



Wantage & Abingdon Methodist Circuit

Advent Devotional 2020

Readings, reflections and prayers for the Advent Season



With contributions from Keith Underhill, John Anderson, Alan Grist, Irena Byron, Selina Nisbett, Valerie Grist, Barbara Kershaw, Helen Carter, Liz Wood, Ruth Dams, Daphne Savage, Libby Bolton, Marlene Chalkley, Carol Sturt, Barbara Sexton, Malcolm Newton, Stephen Atkinson, Peter Hemmings, Ian Sturt and Andrew Dixon.

Welcome to our Circuit Advent Devotional for 2020.

Whether you have a printed version of this devotional before you or a pdf file to use on your iPad, tablet, smart phone or other device, my prayer is that this collection of Bible passages, reflections and prayers will help guide you on your Advent journey this winter.

Advent always finds us in the darkest of days, that time of year when the nights are long and the days are short.

This year the darkness that surrounds us is far more than the usual lack of sunlight that we expect and are used to. This year it hangs heavily upon us in the form of the politics of our age and the all-consuming global pandemic that is Covid-19. There is an air of oppressiveness to the darkness that is visceral and at times all encompassing.

Into the darkness of these days comes the Advent hope and its message of hope, light and love.

If our faith and the message it proclaims is to be of any use, then it must be able to have something to say about the days and times in which we currently live and of course it does.

Advent helps us to prepare for the truth of the incarnation that is at the heart of our celebrations. Advent reminds us that God comes to us in the midst of the messiness of our world and our lives. Advent reminds us that we are not on our own in the darkness, for into the darkness of the world comes the light of God himself.

As John reminds us in the opening words of his Gospel:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

May the words of wisdom contained within this booklet and the movement of God's Spirit, be as "a lamp to our feet and a light to our path", as together we travel to Bethlehem once more to greet the one born to be the light of the world.

With love and God Bless

Keith

1st week of Advent - God's word at work

Tuesday 1st December

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1) Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you.

2) We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3) We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4) For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5) because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6) You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7) And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8) The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia - your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9) for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10) and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

As we enter Advent, we are welcomed into the future hope of the Risen Christ, the coming Lord. The steadfast faith of the Thessalonians brought joy to Paul's heart. In the same way, our Christian constancy now will bring joy to our Lord. The love we show each other, and our neighbour, stands as testimony to the teaching of Christ; as that of the Thessalonians stood as a beacon of Christian living throughout their region.

Faith, hope and love sustained the Thessalonians through harassment and persecution, attacks on the apostle Paul, who had brought them the Gospel, and on the Gospel itself. And in addition, within themselves, they still knew the need for a conscious rejection of old, pagan ways and false gods. So Paul is able to write:

'We always thank God ... for ... how you put your faith into practice, how your love made you work so hard, and how your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ is firm'. (1: 2-3)

In a turbulent and volatile world, we share the rock on which the Thessalonians stood. In a time when bereavement and loneliness, sickness and fear, separation from loved ones and loss of employment are harder than ever to bear, we know we are not alone. Jesus walks with us, offers his help, strength and love, gives us his peace - and will be born again.

Prayer *Let me accept your help, Lord, and not think myself self-sufficient.*

Let me feel your strength, Lord, when I am weak.

Let me know your love, Lord, so that others will know it through me.

Give me, Lord, your peace.

Be born again in me. Amen.

Wednesday 2nd December

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

1) You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. 2) We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. 3) For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. 4) On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. 5) You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. 6) We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 7) Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8) so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

Paul becomes part of the message he preaches “... *we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed...*” [verse 5]

Greek philosopher, Aristotle, had a thing or two to say about the art of persuasion. His first of three main principles was Ethos or credibility. This highlights the ethical appeal or character of the speaker. We are more inclined to be persuaded by someone who has no hidden agenda than by someone who stands to gain in some way if they win us over with their argument.

If, as well as crediting you with openness and honesty, your audience see that you are trustworthy and speak with authority, you can tick the first of Aristotle's boxes: the need for integrity.

Paul needs no lessons about the importance of his own character in securing the attention and trust of any who are willing to listen to him. The apostle called to carry the gospel to new Gentile churches comes to them with unquestionable integrity. He nurtures them gently and eliminates any possibility that his work among them might be perceived as a source of personal gain.

The Advent promise is a promise that God is coming to share our lives. We carry that promise to the people we meet. Sharing our lives requires openness, honesty and trustworthiness. In a word, integrity, so that we become the message we carry.

'We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel but our lives as well' [verse 8]. Lord God, that goes for us too. As we carry the Advent promise by sharing our lives, may we hear Paul's words as if spoken by Jesus: 'I loved you so much that I was delighted to share with you not only my Father's Kingdom but my life as well'.

