

Wantage and Abingdon Methodist Circuit

Advent Devotional 2018



Introduction

This year, we are trying to do things slightly differently and to make the most of the season of Advent. Advent is a time for watching and waiting, a time for preparation and getting ready.

As a Circuit and as churches we will not be holding any business meetings during Advent. Instead, we will be encouraging one another to meet, pray, meditate and study. To make the most of this time, to try and help one another find space in the busyness and stillness amidst all the frenetic preparations that this season brings.

Our Circuit Local Preachers' Meeting agreed to write and compile this devotional booklet, based on the daily readings found within the current Methodist Prayer Handbook, "A world transformed"

Each day you will find within, the given Bible reading for you to follow in your Bible, a short reflection upon the passage and a prayer.

Advent has always been a time for hope and our hope this season is that you will find this Advent devotional booklet a helpful aid as you make your own journey towards Bethlehem and on bended knee, find yourself alongside shepherds and wise men.

My grateful thanks to all those who along with myself contributed to this project; Stephen Atkinson, Jocelyn Bennett, Libby Bolton, Ruth Dams, Andrew Dixon, Valerie Grist, Peter Hemmings, Michael Howlett, Barbara Kershaw, Esther Miller, Barbara Sexton, Carol Sturt, Ian Sturt, and Liz Wood.

May their insights and wisdom guide, challenge, encourage and inspire us on our journey.

With Love and God Bless this Advent,

Keith

Sunday 2nd December

Luke 21:25-36

It has to be said that the first Bible passage of this Advent devotional is not an easy one!

At times it sounds something of a cross between the old sueth sayer from the 1970's television comedy series "Up Pompeii" and some of the more fervent preachers that are to be found in shopping centres and high streets across our nation.

Jesus is using apocalyptic style language and vivid illustrations. Much time and hot air has been expended across the millenniums trying to tease out when these events might take place and in trying to foretell the date and time of the Day of Judgment.

Jesus speaks of the Son of Man coming in all his power and glory, the total opposite to his birth, when almost unnoticed and with anonymity; he slipped into our world, born in a stable.

The thing that struck me though was how Jesus reminded his listeners about the lesson of the fig tree. For when the leaves appear he tells them, you know that summer is on the way.

As we begin this advent journey together, looking forward to His birth as well as to His triumphant return (whenever and however that might be), I wonder what our equivalent of Jesus' fig tree might be?

What is it that for us points towards the eternal truths of this season, that which is so often overlooked yet is also there in plain sight for those with eyes to see.

Prayer. *Loving God, grant us eyes that see, ears that hear and hearts ready to receive this advent season. In the midst of all the noise and busyness of this time, may we recognise that which speaks of the divine and points us towards the eternal.*

Amen.

Monday 3rd December

1 Samuel 3:1-14

This is the familiar story of a boy who was sensitive to God's message. It gave rise to the hymn "Hushed was the evening hymn" in which we pray

O give me Samuel's ear,
The open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear
Each whisper of thy word;
Like him to answer at thy call,
And to obey thee first of all.

An appropriate prayer for us all arising from this story.

But there is more to this passage than this. The message from God which Samuel heard and was to deliver to Eli was not a comfortable one. Eli's two sons were priests in the sanctuary at Shiloh, with oversight of the sacrifices made there. But, when the worshippers brought their offerings for sacrifice, rather than sacrificing them in the accepted manner, Eli's sons stole some of the meat for their own use. Eli knew about this and remonstrated with his sons, but did not use his authority to stop it. What Samuel had to tell Eli was that, because of the appalling behaviour of his sons, God's judgment would come upon Eli's whole family. God would not tolerate corruption.

The first verse of the passage tells us that "in those days the word of the Lord was rarely heard, and there was no outpouring of vision." That is hardly surprising when religion had become so corrupt. Eli's sons did not want to hear God's voice or obey Him.

God speaks to us and guides us by his Spirit, but we must be ready to listen.

