertainty, we want to stay in touch with our regular worshippers and indeed with everyone who is associated with the Cathedral family. We are delighted that we have been able to reintroduce congregational worship here at the Cathedral. Durham Cathedral is also open for private prayer and quiet reflection.*

*If you'd like to come to the cathedral for worship and/or prayer, there are some important measures we'd like you to know about, to ensure the safety of members of the public and staff. You can find this information on our website: [www.durhamcathedral.co.uk](http://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk) We will continue to live stream services as well so that, if you can't re-join us yet, you will still be able to engage with us online.*

## **Gospel**

**Mark 1. 1-8**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight” ‘,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

# Thought for the Day

by the Reverend Canon Professor Simon Oliver

The wilderness or desert features very prominently in the Bible. We think particularly of the Israelites' forty years in exile in the wilderness after they fled the Egyptians. This was a time of preparation to receive the promised land. We also think of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, tempted by Satan, as a preparation for his public ministry around Galilee. There are also figures in the Bible, particularly in Genesis, who run away from their troubles and broken relationships into the wilderness. Hagar, for example, was the Egyptian slave of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to bear a child. After Hagar conceived, things do not go well with Sarah, so Hagar ran away into the wilderness only to be sent back again by an angel. Hagar and her son Ishmael will later be sent again into the wilderness by Abraham. Jacob is another character who runs away from his troubles into the wilderness, first fleeing his brother Esau after he had cheated Esau of his birth right, then running away from his father-in-law Laban.

Life in the wilderness is not always to be feared and avoided. It could be a place of repentance, learning, purifying, preparation, and blessing. There are two aspects of life in the wilderness to which I'd like to draw our attention. First, the wilderness is a place that struggles to sustain life. There is little water and vegetation. The Israelites, when wandering in the wilderness, were fed with manna that fell from the skies. In this morning's gospel, we are told that John the Baptist, living in the wilderness, eats locusts and honey from wild bees. Neither manna, nor locusts and honey, are food that can be cultivated; they are gifts of God. So the Israelites and John the Baptist live with a more immediate awareness that their life is sustained by God's providence and care. The second aspect of nomadic life in the wilderness is that it contrasts with the labour and turmoil of urban, settled life. The wilderness or desert is a place set apart where one can be alone with God. The New Testament Greek word we translate as 'desert' does not simply mean a wasteland or endless sand dunes; it can be a place that is sparsely populated, away from others. So life in the wilderness is a place away from others where one can be alone with God and oneself.

In the third century a group of Christian men and women decided to leave the busyness and turmoil of urban life to live in the desert wilderness in northern Egypt, to be alone with themselves and God. They became known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. They had a wonderful image which describes the life of stillness and prayer

which they sought in the desert. Imagine you have a bowl full of water and some sand in the water. When the sand is stirred up and suspended in the water, you can see nothing reflected in the surface of the water. All you can see is the swirling sand. As the water settles and the sand sinks to the bottom of the bowl, the water becomes clear and you can see your face reflected in the surface. So the Desert Fathers and Mothers taught that in the turmoil and busyness of urban life, all we can see is that busyness – of work, commerce, trade, politics, cultural, religious and family tensions. All we see is the swirling sand of life. In the settled stillness of the wilderness, when we are alone, when the sand, as it were, sinks to the bottom, we learn to be with ourselves and with God, seeing ourselves, our goodness and our sin, reflected on the surface of life. That's the settled life of prayer and solitude sought by the Desert Fathers and Mothers who joined John the Baptist and Jesus in the wilderness.

Moving into the desert, into the wilderness, disrupts a settled urban or communal life. It's a form of life in which one can see one's reflection more clearly, learn about oneself, learn about God. It's a time to reset, a time to learn what really matters, a time to learn that all that we are and all that we have come from God. Importantly for the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the quiet wilderness was a place where one could confront one's sins.

Both our scriptural readings today – the prophecy of Isaiah and the opening verses of St. Mark's gospel – teach us about a voice in the wilderness. This is a voice that can be heard in the stillness beyond the city. From the desolate wilderness which struggles to sustain life we hear the news that God is coming to his people to give them new life. The voice says 'get ready, prepare yourself, for something unimaginable is about to happen. The Messiah, the object of such deep longing for generations, is coming.' St. Mark tells us that people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went into the wilderness to be baptized by John. There, outside the city, beyond the corrupt and tumultuous life that humanity had created for itself, they learned that life and salvation come from God alone.

Against this background, what I'd like to offer you this morning is this thought. Moving into the wilderness – whether it be Hagar fleeing Sarah, the Israelites in exile, John the Baptist, or Jesus after his baptism – moving into the wilderness is about disrupting the familiar pattern of busy communal life with all its fraught tensions. It's about moving to a different kind of living that allows us to gain perspective and learn about ourselves and God. Can we see our experience of the 2020 pandemic as a wilderness, a time when normal communal life was disrupted,

when the sands of commerce and work settled and we saw ourselves reflected on the surface of life? If we can, what have we learned about ourselves collectively during the most dramatic disruption of our ordinary lives since the 1940s? We've been driven apart from each other into isolation, so what have we learned about ourselves individually and our need for one another? What have we seen reflected on the surface of our lives? There are, I think, some bitter lessons arising from 2020: the vulnerability of women and children to domestic abuse, our reliance on underpaid and often undervalued key workers, the desperation of the poor who need help, not blame, for their plight. There are some terrible consequences: the more than 1.5 million globally who have died with COVID-19, the terrible loss of jobs and livelihoods, the costs for the most troubled and impoverished nations when the world's attention is elsewhere. At the same time, we have also seen extraordinary ingenuity, adaptability, resilience and mutual care as we sought to sustain our life together and protect one another from a terrible virus. There's a lot to learn.