Thursday 3rd December

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

9) Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. 10) You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. 11) For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12) encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

13) And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

In this passage, Paul refers to the Thessalonians as children, and describes himself as having dealt with them like a father, “encouraging, comforting and urging them to live lives worthy of God.” He and his companions lived lives that glorified God while they were among them, and he expresses his joy and gratitude that they have continued to follow that example in their own lives.

Advent is a time of preparation, and as we set out on our annual journey to Bethlehem, I invite you to take time to reflect on the past few months.

The world news has been frightening and invariably depressing; so many have suffered and are still suffering because of illness, loneliness and bereavement. But in the midst of all this suffering and sadness, God is still faithfully working, still caring for us and loving us, revealing His glory through the lives of others. There IS Good News!

Strangers have become friends as they have helped those who were shielding. New neighbours have been discovered, without the need to move house, as shopping has been bought and delivered, dogs walked and prescriptions collected. Friends and families have kept in touch with regular telephone calls and front garden visits, and Zoom has become a lifeline for meeting with our churches, clubs and distant families and friends.

This is how God wants us to live - loving one another as He loves us. This is the Word of God at work in those who believe. Amen.

Prayer: Lord God, we thank You that whatever lies ahead, You will always be with us, as You always have been. Help us to be imitators of Christ in every aspect of our daily lives and as we work to serve others, may we be blessed by the knowledge that we are also serving You. Amen.

Friday 4th December

1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

1) So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2) We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3) so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4) In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5) For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.

As I am sure that some of you will know, waiting for the arrival of a grandchild brings a whole range of emotions, a mix of anticipation and joy, and then as time goes on and you hear nothing from the 'business end', there comes the feelings of impatience, with underlying concern. We have family in Farnham, Southampton and Bristol, so at various times since we moved to Abingdon the temptation to jump into the car and drive down the A34 and then turn appropriately, or not, has been resisted. Just.

Paul, however, could not wait, so he sends Timothy to the churches in Thessalonica to see how they were getting on, and to encourage them in their new found faith in Christ. This leaves him alone in Athens. Some Jews had begun to give Paul and the new churches a hard time so he was rightly concerned about their welfare, and his underlying concern was that all the hardship that had been endured by Paul and his followers such as Timothy would have been wasted.

I feel that Paul must have been overwhelmed by his concern for these new Christians to be as gloomy as he seems. Regardless of how hard life gets – and it's been a very hard year – there are, I believe, always positives to be found in amongst the gloom and doom. Yes, there are times when you have to look very hard, but they are there, none the less. And as we anticipate the coming of the Christ child, we remind ourselves that hope needs to be claimed as part of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote at the beginning of this letter *"We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Lord, as we await your coming, we pray for a sense of hope for the future, to find the peace that you can bring, to feel the joy that comes with a new birth, and to be wrapped in the love that you have for us all. May we share all of these gifts with our families, our friends and strangers this Advent and Christmas.

Saturday 5th December

1 Thessalonians 3: 6-13

⁶)But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.

⁷)Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.⁸) For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹) How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰) Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹) Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹²) May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³) May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

We have become accustomed to instantaneous news. Electronic mail and Zoom connect us to people and events far away. The days of waiting for love and other letters belong to a different age. During the war wives and sweethearts waited weeks or months for news. There used to be a cartoon next to the photocopier at work showing a monk holding a scroll and a quill saying he would get it copied in a couple of years. We used to wonder if everything was alright or what was happening. And then Timothy arrives with good news of their faith and love.

Stories of faith lift our hearts. We love the Biblical heroes and those of Christian history: the witness of saints, martyrs and others as well. Pioneers of social justice and human rights. We can see how Paul's spirit, persecuted and in distress, was lifted. He is missing his friends and wants to see them again. We have all felt this through lockdown and antisocial distancing. We have all been there: except we haven't! The strength of Paul's longing comes out from the language. It could be a love letter.

Jesus urged his followers to be constant in prayer. Not just for our needs and desires. Paul's letters typically begin by thanking God for his faithful followers and praying for them continually. When we do that, we are following worthy footsteps. Pray for events, situations and conditions but bring to mind those you cannot see.

During Advent we think again of the time when Jesus will come. So read again the last two sentences.

Reflect: *Our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see.
And when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought.*

Sunday 6th December

Mark 1:1-18

¹⁾ *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ²⁾ as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" ³⁾ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."*

⁴⁾ *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵⁾ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶⁾ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷⁾ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸⁾ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

⁹⁾ *At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰⁾ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹⁾ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." ¹²⁾ At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³⁾ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.*

¹⁴⁾ *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵⁾ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

¹⁶⁾ *As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷⁾ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ¹⁸⁾ At once they left their nets and followed him.*

Mark's gospel begins with an explosion of information. The prophecy of Isaiah, John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, the temptation in the wilderness, John's imprisonment and the calling of the first disciples, and we're only half way through the first chapter!

The proclamation is about Jesus Christ the Son of God. He is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah. John the Baptist is the one who is preparing the way. We often think of Advent as a time of preparation, waiting, expectation and reflection. Each year we look again at the events leading up to the coming of Christ and the celebration of his birth at Christmas.