Prayer. *Holy God, who throughout the ages has been speaking to mankind and spoke most clearly through Jesus, help each one of us individually, and your church, to remove any barriers that prevent us from hearing what your Spirit is saying to us. Help us to want to hear; to listen and obey. Amen.*

Tuesday 4th December

1 Samuel 3:15 - 4:1

Yesterday's reading was all about Samuel hearing God's call. Despite Eli's failing eyesight, the fact that it was nighttime and that he was getting on in years, Eli got there in the end. The ageing priest eventually recognised God at work once more, and a lifetime's experience of being faithful to God ensured that he gave wise counsel and advice to the young lad in his care.

Today's passage shows how the balance of power shifted and as the importance of Eli and his family declined, so Samuel gains favour and importance.

Samuel becomes the prominent figure. Today's reading tells us "As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." Similar sentiments were later expressed by Luke in his Gospel about another child, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him."

Throughout the story of God and His people, there is the constant theme of Him raising up individuals to do his will and then when they become too old and frail, have in some way failed him, or rebelled against him, that baton is passed on to the next person, thereby enabling the flame of the Covenant promise and hope to stay alive and keep burning.

We are only too well aware of those who have passed on their faith to us and as we faithfully seek to tread in their footsteps, seek in turn to pass ours on to others.

Prayer.

Encouraging God, help us we pray to keep the flame of faith alive and burning bright, so that when our time comes to an end, we can with thankful hearts, pass on the eternal truths and mysteries of all that we know to be true. Amen

Wednesday 5th December

1 Samuel 8:4-22

Perhaps this passage can be best summed up as “be careful what you wish for”!

The Israelites wanted to be like the other nations that surrounded them, they wanted to have a King, someone to look up to, someone to lead them into battle, someone to bring them victory when they felt threatened and isolated and someone they could identify as being in charge.

The days of the judges were coming to an end, and there was a groundswell, a populist momentum if you like, that expressed an ever increasing demand for them to have their own ruler, their own king.

The people wanted an earthly ruler, they wanted a human King, and consequently turned their backs on the notion of a theocracy.

The One who freed them from slavery and delivered them from Egypt, was no longer what they wanted and they were eager to discard him. In their desire to be like others, they had forgotten who they were and more importantly, whose they were.

The birth of Jesus brings into stark contrast two different types of Kings with contrasting styles of governing. Herod, the megalomaniac, bully boy, murderous, despotic, tyrant who exercised power through violence and fear and the Christ Child.

In front of which kind of King do we kneel and what kind of kingdom do we seek to serve?

Prayer.

Loving God, King of all kings and Lord of all lords, may we follow your in all that we do and commit ourselves to the values of your kingdom of love, peace and grace.

Amen.

Thursday 6th December

1 Samuel 15:10-23

Reading these verses in isolation, it's hard to appreciate what was so very wrong about Saul's actions. The idea of divinely-sanctioned military conquest and annihilation is uncomfortable enough, so it's easy to see God as being unduly pedantic about Saul's conduct (and to become anxious about how God sees our conduct).

But I think the underlying dynamics are quite different. Imagine coming home to find your teenage son sitting with his friends, showing them packets of cocaine – a drug which you know is not only illegal, but also deplorably exploitative in its production. You've warned him before not to accept such drugs, so you challenge him. He shakes away responsibility saying, "Oh, I wasn't going to consume it; it was just my friends brought it back and I thought I'd give it to you in a gesture of love, because I know its market price." Either this answer is a flagrant lie or it illustrates an impoverished and backward concept of who you are and what you value.

No wonder God was grieved.

The tragedy of Saul's kingship is not that he couldn't follow instructions, but that he held a superstitious, manipulative view of God, valuing what God could give him as a powerful deity, but not actually trusting or loving him. Saul's successor was, of course, David – who was described as having a heart after God's. But this wasn't because David exercised meticulous legal compliance, rather I think it was because he opened his heart to God.

