



# Praying Together

*during the week beginning Sunday 27 December*

*John, Apostle and Evangelist*

*The First Sunday of Christmas*

**DURHAM  
CATHEDRAL**

THE SHRINE OF ST CUTHBERT

*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**

**John 21. 19b-end**

Jesus said to Peter, 'Follow me.' Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!'

So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.

But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

# Thought for the Day

by the Reverend Canon Professor Simon Oliver

Today, the Feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, we give thanks to God for John's witness and teaching through his Gospel, the three letters, and possibly the Book of Revelation. Who was John? Although there has been controversy about his identity from the earliest Christian centuries, the obvious answer is that the author of these scriptures is John, son of Zebedee and brother of James, the apostle of Jesus. The Gospel of John itself, in the passage we read this morning, identifies the author as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' or 'the beloved disciple' who was an eye-witness to Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

John's gospel is often distinguished from the other three gospels in the New Testament, the so-called 'synoptic gospels' of Matthew, Mark and Luke which give us a common 'synopsis' of Jesus' life and teachings. Matthew, Mark and Luke share a good deal of material in common and they are narrative in style. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus himself teaches by stories we know as parables – the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, and so on. John's gospel offers us a different but complimentary perspective on Jesus. There are no parables to speak of in John's gospel. It is not laid out in straightforward and balanced chronological order. John devotes seven chapters to the last day of Jesus' life. One chapter alone is Jesus' prayer for his disciples. Moved by the Holy Spirit, John dwells deeply and prayerfully on his experience as a disciple and these particular memories of Jesus' life and words.

John's gospel doesn't teach us so much by stories as by images and signs. The seven 'I am' sayings of Jesus are a good example: I am the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate for the sheep; the Good Shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth and the life; the true vine. John tells us about the seven miracles or 'signs' that Jesus performed, for example the turning of water into wine at the Wedding at Cana or the raising of Lazarus. Although John does not recount the birth of Jesus, the beginning of John's gospel is at the heart of the Christmas season and our understanding of the incarnation: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.' Looking across John's writings in the New Testament, I'd like to draw our attention to three themes which dominate his teaching about Christ. They're easy to remember: light, life and love. John's is the gospel of light, life and love.

First to light. In John's gospel, Jesus teaches that he is the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, says John, and the darkness 'comprehended it not'. In the first chapter of John's first letter that we heard this morning, we read, 'This is the message we have heard from him [Jesus] and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.' The image of God as light is so powerful throughout the Christian tradition. Light saturates us, it is infinitely close to us and makes things visible and knowable, yet we cannot touch light and it

is not just another thing in our visual field. Light brings warmth and knowledge. It banishes ignorance and fear. Like light, we cannot touch and grasp God. As light is not just another item in our visual field, so God is not just another thing in our world. God, like light, is infinitely close to us and, as light making things visible and brings the world to us, so God brings creation to exist. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the light of the world. John tells us to walk in this light.

We have just past the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere – the longest night. Because of this wretched and terrible virus, some of us are facing the longest night we have known in our lifetime – the darkness of isolation, illness, fear, poverty, exhaustion, bereavement. In the darkest periods and places of human history, many far darker than ours, the Christian hope has never been extinguished because people have proclaimed a greater truth: Christ is the eternal light come into the world, the light the darkness cannot overcome.

So from light to life. John's is the gospel of life. 'I am the resurrection and the life', says Jesus (John 11.25). John recalls Jesus' teaching, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (John 10.10). The prologue to John's gospel says this about the eternal Word made flesh in Christ: 'What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.' (John 1.3b-4). In a world where life is so often cheap, where life is poisoned by abuse of the environment, where the dignity of human life as created in God's image is sullied or denied, we proclaim that Christ came to call us to fullness of life and offer us a share in God's life. What is most real is not dead matter or blind cosmic processes. There is nothing inevitable about a culture of death. Creation is *for* life; that's its very purpose. Through the pandemic, we have seen a deep desire to protect life, to honour human dignity and care for the most vulnerable, often at huge cost to others. Our family and common life has been curtailed and diminished as we isolate and distance from one another. Yet our longing to be together again, our sorrow at separation, particularly at Christmas, are testimony to our deep human desire to share life, to celebrate life, the life that God gives in creation and gives again in Jesus, the way, the truth and the life.

So finally from life to love. John's is the gospel of love, reflected so profoundly in his letters. On the eve of Passover, John tells us that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and said: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' (John 13.34). In his first letter, John writes: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.' (1 John 4.7, 16b). That is surely the heart of the Christian gospel. But it's not a sentimental injunction to romanticism or niceness. Why not? Jesus says to his disciples '*as I have loved you*, you also should love one another.' How does Christ love us? Supremely, on the cross. God is love and that love is revealed in Christ crucified. This love which John, the beloved disciple, witnessed in Jesus Christ, can be deeply costly. But it is a cost that is borne from the conviction that what is most real, abiding and eternal is the love which gives life and light that we witness in Christ.