Christmas this year is likely to be very different from our previous experiences. Many of the accessories of Christmas may be missing. This may give us time to reflect more fully on what it is that we celebrate. What are we waiting for, what do we expect?

Jesus is the one who brings light into the darkness and hope where there is despair. The people of his time on earth were desperate for the Messiah to come. We too may see ourselves in a similar situation. We need to see light at the end of the tunnel we need the hope which Christ brings, when we feel the world is drowning in despair.

Prayer *O Lord our God, you rescue us when we feel overwhelmed. Calm our thoughts and lives as we travel through this Advent season. Help us to prepare our lives for whatever lies ahead; to face the future with confidence and the knowledge that you will give us strength and guidance. Amen*

2nd Week of Advent – The return of Christ

Monday 7th December

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

¹⁾ As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. ²⁾ For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

³⁾ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴⁾ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, ⁵⁾ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶⁾ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. ⁷⁾ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸⁾ Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

⁹⁾ Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. ¹⁰⁾ And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, ¹¹⁾ and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹²⁾ so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Here we have Paul, the anxious teacher, sending advice to his young and immature church in Thessalonica. He had heard that for some of them their delighted anticipation of the second coming of Christ had led them to become fatalistic, to believe that their own actions and behaviour were insignificant – Christ was coming in triumph and the here and now was unimportant. Not true, says Paul: and he goes on to remind them of just how a Christian is expected to live. Being Paul, it is a practical list and it can be seen as something of a blueprint for Christians everywhere:

- Beware of being carried away with the sexual excesses of the society around you and lead a pure life.
- Get on diligently with your daily activities so that when Christ comes, he will find you faithfully at work.
- Encourage others to follow Christ by the way you live your life and work together,
- Do your best to be independent, not relying on others for support.

Not for nothing are these verses headed, "A Life Pleasing to God", in the NRSV.

We live in difficult times and fatalism is sometimes tempting but as Christians we have the wonderful confidence of knowing that Christ **will** come, and that knowledge gives us hope and the freedom to try to live a life pleasing to God.

Loving God, help us to live out our lives with the confidence and joy that your unending love gives us. May those we meet each day see something of this love reflected in us. And for all your many blessings we give you thanks.

Amen

Tuesday 8th December

Song of Solomon 2:1-4

She

¹⁾ I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

He

²⁾ Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the young women.

She

³⁾ Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men.

I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.

⁴⁾ Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love.

In 65 years of preaching I have never preached a sermon on texts from Song of Songs unlike Bernard of Clairvaux who is said to have preached 86 sermons on these texts, and then only covered the first two chapters!

These love poems have often been interpreted by Jews as a picture of the relationship between God and his people and by Christians as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church/person.

We can learn a lot from poetry. The Psalms are poetic expressions of religious faith and hymns are the poetry of the Christian faith.

In this passage we learn of the importance of a loving relationship and we may see this as alluding to our loving relationship with God expressed through Christ.

For me the key verse here is v4 “his banner over me is love.” (NIV). A banner is a symbol under which people gather to express their solidarity and find protection.

The title Song of Songs means the most excellent song. The most excellent song we have is given to us in Jesus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.”

*Prayer: “O love of God, our shield and stay
Through all the perils of our way;
Eternal love, in thee we rest,
For ever safe, for ever blest!” Horatius Bonar.*

Wednesday 9th December

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

¹⁾Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ²⁾for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³⁾While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴⁾But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵⁾You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶⁾So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷⁾For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸⁾But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹⁾For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰⁾He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹⁾Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Paul speaks in the preceding verses of the second coming of Christ. Now he speaks about it as 'the day of the Lord'; It is coming inexorably but mysteriously. 'Peace and security' was a Roman slogan referring to the empire and the Pax Romana, yet Paul sets no store by this and we know with hindsight that empires, however great, do not last. Not so the coming Kingdom. To take a purely worldly view is to be in darkness, asleep and unprepared for the great spiritual event to come.

When the prophet Joel refers to the day of the lord (Joel 3:14) he speaks of it being *near* in the 'valley of decision'. The external event seeks an internal response. We are each offered our own valley of decision where we are invited to choose between day and night, waking or staying asleep. In the middle of the dark world's night, the spirit of Jesus tells us it is daytime. The new world is already here; the resurrection and the gift of the spirit is given and 'The Lord will be a refuge for his people' (Joel 3:16).

In that great day of the Lord, the source of all comfort and strength (and that with which we are to build each other up) is found in verse 10; "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." Jesus Christ offers us salvation.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus, for dying for me. In my own valley of decision help me choose the light of your salvation so that I may have true life with you. Amen.