Prayer *Lord God, may we be appreciative of who you are, for your own sake and in your own right. May we not value the things you give us more than we value you, nor forget your personhood by idolising your greatness. Cast away our anxieties and open our hearts to be receptive to your Holy Spirit, that we may delight in you, and you in us. Amen.*

Friday 7th December

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Have you ever had to interview applicants for a job? It all depends of course on what the job is but what is it that we look for in a successful applicant. Some who come have everything. The right qualifications, good appearance, easy conversational manner. Is it all outward show? Difficult to tell isn't it.

This story reminds us that what the Lord seeks is one who is strong in faith and character all the way through like a stick of seaside rock.

David, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons had a fine appearance and handsome features. Yet while his older brothers were invited to the sacrifice David was left out in the fields tending the sheep. Of no account in the eyes of his family?

Because of David's unassuming nature he was not considered to be a natural choice for God's anointing but he was chosen because the Lord could see the potential he had for great things.

It begs the question in our church life as to whether we invest enough time and energy in nurturing and developing the potential in each person in our midst, especially the young.

Prayer

Lord God, help us to see others as you see them. Help us to develop their worth as well as our own so that we can grow together to be the people you long for us to be.

Amen.

Saturday 8th December

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

In Sunday Schools, Junior Churches, Play and Toddler Groups, infant, Junior and Primary Schools, the coming of Jesus will once more this year be told through the ubiquitous nativity play.

All those who attend will find their hearts warmed once more and emotions stirred as those they have come to see re-tell and re-enact the greatest story ever told. Often with a cast of extras that do not find themselves mentioned in the accounts of Matthew or Luke, but are there so that everyone may have part in what is after all, the most inclusive story of all time.

The words and theological concepts that stretch our minds and challenge us in today's reading from the opening chapter of Ephesians, remind us all of something that can be so easily forgotten once the curtain comes down at the end of the nativity – that Jesus grew up!

For that tiny, vulnerable baby who was laid in a manger brings to fruition God's ultimate and audacious rescue mission for all of humanity; and in a cosmic setting that transcends time and space, transforms and changes everything.

All that we are and can be, all that we are blessed with and all that we seek to claim for ourselves is because of the miracle of Christmas – "God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man."

The baby born into grinding poverty in an unfashionable backwater of the Roman Empire is none other than God himself becoming like us, so that in the end, we may become like him.

Prayer.

God of all, forgive us we pray for those times when we keep Jesus in the stable and forget what happens next, for the times we'd rather focus on shepherds and kings rather than betrayal and denial and for when our vision of him is far too small. **Amen**

Sunday 9th December

Luke 3:1-6

The first two verses of this chapter give us a combined history and geography lesson. Names, titles and places abound. It's not a case of once upon a time or a long time ago. It is not a fairy tale or the machinations of an author's active imagination. No, Luke wants to make sure that we know exactly when and where these events took place and where and when God once more engaged with our human history.

Luke, writing as he does, roots and grounds his account of what took place in our world, both in time and in space.

He tells us how John, Zechariah's son, is the one called by God to bring the words of the prophet Isaiah to fruition. Words spoken some eight centuries or so earlier now resound and echo around the region of the Jordan, full of life, urgency and relevance as this wild man of God begins to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

I wonder as we wait in hope this Advent, where the words of Isaiah can be heard today resounding with life, urgency and relevance once more?

Who are those (wild or not) who point the world to the coming of the Lord as a helpless baby, Emmanuel God with us?

Who are those whose lone voices cry out in the wilderness, reminding the world of things once known but now long forgotten?

Prayer.

Lord of time and space, may we be those who prepare the road, who herald your arrival and proclaim your love for your world and all people.

Amen.

Monday 10th December

Zechariah 2:1-5, 10-11

Both the measuring line and the wall of fire suggest a time of judgement. Judgement is an Advent theme but this passage paints a picture of the Kingdom of God.