One lesson we can learn, I think, is that God has sustained the life of his Church in new and unexpected ways. Prayer continued and continues with people gathered in this great cathedral and a new community gathered through the internet; that community, a seed planted in the pandemic wilderness, will celebrate its new life with a service this evening. As Advent unfolds and our time in the wilderness of a pandemic looks like it may come to end when vaccines are administered, take this opportunity to reflect on what you have learned over the last months, what you have seen reflected in the surface of life as the sands settled. Together, as a Church, we keep attentive to the voice in the wilderness: Christ the Messiah, once born in Bethlehem, is coming again. Rivers will flow in the desert; flowers will blossom; we will be healed; God will bring us home to his heavenly city, a new Jerusalem.

## **A Form of Intercession for Advent**

In joyful expectation of his coming to our aid  
we pray to Jesus.

Come to your Church as Lord and judge.  
Help us to live in the light of your coming  
and give us a longing for your kingdom.

Maranatha:

**Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come to your world as King of the nations.  
Before you rulers will stand in silence.

Maranatha:

**Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come to the suffering as Saviour and comforter.  
Break into our lives,  
where we struggle with sickness and distress,  
and set us free to serve you for ever.

Maranatha:

**Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come to us as shepherd and guardian of our souls.  
Give us with all the faithful departed  
a share in your victory over evil and death.

Maranatha:

**Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come from heaven, Lord Jesus, with power and great glory.  
Lift us up to meet you,  
that with Cuthbert and Bede and all your saints and angels  
we may live and reign with you in your new creation.

Maranatha:

**Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**

*Silence is kept.*

Come, Lord Jesus, do not delay;  
give new courage to your people,  
who trust in your love.  
By your coming, raise us to share in the joy of your kingdom  
on earth as in heaven,  
where you live and reign with the Father and the Spirit,  
one God for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

# Hymn

The advent of our God  
With eager prayers we greet,  
And singing haste upon the road  
His glorious gift to meet.

The everlasting Son  
Scorns not the Virgin's womb;  
That we from bondage may be won  
He bears a bondsman's doom.

Daughter of Sion, rise  
To meet thy lowly King;  
Let not thy stubborn heart despise  
The peace he comes to bring.

On clouds of dazzling light,  
As Judge he comes again,  
His scattered people to unite,  
With him in heaven to reign.

Let evil flee away,  
Ere that great hour shall dawn,  
Let this old Adam day by day  
The new Man all put on.

Praise to the incarnate Son,  
Who comes to set us free,  
With Father and with Spirit One,  
To all eternity. Amen.

*Charles Coffin  
Translated by H Putman*

## Calendar of Holy Days

Monday 7 December

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Teacher, 397

Tuesday 8 December

The Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Almighty God,  
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness  
and to put on the armour of light,  
now in the time of this mortal life,  
in which your Son Jesus Christ  
came to us in great humility;  
that on the last day,  
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty  
to judge the living and the dead,  
we may rise to the life immortal;  
through him who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

This year's Advent Procession with Carols has been pre-recorded and is available as an online act of worship on the Cathedral's Facebook page and YouTube channel for a limited period. We hope that you will engage with us in this great and moving act of worship to mark the beginning of the season of Advent.

A Prayer for use during the Coronavirus outbreak

Keep us, good Lord,  
under the shadow of your mercy  
in this time of uncertainty and distress.  
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may rejoice in your comfort  
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love  
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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A Prayer of John Goter (died 1704)

Most gracious Lord,  
by whose direction this time is appointed  
for renewing the memory of thy infinite mercy to man  
in the incarnation of thy only Son;  
grant that we may live, this holy time,  
in the spirit of thanksgiving,  
and every day raise up our hearts to thee  
in the grateful acknowledgement  
of what thou hast done for us.  
Besides this, we ask thy grace, O God,  
that we may make a due use of this holy time,  
for preparing our souls to receive  
Christ our Lord coming into the world  
at the approaching solemnity of Christmas.  
Christ came into the world to do good to all.  
Grant, O God, that we may thus prepare to meet him.  
Grant we may be watchful at this time above all others,  
in avoiding everything that can be injurious  
to our neighbour, whether in afflicting him,  
or giving him scandal, or drawing him into sin,  
or casting any blemish on his reputation;  
but in all things, O God,  
may we follow the spirit of charity,  
being forward in bringing comfort and relief to all,  
as far as their circumstances shall require,  
and ours permit.  
Grant, O Lord,  
that we may prepare to meet our redeemer.  
Amen.

The next issue of *Praying Together*  
will be published on Monday 14 December