Thursday 10th December

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

1) Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2) Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3) We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. 4) Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

5) All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. 6) God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7) and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8) He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9) They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might 10) on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

11) With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. 12) We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

For most of us letter writing is not something that is an everyday occurrence as it once was. When was the last time you sent a letter to a family member or friend? Technology such as texts, Facetime, Zoom, emails etc has taken over our lives in so many ways. Handwritten cards and letters written by a loved one are so special, and provide such happiness, or maybe comfort, for the recipient.

Paul's letters can be both supportive and challenging. This particular letter to the Thessalonians is very supportive indeed. Paul detects the struggles and the self-doubt of the church in Thessalonica and reacts with love and encouragement. He speaks of their growing faith, their love for each other and their determination in the face of troubles that have beset them. One can imagine the letter being read out to the church and what it would have meant to receive such greetings from Paul. Who might we send encouraging words to today?

Another focus within that letter which is particularly pertinent in this time is about the coming of Jesus. The powerful picture given by Paul is one that has been painted by many people. Are any of those paintings accurate? No one knows how or when Jesus will return. Within Advent, may we look to the coming of Jesus with love in our hearts and a growing faith that will carry us through all the hard times. Amen

Friday 11th December

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3a, 13-17

¹⁾Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ²⁾not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. ³⁾Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed,

¹³⁾But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as first fruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴⁾He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵⁾So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

¹⁶⁾May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷⁾encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

We read yesterday that, in his letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul assured them that, though they were now suffering persecution for their faith, Jesus Christ would come again and gather them into God's kingdom. But today's reading tells us about their great disappointment. Someone had told them that God's kingdom had already arrived. But where was the promised joy? They were still suffering. They had expected that God's kingdom would offer something better than this. Paul reassures them. This rumour they have heard is false. They can still look forward in hope. It has always been God's intention to bring them to himself through Christ. His love and grace are sure.

We are not persecuted for our faith, but we do not live in a comfortable world. We are constantly being told that we are destroying our planet by pollution and over-consumption - that if we do not change our ways, we shall no longer be able to feed our growing population. I am sure that God who created this planet and in Christ lived and died for mankind must surely want something better than this. The expectation that Jesus would return soon to establish God's kingdom was obviously mistaken, but Paul's certainty of God's love and grace is still true.

Paul told the Thessalonians to seek the encouragement of God to strengthen them in every good deed and word. So we pray for God's spirit to guide us as we work to make our world a better place, believing in his love for us, and that we shall ultimately become part of God's kingdom.

Prayer *Heavenly Father, we thank you for all your blessings which show your love for us. When faced with dangers such as sickness, international conflict and environmental destruction, may we not give in to despair. Help us always to trust in your love and grace. May we allow your spirit to guide us so that we live in the world in ways that fulfil your purposes, and may we never cease to have hope. Amen.*

Saturday 12th December

2 Thessalonians 3:1-17

1) As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. 2) And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. 3) But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. 4) We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. 5) May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

6) In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching^[a] you received from us. 7) For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, 8) nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 9) We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. 10) For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

11) We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. 12) Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. 13) And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

14) Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. 15) Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.

16) Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. 17) I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

We are expected to be many things, successful productive members of society who earn our keep, servants of God who spread his word, good people who share all we have and trust God in all we do. But we must take care, have too little you're a scrounger, too much you're greedy, help too many you're a fool too few you're a poor excuse for a Christian!

Where is the balance, how much is too much, how little is not enough? In what we earn or give or do or refrain from? In the eyes of God and the World or the toll it takes on us? Should we share until we have nothing, serve until we drop, give until we fall apart? God is with us, protecting, guiding and supplying our every need so surely no matter how close to the edge we may feel we can never actually fall, never truly break!

There is a difference between: -
earning my keep and seeking wealth
serving God in all I do and doing all in his service
trusting God to support me in his work and expecting him to support me in mine.

So, before we give our all to the path of God's love, investing our money, time and effort it's important to stop and ask what does God actually want?

God will guide and support those who serve him, if we will allow him, trust him, and follow his path of love.

3rd Week of Advent - The Lord is near

Sunday 13th December

John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶) There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷) He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸) He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

¹⁹) Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰) He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹) They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

²²) Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³) John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

²⁴) Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵) questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶) "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷) He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸) This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Not the light, but a witness to the light

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'"

It can take a lot of courage to testify as a witness, especially if you have witnessed a criminal act and are under threat of violence if you give evidence of what you have seen. I recall a scene in a magistrate's court many years ago in which a prosecution witness stubbornly refused to answer questions out of fear of the consequences of sticking to his police statement. Witnessing to the truth puts you in the limelight and, where truth sits uneasily with self-preservation, requires greatness of mind and principle.

The greatness of John the Baptist is of this sort. He is not fearful, but in remaining true to his calling he displays a greatness of mind and principle that seems part of his noble nature. Called to bear witness to the unparalleled holiness of Jesus and of Jesus' mission, John acclaims Jesus and then retires. The crowning of his vocation marks his decline as teacher and prophet.