The love of God is immeasurable. *“City of God, how broad and far, Outspread thy walls sublime”*. Walls are created to keep those inside safe from the enemy outside and to deny access to outsiders. We put walls around us to shut out things and people we do not like. A wall of silence: a wall of hatred.

Many ancient walls lie in ruins because they no longer offer protection. Gunpowder spelled the end for medieval strongholds. Cities like Oxford outgrew their walls. Even York with its walls almost intact spread beyond its confinement long ago.

The Advent hymn says, *“He is breaking down the barriers”*. Barriers between people and God. Far from nations being separated by so called secure borders, nations will be united. Our Father is the god of all.

God has given us something to shout about. “I am coming and I will live among you and you will know”. Here is God’s promise.

When people supposed Jesus was Moses or Elijah or some prophet they recognised that he was sent by God. If only they knew!

Prayer

Help us, Lord, as we look forward to your coming, to breakdown barriers. May we open our defensive walls and welcome both the loved and the unloved into our church, our homes and our lives. Amen

Tuesday 11th December

Zechariah 8:1-8

A former colleague used to complain that he could never drive down the road where he lived because of children's bikes left lying around. When our children were young there were several children the same age and you never knew what you might find. When the children grew up and moved away suddenly the street seemed empty.

The vision here is of a place of safety. But think of places with no safety in the streets. Aleppo, Beirut, Belfast during the troubles, the Berlin wall. Not just guns and bombs. Car and trucks have mown people down in London, Barcelona and Berlin. In the USA it seems the price of freedom to bear arms is paid by innocent bystanders. And what about gangland turf wars and the drugs barons?

Some say you can run but you cannot hide. Try saying that to the old men and women with their walking sticks and Zimmer frames.

The vision here is of a God burning to bring truth and safety. He will return to Zion and bring his people back because he is both faithful and righteous.

Do we return to God or does he return to us? *He on his shoulders gently laid and home rejoicing brought me.*

Prayer

*As we prepare for Christmas in our homes with loving families, we remember those who have no homes - no place of safety - those made homeless by natural disasters and those who live in war torn countries living in fear for their own and their families' lives. We pray for the work of Crisis, Shelter and others seeking to alleviate the loneliness and unhappiness which Christmas can sometimes bring. **Amen.***

Wednesday 12th November

Zechariah 8:20-23

Language is a source of pride especially for small nations. It is central to culture and enables thoughts and ideas to be shared and passed on. But it can also be a barrier preventing understanding.

The origin of the name Barbarian was a description of strange speech: "*bar... bar.*" Language can be good or bad. In spiritual terms good language is edifying, bad language destructive.

Here we have a prophetic vision of people coming together to seek God and to pray. How in a world of diverse cultures can we together find God?

Some problems are global: peace under the shadow of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; climate change from whatever cause, pandemic disease, human rights.

How else can the UN Sustainable Development goals be achieved unless the nations work together? These include: *No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health & Well-being, Quality Education, Gender Equality* and 12 others.

"God is with you." Christians would identify that Jew as Jesus. Simon Peter asked, "Where (else) should we go? You have the words of eternal life." It is said that Christianity is caught not taught. Can it be that people see that God is with us? A previous minister posed the question, "If you were arrested for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

If the world would touch the hem it would be healed.

Prayer

Help us, Lord, to speak the language of love, to work for peace in a troubled world, and to live our faith so that through our actions people may come to know you. Amen

Thursday 13th December

Malachi 3:1-7

The thought of being purified and refined, with its powerful images of strong soap and fire, does not make for comfortable reading. It sounds both painful and excruciating!

There is the promise within these words that on that day, all that is not of God, all that is false, all that has been allowed to happen, will be washed away and burnt in an act of restoration and purification, in order that what is left will be acceptable and pleasing to God.

