

**Third Sunday of Advent,
Sunday, 13th December 2020**



Dear Friends,

'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.'

(John 1: 9)

At our service last Sunday, we re-lit the Candle of Peace as we remembered the Prophets, together with the Candle of Hope as we remembered the Patriarchs of the church – both groups of witnesses who point us to Jesus, born in Bethlehem, our hope and our peace.

Today we light the Third Candle of Advent, the Candle of Love, as we particularly reflect on the role of John the Baptist, both in his special, loving relationship as Jesus' cousin, and in his prophetic love for the people of the world, that we too might know the powerful love of Jesus Christ.

In their old age, God gave Zechariah and Elizabeth a son called John. John spoke to the people bravely in the desert - denying his own comforts, fully prepared to die for what he believed. John taught that we should share what we have with others, treat each other kindly and show God's love which comes to us in Jesus. He did this because he cared for God's people and wanted them to repent and find His forgiveness.

Love is like a candle shining in a dark place. As we look at the light of this candle we celebrate the love of God we have in Christ.

Prayer for the Third Sunday of Advent – The Candle of Peace

Lord God, Your witness, John the Baptist, grew up strong in spirit,
and prepared people for the coming of the Lord.
He loved your people and baptized them in the River Jordan to wash away their sins.
Help us to have the same love,
that we would be witnesses to the Messiah and spread the good news of your love.
As Christmas draws closer day by day,
help us to be ready to welcome Jesus into our hearts. Amen.



Chanukah Celebrations - Alamy

Earlier this week, on Radio 4's 'Today' programme, the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, shared a reflection to mark the beginning of Chanukah. Described by First Century Roman historian, Josephus, as the Festival of Lights, Chanukah (transliterated from the Hebrew, חַנּוּכָּה, and pronounced *Hanukah*) is a Jewish festival which extends across eight days and commemorates the dedication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem after the Maccabean uprising of 164BC (described in 1 Maccabees 4:36–4:59, which you will find in the King James version of the bible, or any bible with an apocrypha). John's Gospel records Jesus returning to Jerusalem for the Jewish Festival: '*It was now winter and Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time of Chanukah, the festival of Dedication*' (John 10: 22-3).

The eight days of Chanukah are celebrated with elaborate feasts and the lighting of a special '*Menorah*' or candlestick. Reminiscent of our lighting of an Advent wreath, Chanukah Menorah candles are lit across the 8-day period. Jewish families exchange gifts each night and children are given chocolate coins wrapped in silver and gold foil in celebration of the Festival. In his reflection, Rabbi Mirvis looked at the significance of the giving of gifts at this time, and explained how the Hebrew language has seven different names for the word '*Gift*,' highlighting the importance of giving and receiving gifts in their many and varied forms. Across Jewish life, these gifts comprise:

1. **Berakhah**– which means Blessing: the gift of a good wish which costs nothing but which means a great deal.
2. **Mattanah**– which describes the generous act of giving a gift which serves the needs of the present time.
3. **Chai** – a thoughtful gift, given on special occasions to be cherished.
4. **Terumah**– a contribution to a worthy cause in response to an appeal which 'elevates' or uplifts the giver.
5. **Nedavah** – an unsolicited contribution, where the giver is moved to act without being asked, or to motivate others to be generous where there is need.
6. **Dóron**– a rare or timeless gift across generations, which will be treasured for many years.
7. **Minchah**– a gift which celebrates bonding, drawing people together in a profound way and often having a transformative impact on the lives of the recipient. This is seen as the most profound gift of all.

Rabbi Mirvis went on to say how the Coronavirus vaccine was a powerful example of the seventh word, *Minchah*. He exclaimed '*Has any gift ever had such potential to give so much joy to so many lives?*' Without wishing to sound patronising or to diminish the beauty of the Rabbi's intended recognition of the gift to the world of a vaccine which might rid us of the scourge and suffering of Coronavirus, I might beg to gift the Chief Rabbi with the presence of Jesus as being the greatest transformative Minchah the world has ever known!



'Saint John the Baptist Bearing Witness' by Annibale Carracci

Our commemoration of John the Baptist on this Third Sunday of Advent, marks the importance of his prophetic vision of Jesus as the Son of God: *'The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to him, and said: 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'* (John 1: 29)

John the Baptist was paraphrasing scripture, using the words of Isaiah, to enlighten the faithful Jews crowding about him waiting to be purified, as to the Divine nature of the man walking towards them in the wilderness. Those listening to John would have immediately recognised the words of Isaiah, who prophesied that the Messiah would be *'...treated harshly and led like a lamb to the slaughter.'* (Isaiah 53: 7)

John, as Isaiah had done before him, was referencing Jesus as being like the lambs used in ritual sacrifice to God in Old Testament times. Just as those poor lambs were innocent, so too Jesus was spotless and pure, sinless and yet prepared to offer Himself to die to redeem each of us from our sins. John the Baptist, who had recognised Jesus as divine, even whilst they were both in their mothers' wombs, was pointing the crowds to Jesus and asking *'How can we respond to love of God who blesses us with the gift of His one and only son?'*



***'The Preaching of John the Baptist'* by Bartholomeus Breenbergh**

The tragedy is that so many people in 2020, even in the midst of a Coronavirus pandemic, really can't see the relevance of Jesus in their lives – either because they have chosen the 'God delusion' argument or because they have never had the joy of experiencing the living, radical, unconditional love of Jesus Christ.