In making straight the way of the Lord, John steps aside for Jesus. Here is the greatness of one who knows what God has called him to do and seeks no higher destiny than doing it.

We'll probably never find ourselves in the testing position of one who must choose between truth and self-preservation. But it does take courage to bear witness to the coming of Jesus, by sharing our thoughts and lives, and by heeding John's call to make straight the way of the Lord.

O Lord, help us to straighten the way of your coming by inspiring our thoughts and words and deeds. Give us strength to bear witness to the true nature of your calling, and to fulfil our own in your service. Amen

Monday 14th December

Isaiah 40:1-1

1) Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2) Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

3) A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4) Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

5) Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

6) A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7) The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8) The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

9) Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'

10) See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11) He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

In Chapter 39, Isaiah had prophesied a time of war, famine and then exile. People's lives would be turned upside down, they would be separated from their loved ones and hope would be turned off like a light bulb.

The people are at a low point. Everything has gone wrong. They are defeated and disgraced. In the depths of their despair, God offers hope for the future - a chance to start again. He promises his people that they have been forgiven and they have not been forgotten.

God has not forgotten us either. In the midst of despair, God offers us hope. In the midst of darkness, God offers us light. The dawn is coming. In the midst of winter we sow seeds for spring.

God speaks to us as he speaks to the people of Isaiah's day: prepare a way for the Lord. God has not abandoned us, he has walked alongside us and when we have needed it, he has carried us. Now he declares that he is coming in power. He is sending his Son to a world which is in need. We are called to be heralds of his coming. We are called to proclaim that Easter will soon be upon us, resurrection life for our churches and for our nation.

God is coming and he will gather the lambs in his arms.

Father God, we thank you that you sent Jesus into our world in order to bring us new life, resurrection life. In this difficult time, help us to live lives of hope and faith and offer light in the darkness.

Tuesday 15th December

Lamentations 3:22-33

*22) Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.*

23) They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

24) I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

*25) The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;*

26) it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

27) It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.

28) Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him.

29) Let him bury his face in the dust— there may yet be hope.

*30) Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him,
and let him be filled with disgrace.*

31) For no one is cast off by the Lord forever.

*32) Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing
love.*

33) For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion."

We seldom visit the pages of Lamentations and yet here we find one of the bible's great songs of confidence and the inspiration for many writers of hymns and worship songs.

This passage follows an extended description of distress in which God is identified as the one who brought it about and it has its origins in his purposes. In doing this, the writer enters a dialogue, directly calling on God with confidence that he will hear and ultimately finding comfort in doing so. The basis of this confidence is God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

His steadfast love is always the same and therefore also the source of what we may only see and interpret as suffering, wrath or punishment. This prophetic insight redeems catastrophe from meaninglessness, God being the ultimate source of meaning. It sees something far deeper; a spur towards a deeper understanding of, and closer relationship with God. The only course of action, therefore, is to accept it and offer a cheek (as Jesus taught, and also reflected in the 'suffering servant' of Isaiah). To those who can receive it, who use it as an occasion for turning towards God and crying out to him, it is the basis of hope; God himself being the reward, and "All those who call on the name of the lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32).

Prayer

*Lord Jesus, through your acceptance of suffering may I find comfort in mine.
Through your death and resurrection may I find sure hope of eternal life and
fellowship with you. Be with me now and forever. Amen.*

Wednesday 16th December

Joel 3:9-16

9) Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war!

Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack.

10) Beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears.

Let the weakling say, "I am strong!"

11) Come quickly, all you nations from every side, and assemble there.

Bring down your warriors, LORD!

12) "Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side.

13) Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.

Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!"

14) Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!

For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.

15) The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine.

16) The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem;

the earth and the heavens will tremble.

But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Reading these words from Joel was a bit of a shock and left me saying to myself "This is NOT what I need to read during Advent, so aggressive and bloodthirsty, so angry and hate-filled ... while I'm thinking about the coming of Jesus - the loving Saviour of our world". We understand that Joel is focused on 'the Day of the Lord' - and the warning of the judgement to come for those who do not turn to God.

I did look earlier in Joel to see if there was anything about a God I recognised and found he does mirror Exodus 34.6 (check it yourself!) in 2:13: "Return to the Lord for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

So, despite first impressions, I felt we could use Joel's words to add a bit of urgency to our personal commitment to sharing the love of Jesus, to wanting others to know the sheer wonder of living with Jesus day by day. Then I can live with everything else in this reading and take the message in verse 16 as mine 'The Lord will be a refuge for His people' and remember that Jesus came to the whole world - not just people of faith.

That means my role in this mission is simply to live and be what Jesus wants in my personal world, sharing the love of Christ just where I am. And, as we live through this anxious time, that is a real and positive mission we can all take on.