I am reminded of Stewart Henderson's poem, "I'm dousing my self with cosmetics", in which he speaks of all the beauty products he has vainly tried and tested in an attempt to make him smell better. The last verse says;

*"So dear Estee Lauder do tell me
When my body is clean and hair dyed
It must be a phase
Please help me erase
The sweat stain that lies deep inside."*

On a closer reading of these words from the prophet however, we also find hope – for as the Good News translation puts it: *"I am the Lord, and I do not change. And so you, the descendants of Jacob, are not yet completely lost. You, like your ancestors before you, have turned away from my laws and have not kept them. Turn back to me, and I will turn to you."*

No matter how hard we try, we cannot be perfect and do all that God requires of us. This is why we wait in hope and expectation during Advent, waiting for the one who not only can cleanse the sweat stain that lies deep inside but also ensures that God will never forget us, nor give up on us!

Prayer

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.***

Friday 14th December

Malachi 3:8-12

As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth we take from this passage a call to be holy. More than that, we take encouragement to connect holiness with the call to live responsibly; that is to serve others in humility, particularly those who are less well off than we are, and to lead in the knowledge and wisdom of Christ.

Malachi condemned corruption among priests and cheating by those who would make blemished offerings. We no longer make tithes and offerings to meet the demands of the law that God gave as part of his holy covenant. We measure holiness by how we live, not just by how we prepare for worship. Yet the obedience of Christian people is connected with self-giving, and holiness is associated with the depth of devotion in worship.

The idea that God may be robbed of what is due to him is as alive as it was in Malachi's day. The wonder is that God promises overflowing blessings: through generous giving for the support of our neighbour; and through worship with a genuine desire for renewal.

Prayer

Lord God, pour out your blessings this Advent! May they overflow as we give ourselves for your work and the cause of justice; and as we come to worship you with repentant and receptive hearts.

Amen

Saturday 15th December

Malachi 3:13-4:5

And so ends (except for one verse) the Old Testament, the old covenant between God and his people.

We could consider that the old covenant book closes in failure - the people of God have largely gone their own way and abandoned their God. The covenant is broken. Most people have found it too difficult to keep the laws.

This passage gives two glints of hope. The first is that there is a remnant of people (the remainers) who revere the Lord (3:16), people who will serve God throughout the dark days to come.

The second hope is that a day is coming, a day when God will be victorious, the day we recognise as the incarnation of Jesus. The people are left with a tantalising sign: the prophet Elijah will return before that day, before the coming of the Messiah, the Christ.

So what are the people meant to do? The people are left with the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets.

Do we remain in God's presence? At a time when Brexit is challenging our identity and our values, where do we belong, where do we remain?

As Christians we are called to first be children of God, a holy nation and royal priesthood, open to all and recognising no boundaries or borders. We are called to be stewards of God's creation, world people who recognise that trade must be fair for the people who produce the goods and we have a responsibility for the impact those goods and their packaging have on the environment in which we live.

We are called to be part of God's vine, to remain in him and he in us.

Amen.

Sunday 16th December

Luke 3:7-18

John's message may seem distant or even irrelevant to us, he spoke to a world where being a person of faith was the norm, a world of poverty, financial turmoil, social anxiety, ruled by people whose values differed from their own. Nothing like 2018, right?

John begins by condemning his entire congregation "You brood of vipers", he speaks of those who go through motions of faith, following the rules and traditions but failing to truly live out that faith. These are a people in the wilderness of reality and spirit, they long for a world of forgiveness, Justice, love, peace and yet they've let go of the very faith that can bring it to pass.

John's message is one of hope not condemnation and its hope is for all generations, the world we long for, the Messiah, they're coming, it isn't too late to repent, change and choose to live out our faith every day.

In a time of global turmoil, when people live in fear and poverty, ruled by those who may not share their values our challenge is that we the people of God are not a brood of vipers but instead live out our faith daily, treating others fairly, sharing what we have, living true, honest and faithful lives for our God.

