

## Advent 3 (2024)

The focus of this Sunday is “Heralds of Good News” . . . in particular, those in the ordained ministry of the Church.

They are God’s point people on the ground.

Their task, in the words of Isaiah 35, is to:

**“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees”**

**“To say to those who are of a fearful of heart, Be strong, fear not! Behold your God will come . . .”**

This Sunday in some traditions is called “Gaudete Sunday”. That is the reason for the pink candle in the Advent wreath. Gaudete, from the Latin, is a command to rejoice. It is

directed first to God's ancient people Isarel.  
Why should they rejoice?

Let's take a brief look at their story.

After arriving in the Promised Land, they broke the covenant God had made with them at Mount Sinai.

Instead of serving the God who had brought them out from the slavery of Egypt, they bowed their heads before the gods of the nations all round them. They went and served gods which were no gods, gods which could not help them in times of trouble.

**“Eyes have they and see not . . . ears have they and hear not”** is the way the psalmist in Psalm 115 describes these so-called gods.

Worshipping these non-gods had consequences. Instead of inheriting the blessing God wanted to give them . . . instead of

dwelling securely in the land God had promised them, they found themselves oppressed by the nations around them. Eventually, they went into exile.

It looked as if God had forsaken them, but not so. Their unfaithfulness was no match to His faithfulness.

God was determined to be true to the promises He had made with their fore-bearers. He would open a highway for their return from exile.

More than that, a Saviour was coming. Good news. Rejoicing was in order.

But what about us? /// As we look out on our world at the end of this year of grace and sorrow 2024, it is easy to become discouraged. There seems to be more problems than solutions.

Man's ingenuity is staggering. Technological advances hold out great promise for a better world. Yet, almost without exception, those advances get perverted.

Take for example the internet. It places at our fingertips the libraries of the world.

It enables us to listen to lectures from eminent scholars both living and dead.

It connects us with people on every continent.

It is capable of advancing knowledge and enhancing creativity.

Yet, it has a dark side. For example, it has brought about cyberbullying and dangerous challenges over social media. Not a few young people have committed suicide as a result of one or the other.

In recent days, we have been hearing a lot about “artificial intelligence”. Again, it holds out great promise, but with it comes new fears. As with all good things, it is capable of being manipulated and used for evil.

We, no less than God’s people of old, need a Saviour.

Christmas tells us a Saviour has come. Blessing has come to the human race.

When Jesus came the first time, He revealed not only what God is like but what true humanness looks like. He demonstrated forgiveness, fidelity, courage, love and self-sacrifice, those qualities God want us to have.

If you want to be fully human, look to Jesus. Learn from Him. Let Him be your example.

But He is much more than an example. If we know our scriptures, He is also our sin bearer.

Somehow (I don't suppose we shall ever fully understand the transaction) all the sin of the world was directed onto Him on the cross, so we can go free.

**“He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities . . . and with his stripes we are healed,”** says the famous servant song found in Isaiah 53.

Let me make this personal. If you are carrying around a bundle of past mistakes, guilt for sins of both commission and omission, there is good news here for you. Those things don't have to define you.

Lay that burden down. Give it to the One who bore your sins and carried your sorrows. Receive His pardon and go free. Look to Him and be saved.

But there's still more. Jesus is not only our example and sin bearer. He is the conquer of death and our forerunner.

For as long as anyone could remember people had been filing through the door of death. No one was coming out. Then One does. On Easter morning, death meets its match. The God-Man tramples death by death.

What this means is: As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. We can therefore face whatever life throws at us with courage and confidence because Jesus has gone before us and made the way safe for us to follow.

And finally, we have Jesus' promise that He is coming again. History is more than a mass of dates and facts, one act of cruelty after another. It is going somewhere. In the end, truth, justice and beauty win. New heavens and a new earth are promised and are coming. (Rev 21).

The command to rejoice is, therefore, for us as well as for God's ancient people Israel.

But, and this is the question for this Sunday: Who will take the news of Christ's victory over sin and death out to those who are perishing?

Who will turn those on the wrong road onto the right one as did fearless John the Baptist spoken of in today's Gospel?

Who will tell them of Jesus' love?

Who will **“strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees”**?

Paul tells us in today's Epistle. He calls them “ministers and stewards.” They are those in the ordained ministry of the Church. In our Anglican tradition: the bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons.



In Paul's day, stewards were entrusted with the care and management of another person's property, possessions, or affairs. Christian ministers been entrusted with an even greater responsibility. They are stewards of the "mysteries of God".

"Mysteries" here does not refer to things that are beyond our finding out, but to thing that have been revealed in Christ.

We can now know the answers to life's ultimate questions: where we came from, what our problem is as humans, what God has done about that problem, how God wants us to live, and how we can have peace with God.

Those called to the ordained ministry are to make these mysteries known, but, I want to suggest, they have a further task as well. That task is to equip those placed under their care so they can join in this work. So, they too can be heralds of Good News.

Peter, speaking to Christians at large, says: **“But, ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood . . . that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9).**

You come into contact with people I may never meet. More than that, if you are living a distinctive life, they find in you a credible witness. They may not darken the door of a church, but they see Jesus in you. Your witness, therefore, is powerful and effective and needed.

Equipped on Sunday. Sent out on Monday. That is the way it works.

You no doubt have seen pictures of that old recruitment poster from the First World War. Uncle Sam, looking very sternly ahead, is pointing his finger and saying: “I want you . . .”

Well, that is what the God we meet in Jesus is saying to each one of us. No one is excluded. Everyone is called to be a herald of Good News. Pray for and support those in the ordained ministry but dare to do your part . . . perhaps beginning by inviting someone to our Christmas concert and services on Christmas eve.

Rejoice at what God has done and is doing. But don't keep that joy to yourself.

In the words of an old spiritual often sung at Christmas . . . and with these words I close:

Down in a lowly manger  
Our humble Christ was born  
And brought us all salvation  
That blessed Christmas morn

Go, tell it on the mountain  
Over the hills and everywhere  
Go, tell it on the mountain  
That Jesus Christ is born  
That Jesus Christ is born.