A Prayer: *Loving God, thank you for the reminder from an ancient prophet that you are a refuge for your people, especially in these anxious times. Help us, in our own personal world however confined that may be, to live for you. May we bring to life, through our faith in you, your qualities of being gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Amen*

Thursday 17th December

Isaiah 62:1-12

¹⁾ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her vindication shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. ²⁾ The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

³⁾ You will be a crown of splendour in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴⁾ No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married. ⁵⁾ As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

⁶⁾ I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, ⁷⁾ and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth.

⁸⁾ The LORD has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: "Never again will I give your grain as food for your enemies, and never again will foreigners drink the new wine for which you have toiled; ⁹⁾ but those who harvest it will eat it and praise the LORD, and those who gather the grapes will drink it in the courts of my sanctuary."

¹⁰⁾ Pass through, pass through the gates! Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. Raise a banner for the nations.

¹¹⁾ The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your Saviour comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.'"

¹²⁾ They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.

The urgent message is one of hope for the Jews in Exile, beginning to be repatriated by Cyrus of Persia who conquered Babylon in 539B.C., of promise and purpose, redemption and renewal.

The physical re-building of Zion/Jerusalem is symbolic of the spiritual. It will be a place of salvation, righteousness and glorious light, named Hephzibah [my delight is in her] and Beulah [married], by the Lord who rejoices over her. The people must return quickly; their Saviour comes! They will be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord, a beacon for the nations.

Our world to-day needs to hear such a message of salvation and hope. People are in a strange place, trapped in difficult circumstances, uncertain what the future holds, not in control.

This is the word of the faithful, loving, Sovereign God, whose coming in Jesus is the true meaning of Christmas. God's Redeemed, Holy People ["The Bride of Christ"] are called to proclaim the Good News of deliverance and renewal through Christ. The Saviour has come!

The Kingdom of God has come. One day it will be completely fulfilled. The whole Creation will be renewed at Christ's Second Coming, as in John's vision in Revelation [21-22].

Come, Lord Jesus, to the people and situations we are concerned about to-day. Amen.

Friday 18th December

Isaiah 2:1-5

2)In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

3)Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4)He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

5)O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Joel (3:10) called the nations to prepare for war “Hammer the points of your ploughs into swords and your pruning knives into spears”. For many centuries, labourers led into battle by local landowners armed themselves with whatever scythes, billhooks etc. that were available.

Isaiah (and Micah 4:1-3) reverse that imagery. The weapons of war are to be reclaimed for agricultural purposes and so there will be peace. The prophet recognises that disagreements will still arise but these will be settled without recourse to war. God's justice will be recognised as scrupulously fair by all nations. Our world has tried to move in that direction with international courts but human justice moves only slowly; not everyone is willing to wait for a verdict or accept with equanimity the decisions that go against them.

Note too that the weapons of war are not simply locked away, or even destroyed. Peace is more than the lack of weapons. Peace requires continuous work. The tools of war are transformed into tools of peace so that land destroyed in conflict may be recultivated and become productive. If we cannot feed the world and provide for the basic needs of all people then the temptation to revert to violence and take what you lack will always remain.

Lord when we have enough and to spare, give us the grace to recognise the needs of others and the willingness to share the blessings we have received from you. Amen

Saturday 19th December

Proverbs 8:22-31

- ²²⁾ *The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;*
- ²³⁾ *I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning,
when the world came to be.*
- ²⁴⁾ *When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
when there were no springs overflowing with water;*
- ²⁵⁾ *before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,*
- ²⁶⁾ *before he made the world or its fields
or any of the dust of the earth.*
- ²⁷⁾ *I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,*
- ²⁸⁾ *when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,*
- ²⁹⁾ *when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.*
- ³⁰⁾ *Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence,*
- ³¹⁾ *rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.*

In this beautiful piece of scripture, it is as though “Lady wisdom” rehearses the “song” of Christ’s identity, and this text became important for the early church as they sought to describe the divinity of Jesus and his relationship to God, (Christology), essentially seeking to describe the incarnation. Personified wisdom is seen as God’s agent and when we approach it from the stance of the early church, the “notes” become so sharpened that we cannot help but hear the echoes of John’s gospel that are so familiar to us at Christmas time;

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” and Paul’s description of Christ takes up the “tune” of Proverbs; for *“he [is the] power of God and the wisdom of God.”* 1 Corinthians 1

Brought forth, eternally begotten of God the Father, the incarnate Christ is the image of God, the “imago Dei”, ever revealing to us God the Father. Present at the act of creation, Christ is there as “master workman or architect” who delights in humanity and whose work is redemptive love, yet who comes to us not as a powerful saviour, but in an attitude of humility, and sheer folly, the folly of a weak and helpless child who will grow and be crucified as a man. How could anything redemptive come from such foolishness some may ask.