Prayer: *In a world of turmoil loving God we offer you our lives, may we have the courage to speak your love, act your love and be your love for all we meet, this day and always. Amen*

Monday 17th December - Matthew 1:1-17

Yesterday's reading shows John the Baptist saying it's worthless to claim Abraham as an ancestor because God can raise up children from the stones. Yet today we see Matthew saying just the opposite. Or do we?

Matthew presents Jesus throughout his gospel as king of the Jews. His genealogy, baptism, message and miracles all point to the inescapable conclusion that Christ is king. And through the resurrection he lives.

Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Through Abraham the covenant of blessing was made. Through David the covenant of kingship.

Matthew wants us to believe Jesus is the Messiah through whom a new covenant is made (Matt 26:28 and Jer 31:31-34) one of forgiveness and adoption.

Matthew's genealogy generally shows descent from the younger brother. Christ's descent is therefore not a matter of legal inheritance, but God's providence, "He exalts those of low degree". The promise does not come by man's rules but the gift of God.

Some ancestors built the temple. Some, like David were repentant sinners. Some were outsiders, some good, some not so, who unwittingly fulfilled God's purposes. Jesus would go on to build the everlasting temple.

Joseph is not called the father, but the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Messiah. Joseph has faith and love. He legitimises Mary, the pregnant virgin and Jesus is added to his line. The kingdom, then, is not from natural descent, but from adoption through faith.

Prayer

May we see this genealogy through the eyes of faith. May we have faith and understand in our hearts that Jesus is King. May we surrender our lives to the king of kings and enter his kingdom.

Tuesday 18th December

Matthew 1: 18-24

This is such a well-known passage that it is easy to marginalise Joseph's role in the birth of Jesus. Joseph was betrothed to Mary, and betrothal could only be terminated by divorce or the death of one of the parties.

Imagine Joseph's anguish when he discovered that the woman he loved and believed to be pure and chaste was in fact pregnant. He could have divorced Mary publicly, even had her stoned, but Joseph was a man of compassion and mercy; therefore, he decided to divorce her quietly. I believe he really loved Mary, despite her supposed infidelity.

When the angel told him to marry Mary because the baby was conceived of the Holy Spirit and to name Him Jesus, "because he would save His people from their sins," (v 21) Joseph did not question or hesitate but faithfully obeyed God and took Mary as his wife.

The implications if he had said, "no" are unimaginable, but Joseph chose to accept Jesus as his son, and through his obedience to God's will, the scriptures were fulfilled (Isaiah 7:14); Immanuel (God is with us) was born of a virgin.

Joseph chose to accept God's Son as his child and because of Jesus' incredible sacrifice for our sins, God chooses to accept us as His children.

We won't all get visits from angels, but God does speak to us every day and we must learn to listen to Him and be obedient to His Will, just as Joseph was. Amazing things can happen!

Prayer

Gracious Lord, at this season of Advent, we ask you to fill us with the simple obedience, trust and faith of Joseph; and as we prayerfully listen for Your voice, may we know the joy and peace in our hearts that only You can give. Amen.

Wednesday 19th December

Luke 1:5-25

What a portrait of John, the last prophet of Israel! Asked to describe him in a few words, you might say 'wild', 'holy', 'uncompromising'.

Here, in the promise of his birth, he is portrayed by two old testament texts: he will drink neither wine nor strong drink; he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children. John would certainly condemn the father who, as in many stories, returns home drunk and abuses wife and children. Not quite what Luke is driving at, but not far off!

The first text is taken from Numbers, in which one who takes the vow of the Nazarite must abstain from wine and other fermented drink; part of a vow of separation and devotion to God.

The second is more obscure. It's taken from the very last verse of the old testament: I will send the prophet Elijah before the day of the Lord; he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and of children to their fathers. An allusion to Abraham, perhaps, who would direct his children in the way of the Lord; or to the Lord who would 'keep his covenant of love to a thousand generations'.