St. John, Apostle of Jesus Christ and Evangelist, points us to God's eternal light, life and love made flesh in Jesus Christ. This reminds me of the famous poem 'Christmastide' by the nineteenth century poet Christina Rossetti. This poem, like her 'In the Bleak Midwinter', has been set to music many times. It shares the same simple directness of St. John's scriptural writings:

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love Divine,  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,  
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,  
Worship we our Jesus,  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, pray for us, and to Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, our light, life and love, be all honour and glory, might and majesty, now and in the ages of ages. Amen.

## **A Form of Intercession for John the Evangelist**

Encouraged by our fellowship with all the saints,  
let us make our prayers to the Father  
through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, your Son called men and women  
to leave the past behind them and to follow him  
as his disciples in the way of the cross.  
Look with mercy upon those whom he calls today,  
marks with the cross  
and makes his disciples within the Church.

Lord, have mercy.  
**Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son told his disciples not to be afraid  
and at Easter breathed on them his gift of peace.  
Look with mercy upon the world  
into which he sent them out,  
and give it that peace for which it longs.

Lord, have mercy.  
**Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son formed around him a company  
who were no longer servants but friends,  
and he called all those who obeyed him  
his brother and sister and mother.  
Look with mercy upon our families and our friends  
and upon the communities in which we share.

Lord, have mercy.  
**Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son sent out disciples to preach and heal the sick.  
Look with mercy on all those who yearn  
to hear the good news of salvation,  
and renew among your people the gifts of healing.

Lord, have mercy.  
**Christ, have mercy.**

Your Son promised to those who followed him  
that they would sit on thrones  
judging the twelve tribes of Israel  
and would share the banquet of the kingdom.  
According to your promise,  
look with mercy on those who have walked with Christ  
in this life and now have passed through death.

Lord, have mercy.  
**Christ, have mercy.**

Almighty God,  
grant that your Church  
may faithfully hold and make known  
the faith that has come to us through the apostles,  
that with them and all your saints  
we may inherit the glories of eternal life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

## Hymn

Ye watchers and ye holy ones,  
Bright Seraphs, Cherubim and Thrones,  
    Raise the glad strain, Alleluia!  
Cry out Dominions, Princedoms, Powers,  
Virtues, Archangels, Angels' choirs,  
    *Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,*  
    *Alleluia!*

O higher than the Cherubim,  
More glorious than the Seraphim,  
    Lead their praises, Alleluia!  
Thou Bearer of the eternal Word,  
Most gracious, magnify the Lord,

Respond, ye souls in endless rest,  
Ye Patriarchs and Prophets blest,  
    Alleluia, Alleluia!  
Ye holy Twelve, ye Martyrs strong,  
All Saints triumphant, raise the song

O friends, in gladness let us sing,  
Supernal anthems echoing,  
    Alleluia, Alleluia!  
To God the Father, God the Son,  
And God the Spirit, Three in One,  
    *Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,*  
    *Alleluia!*

*Athelstan Riley*

# Calendar of Holy Days

**Monday 28 December**

**The Holy Innocents**

Almighty God,  
whose blessed Son was circumcised  
in obedience to the law for our sake  
and given the Name that is above every name:  
give us grace faithfully to bear his Name,  
to worship him in the freedom of the Spirit,  
and to proclaim him as the Saviour of the world;  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Tuesday 29 December**

Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury,  
Martyr, 1170

*Thursday 31 December*

*John Wycliff, 1384*

**Friday 1 January**

**The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus**

Heavenly Father,  
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod,  
though they had done no wrong:  
by the suffering of your Son  
and by the innocence of our lives  
frustrate all evil designs  
and establish your reign of justice and peace;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Saturday 2 January**

Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus,  
Bishops, Teachers, 379 and 389

## 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.

## A Prayer for God's love:

Look upon us, O Lord,  
and let all the darkness of our souls  
vanish before the beams of thy brightness.  
Fill us with holy love,  
and open to us the treasures of thy wisdom.  
All our desire is known unto thee,  
therefore perfect what thou hast begun,  
and what thy Spirit hast awakened us to ask in prayer.  
We seek thy face;  
turn thy face unto us and show us thy glory.  
Then shall our longing be satisfied,  
and our peace shall be perfect.  
Amen.

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The next issue of *Praying Together*  
will be published on Monday 4 January