But for Paul, God’s wisdom is not what would be considered wise in our world; God’s wisdom is sheer folly; *“for the foolishness of God is wiser than humanity and the weakness of God is stronger than humanity.”* And so we pray;

Father God give us the courage to step out and walk in the way of Your holy “fool” Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. May we be humble enough to clothe ourselves in His extravagant love, and become true fools for Christ, as we live in the world, wearing His “stigma of folly.” Amen

4th week of Advent Christ is born

Sunday 20th December

Luke 1:26-38

*²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' **34**) Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸ Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.*

Mary was an ordinary young woman whose life was interrupted when an Angel told her that God had something special for her to do. She was to have a baby who would be called the 'Son of God' and become the hope and Saviour of the world. WOW! Can you imagine her surprise, anxiety, fear! A young teenager engaged but not married, which in her culture was very dangerous, however, she says 'yes' to God and trusts in his promises, which never fail. I have often wondered what would have happened if she had said 'No' would God have had plan B? Fortunately, she responded to God's call and became instrumental in his great plan of Salvation for all through Jesus Christ his Son.

There would have been many times when Mary was anxious and worried about the future but her trust in God enabled her to respond positively. This year with all that has happened, we too are anxious about the future which seems dark and uncertain. Perhaps Mary's example of trust in the 'unknown' can help us face whatever the future holds for us, our families and community.

As we move from Advent into a very different kind of Christmas this year with the dreadful virus affecting so many, with restrictions on movement and lack of money for presents; perhaps the material aspect will be less evident. People may have more time to reflect on the reason why we still celebrate it. The fact that God is not distant or uncaring, but in sending us his Son Jesus to live on earth and share our humanity, he has shown his infinite love and understanding of our suffering and is alongside us in all the darkness. Can we become 'Custodians of hope' (as mentioned in a recent radio 4 service) offering ourselves in God's service to all in need today?

"Best of all God is with us, hearts are challenged, strangely warmed, faith is deepened, courage strengthened, grace received and strength reformed" (Andrew Pratt StF 610)

Lord, as your followers today help us to be willing and obedient to your call as Mary was, may we show the light of Christ in all we say and do and are. Amen

Monday 21st December

1 Samuel 1:1-20

1) There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. 2) He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

3) Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. 4) Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. 5) But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. 6) Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. 7) This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. 8) Her husband Elkanah would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

9) Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. 10) In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. 11) And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

12) As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. 13) Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk 14) and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

15) "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. 16) Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

17) Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

18) She said, "May your servant find favour in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

19) Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. 20) So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him."

This story always strikes me as being like a singing bowl, that when touched, sends out ripples of a song, a song that is whispered on through time, and whose notes come to rest upon Mary as she accedes to God's calling.

Hannah, a faithful servant of the Lord, who bears the shame of barrenness, and who receives through Eli, a steadying, and fear-releasing revelation from God, sets aside her precious miracle-child to be a "Nazarine." A Nazarite

vow being a lifelong dedication to God, a vow of consecration to God's service for a period of time, or even for life.

I am struck by the great trust and generosity of Hannah, in surrendering in obedience to God, her longed-for son, and how the blessedness of this child must surely have also been like a sword piercing her heart, as she eventually leaves Samuel with Eli, at the tender age of three. But rooted in her deep and generous faith, Hannah feels blessed by God.

Hannah and Mary, two "empty vessels" prepared to follow God's calling, give birth to sons who become prophet and Messiah respectively, to the nation of Israel, both who are "given up" and discover the real joy that that is to be found in surrendering to God's will. Moving beyond the given text, Hannah sings out her song of praise, whose echo is "captured" by Mary as she prepares for the birth of Jesus. Hannah sings out,

"My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength."

Words that are echoed in Mary's song.

We pray; Lord, at this time of preparation, may we too know the blessedness that is to be found in the challenging times. Give us the courage to say "yes" to your call upon our lives, and the strength of mind to surrender ourselves to You, for it is only in giving of ourselves, that our joy may be complete and known in You. Amen

Tuesday 22nd December

Revelation 22:6-21

⁶) *The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place."*

⁷) *"Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll."*

⁸) *I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. ⁹) But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!"*

¹⁰) *Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near. ¹¹) Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy."*

¹²) *"Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. ¹³) I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.*

¹⁴⁾ *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. ¹⁵⁾ Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

¹⁶⁾ *“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”*

¹⁷⁾ *The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.*

¹⁸⁾ *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. ¹⁹⁾ And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.*

²⁰⁾ *He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

²¹⁾ *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.*

The Revelation is often called the most difficult of books, and our passage today the most disjointed of endings! However, some things are crystal clear.

First, that the promise of Christ is assured, and our hope in it secure. “Listen!” says Jesus. “I am coming soon!” (12) And when he comes, we shall know in their completeness the blessings of his kingdom, which we know only imperfectly now. We know, for example, that in life Christ is with us; but compared with his future presence (parousia), he is absent (2 Cor. 5: 6). We work now for peace, justice, and an end to disease, sickness and pain; but these will be the characteristic hallmarks of the New Jerusalem.