What these texts share is the idea that being holy involves rising above oneself and one's own interests. Alcohol is not a bad thing in itself. But if it chains us to the present, we won't be of much service to the Lord or other people. Looking out for ourselves is not a bad thing. But not if we neglect children, neighbour or future generations.

William Blake expresses the gift we seek as we prepare for the birth of Christ:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise*

Prayer *Lord God, who in the birth of Christ touches our world with the kiss of eternity, receive these words as our prayer for today. Amen*

Thursday 20th December

Isaiah 9:2-7

A popular passage for inclusion in carol services, often entitled "Isaiah foretells the birth of Jesus". That attribution perhaps owes as much to hindsight as it does to prophecy.

Once Jesus was recognised as the means of divine salvation there was a tendency to assume that all OT prophecies of coming kings or coming deliverance had always referred to Jesus. While the birth of any child is usually a joyous occasion and a symbol of hope, it's entirely possible that Isaiah was referring to the accession of a king who on being anointed would become "God's son" in a special way. Accessions were always exciting times, with the hope that the new king would be better than his father and that this reign would be a time of peace and prosperity for the kingdom.

We tend to edit out verses 3-6 from our Christmas celebrations, preferring to focus on the imagery of light defeating the darkness and the special child at the centre of our faith.

In doing so we avoid the uncomfortable reminder that any victory which brings peace for a nation also brings pain to the families of those slain or injured in the battles; a reminder that is particularly poignant this year as we commemorate the centenary of the end of WW1.

Prayer Lord God, remind us we pray that whenever times seem dark and our lives bleak and without hope, your light can still break through to surprise us. Reassure us of your presence with us even in our deepest darkness and give us the courage to hold on in faith and step out with joy to walk in your path of light **Amen.**

Friday 21st December

Isaiah 11:1-10

One of the welcoming signs in the depths of winter is to see spring bulbs beginning to break through. Isaiah's vision goes further, promising a branch that will bear fruit. This is a link not only with Jesus the little child about to be celebrated but also with the vine of which we are the branches. Jesus said that it is by its fruit a tree is recognised. Love, joy, peace and so on, these are the fruits of Christian life.

These words of hope were written to survivors at a low point of their history. The second half of this passage looks at nature, red in tooth and claw, and sees a world that needs redemption. He sees a world safe for children.

When war, famine and disease hit the headlines it is the children who suffer. When Winston Churchill was asked what was the best form of investment during the war his reply was, "putting milk into babies." When Jesus was asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" he called a little child and said that we will never enter the kingdom of heaven without the humility of this child. Being child-like not childish.

The child leads along a road running from Bethlehem to Calvary. This is the where the pursuit of justice, righteousness and faithfulness leads. If you want to know which hymn refers to "the earth filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" remember *God is working his purpose out*.

Prayer:

*Kingdom of Christ, for your coming we pray;
hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
when this new song your creation shall sing;
Satan is vanquished and Jesus is King.*

Charles Silvester Horne (1865-1914)

Amen.

Saturday 22nd December

Luke 1:26-38

Oppressed Israel was continuing to wait for the promised Messiah, God's Anointed One, who would save His people. Unexpectedly, God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary, a young girl in Nazareth, promised in marriage to Joseph, a descendant of King David.

His message was that Mary would give birth to a son, to be named Jesus (God is Salvation), the Son of God, who would "receive the throne of his ancestor David" and reign for ever. God's promise (2Samuel7:12-14) was being fulfilled but not without an earthly mother.

Neither Mary's background nor status are mentioned, but she had "found favour with God"(vs.28, 30). She was attuned to God's word and willing to obey. But "how?" Her question was about the process. The Holy Spirit and God's power would come on her and surround her.

Her troubled heart and mind were addressed with an assurance of the Lord's presence and the miracle already taking place in her relative, Elizabeth. With God, nothing will be impossible.

Mary made her remarkable, humble response:

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"

And Gabriel departed. We are left in awe.