Yet more than ever, people are desperately searching for fulfilment: searching for a personal spirituality in which they feel empowered, upheld and complete. This Christmas, where COVID Tier restrictions have limited our ability to mix with our friends and families, business analysts and exhausted Amazon drivers alike are reporting that people are spending vast amounts on food, clothes, alcohol, and all sorts of material possessions through which to find spiritual and emotional solace. This sort of immediate gratification is not new, however. In the 19th Century, Cardinal Henry John Newman was encouraging people to confront their emotional needs. He said: *'Fear not that your life will come to an end; fear rather that it will never come to a beginning...'* He saw how people were searching for the ultimate, transformative *Minchah* - an authentic relationship with Jesus – they just didn't realise it!

In our world of loneliness and worry for the future, there is an overwhelming need for people to know the heart of God: a heart that forgives, that cares; that reaches out and wants to heal our woundedness. At this time of Advent, we are being invited to meet with Jesus Christ, the heart of God, afresh, and to allow this potent gift to transform us.



'Saint John the Baptist' by Juan de Ancheta

Dressed in animal skin as he baptises, this image of John the Baptist, painted around 1580 by Spanish artist, Juan de Ancheta, points directly to the Lamb of God, a symbol of Christ, resting on a volume of the bible. John's baptism with water for the Jewish faithful was a preparation for the coming of the Messiah; a washing clean from wrong ways and an opportunity for the people to repent; to turn around and walk back to God rather than away from Him. John baptized the observant Jews who came to him with water as a symbol that they had asked God to forgive them of their sins.

John speaks to the people in the wilderness – both on the outskirts of the City of Jerusalem on the banks of the River Jordan, and in the wilderness of their sinful and unfulfilled lives. John is reminding us that Hell is not an abstract concept, it is the reality of our future. Speaking to the people in language they understood, he points the faithful to Jesus. As the Gospels unfold, we learn how the people listening to John began to follow Jesus and became His first disciples.

And, so it is with our journey to Christ. Jesus is asking each of us to follow Him on a journey through the inward wilderness of the heart. He says *'I am the way, the truth and the life.'* (John 14:6) He waits for us, arms open, waiting to guide us from the darkness of our world into His marvellous light. In order to avoid the terror of Hell, we must choose to walk in His 'Way' - to see for ourselves the reality of Jesus' gracious truth and learn to walk in the gift of His transforming love.



'Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist'
by Cosimo Rosselli

And, as we saw in Mark's Gospel last Sunday, there is more! Just as Jesus guided those first disciples to follow Him, He is also asking those of *us* who have found Him to encourage others to also *'come and see'* the reality of our faith.

Jesus recognises that it is impossible to begin this journey of faith unless we have been given directions. And that is where you ... and I, come in. God is asking us to reach out in love through the Holy Spirit to guide other people to meet Jesus. He doesn't want any of us to end up in the hell Cardinal Newman describes – realising too late the source of all things good.

'Come and see... you are all welcome.' Jesus says. These cleansing words of invitation are the true *Minchah* gift of Christmas. They are the purpose of God's gift to us, far greater even than the Chief Rabbi's understanding of the undoubted importance of the gift to the world of a vaccine for Coronavirus.

Today we honour the prophetic voice of John the Baptist who stands in the wilderness of the world's woundedness and encourages us to open our hearts to the vulnerable Christ-child who will grow to save us from ourselves.....longing for us to share what he himself found – for us to be amazed by the possibility of a new and authentic, fulfilling relationship - one where we will find ourselves transformed by the God of love who longs to bring *us all* safely home.

Yours, rejoicing in the gift of the coming Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice



Schedule of Services

(All services begin at 10am unless indicated otherwise)

Date	Service	Chilbolton	Crawley	Littleton	Sparsholt	Wherwell
20 Dec	<i>4th Advent</i>	Advent Readings & Prayers	4pm – Readings & Music by candlelight	Morning Prayer	4pm – Crib Service	4pm - Evening Prayer
24 Dec	<i>Christmas Eve</i>	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed
25 Dec	<i>Christmas Day</i>	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Communion	Family Christmas Service	Family Christmas Service
27 Dec	<i>St Stephen's</i>	Closed	Closed	Closed	Patronal Holy Communion	Closed

Now that the **Month of Prayer** in response to the Lockdown has come to a close, I thought you would appreciate some words of reflection as you journey through Advent. Don't forget that you can find further resources and information, regularly updated, on our Benefice website at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

Last week, we were blessed by some beautiful prayers given by Christine Disher. This week, we have a thoughtful and prayerful poem by Sheila North which came to her, prompted by her observance of monetary indulgence at Christmas-time and written on returning home from a shopping trip in a busy City centre. Interestingly, the message of Sheila's poem has become all the more poignant and precious, as we find ourselves wrestling with the restrictions imposed upon us by the Coronavirus pandemic.



Poem for Advent Reflection
***'Pause for Thought'* by Sheila North**

Take your hand from your pocket, card, wallet and purse.
Put your hand on your heart; that is what comes first.
That is where your greatest gift lies;
Of no monetary value – but gives the greatest prize.

Sit near the person who sits all alone;
Words not always needed, but closeness shown.
Give a smile to the one who shows no emotion.
Offer a hug to those whose world has been broken.

Show love to the souls whose love has been lost.
Give a coin to the person whose fortune bore the cost.
Speak to the one who cannot hear the words.
Hold the hands of those who live in torment – unheard.

Often by luck and good fortune, these people could be you.
Take a moment to stand aside – see life from another view.
Deeply treasure your days – share all and have fun.
We never know when fate will dictate when our life is done.

Collect Prayer for the Third Sunday of Advent

O Lord Jesus Christ,
who at your first coming sent your messenger
to prepare your way before you:
grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries
may likewise so prepare and make ready your way
by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,
that at your second coming to judge the world
we may be found an acceptable people in your sight;
for you are alive and reign with the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



'Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist' by Fra Bartolomeo di Paolo del Fattorino

John 1: 6-10; 19-28 - The Testimony of John the Baptist

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said.'

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.