John of Patmos, the writer of the Revelation, had the most urgent of messages to deliver (cf. 10). At the end of the first century, the Christian Church was subject to the most intense persecution, carried out as a matter of policy by the Roman Empire. In addition, the emperor Domitian, had decreed he was to be worshipped as god. The Revelation is intended to give hope, encouragement, and courage to Christians living in the most stressful of times.

And this brings us to our second, and final point here. “I am the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (13) says Jesus. It is also clear, therefore, that as alpha and omega, embracing all of time and space, in Jesus alone rest the authority and power to make real the salvation of humankind.

Prayer (cf. 17, 20)

Come, Lord Jesus.

I am thirsty for the water of life.

Enable me to accept it as a gift.

Come.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come soon.

Come now.

Amen. Maranatha!

Wednesday 23rd December

Malachi 3:1-4, 4:5-6

3¹⁾ *"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.*

2) *But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.* 3) *He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,* 4) *and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.*

4⁵⁾ *"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.* 6) *He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."*

Perhaps with Christmas just two days away we maybe expect our Bible reading to be Mary's majestic magificat or Zechariah's Song – but no, we are thrown a curve ball that sounds somewhat scary and foreboding.

It speaks of the refiner's fire and the launderer's soap (fullers' soap) in other translations. We can easily picture the heat of the refiner's fire, burning off the impurities of precious metals – but what is 'fullers' soap' all about?

Fullers were those who job it was to turn sheep's wool into felted cloth. It was hard, tough work. It was not a nice job but the process transformed the wool beyond all recognition.

In both Old and New Testaments we come across numerous images of being made clean, of being cleansed and renewed.

Whilst the image of the refiner's fire is somewhat terrifying, perhaps the image of soap strikes a different chord and one that is more personal.

Reflecting on this, I was reminded of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples in the upper room. It was an intimate and lovingly enacted parable and sacrament of care.

As we continue our countdown we recall that the one who is soon to come among us, is the one who cleanses and makes all things new. He does this through love, a love that is embodied and demonstrated in the guise of a foot-washing servant with a bowl and the crucified one on the cross.

*Hail! The Heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King!*

Thursday 24th December

Luke 1:67-79

⁶⁷⁾ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸⁾ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹⁾ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰⁾ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹⁾ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—⁷²⁾ to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³⁾ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴⁾ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵⁾ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶⁾ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷⁾ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸⁾ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹⁾ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

I struggle with Christmas Eve! It is the transition from the expectation of the second coming that is Advent to the expectation of Jesus' birth which is Christmas, and the two get so mixed up as we tend to breeze through all the preparations.

My parents were not people of faith, but I would go with my Mum to Midnight Mass and on Christmas morning with my Dad to early communion, tradition which helped me on my faith journey. Even without belief or understanding, there is hope that something better is being offered in this season.

What a lot of effort we put into the celebrations overshadowing the message that is held in this prophecy, Zechariah looked forward, we look back to the birth as if it is history. That is my struggle, moving from Advent looking forward to Christmas looking back; this prophecy holds the same confusion of looking back to what God has done as well as looking forward to our salvation.

However, that should be an encouragement as we celebrate, not just a birthday, but a life of example and a death of salvation, and we cannot separate them.

This 'song' is full of hope for all humankind, for now and for all time. Don't let this be a brief time of worship set in celebrations that are focused on opening presents and a turkey. Do you focus on the reason for this day? We are witnesses, just as Zechariah was, to shout out, praise God and give thanks. Let's make Jesus the priority on His birthday!

Dear Lord, thank you for Jesus the man who showed me the way. Thank you for Jesus as Saviour, come to bring hope. Thank you for your strength to be a witness of your love in this world. Help me to celebrate what you have done for me, that in this birth you have given me life. Help me to be a beacon of light to reflect your glory and guide my way into the path of peace. Help me not just to watch you at work, but rather to be your hands and voice fulfilling your purpose. Amen.

Friday 25th December

Luke 2:1-20

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke doesn't tell us how many shepherds were in the fields – which is great for organizers of school nativity plays. You can have as many angels, shepherds and sheep as you need to involve the whole class.

Did all the shepherds go to Bethlehem? Would you have gone? Or would you have needed more time to process the experience you'd shared? To come up with a rational explanation – perhaps one that didn't have to involve angels, for once they'd departed doubts would surface. Was it a dream; an hallucination?

Would your commitment to the flock have made you unwilling to abandon them? Or would you be afraid of being spotted in Bethlehem – it wasn't much of a job but could you afford to risk losing it? And if you didn't go, would you have regretted it when those who had, returned, praising God?

There are, for many of us, times when we have a powerful experience of God's presence with us. It's an experience we treasure but one we hesitate to share. There's certainty but no proof; no rational convincing explanation, so we stay silent to avoid ridicule. Sadly, that means too few people realise just how often God surprises earth with heaven - and not just on Christmas day.

As we hear again the Christmas stories, may we be willing to make room for God to come into our hearts and lives today and every day. Amen