Mary humbly accepted her task to be the mother of the Son of God, the Saviour and true king of the world, risking scandal and disgrace, facing an unknown future but trusting God.

Prayer *Loving God, we praise and thank you for the fulfilment of your promise and Salvation plan and for Mary's example. May we be attuned to you, trust you and have the grace to say: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". Amen.*

Sunday 23rd December

Luke 1:39-45

Two pregnant women meet to compare notes. One a very young woman, the other, older, and almost past child-bearing years.

For both this pregnancy was a surprise, unexpected and very significant. Both families had been given a message from God, a message which created emotions of anxiety, worry, delight, concern and puzzlement.

Why has God chosen me? What will my child's life be like? Do I have the strength and capacity required? Every new mother or mother-to-be will share these anxieties and joys.

Neither Mary nor Elizabeth could have foreseen the lives their boys would lead or the impact they would have on the world as **we** know it.

We have seen and heard the story as it emerged ;John the Baptist calling people to repentance and preparing the way for the Messiah ; Jesus, the Redeemer and Saviour, calling people to come and follow.

As we celebrate the birth of Christ at this time let us remember the significance of two mothers who were prepared to follow God's will.

Prayer

Lord, our God, we pray for all mothers and mothers-to-be at this time as they nurture and cherish their children. Help us to focus on the true meaning of Christmas.

*God incarnate , born of woman, part of our being, here among us. May your Holy Spirit fill us with your love and compassion, so that the world may see your glory. **Amen***

Monday 24th December

Luke 1:46-55

The Magnificat, Mary's beautiful and poetic response to a meeting with her pregnant cousin Elizabeth has become one of the great hymns of the church and is part of the liturgy throughout Christianity. It is full of Old Testament imagery and is often likened to Hannah's song of praise in Samuel 2 v1-10 as she offers her son into God's service.

Two cousins meet, one pregnant after years of yearning for a child and the other, expecting much earlier than she could have anticipated. After their joyous, initial greeting it is the younger cousin Mary, who bursts forth with this lovely song of praise to *God, my saviour*.

And what a saviour this God is! For Mary tells Elizabeth that the world will be turned upside down and the old order completely reversed. Those who are proud and pleased with themselves will count as nothing; the humble will be praised rather than the mighty and the hungry will be fed while the rich are ignored. It is not surprising that Mary's song is sometimes called revolutionary.

Mary seemed to recognise that what was happening to her was the start of something wonderful: her saviour God was looking forward towards a society, which would not only consider the needs of all but would share so that all might benefit. That is a wonderful thought to hold close as we approach Christmas Day.

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the faithful witness of your saints through the ages and particularly this day we thank you for Mary and her song of praise which lifts our hearts. Help us to follow her simple humility so that we may go forward living lives that reflect your revolutionary love for the world symbolised in the manger at Christmas. Amen.

Tuesday 25th December

Luke 2:1-20

'It's stupid, but I hadn't thought he'd be so light. I can fit him in the palms of my hands. If I couldn't see him, I'd barely believe he was there.

My son. That's what Mary says I should call him. My son.

And from the moment he appeared, as he screamed in his tiny voice, I knew he was. What's happened is too big for me. For my world.

Mary talks of God and miracles. Mary says this little one will save us all. He's already done that for me.

I could have turned my back and let Mary go, when she told me she was pregnant. No one would have blamed me. They'd have said it was what she deserved. She'd have fallen so far.

I'm still not sure what I believe. But I believe in Mary. And I believe in this child.

He is so helpless. He is so beautiful. Is this what it's like to hold God in your hands?' Rachel Mann

Holding God in your hands – God as a vulnerable infant, utterly dependent upon the parent. This is incarnation. This is God contracted to a span. This is the whole of everything that God can ever be, held in the arms of a loving father.

As we reflect on Joseph holding Jesus, – **we pray**

*For those who are vulnerable & those who have lost their way
For those who have deliberately walked away or those who are alone,*

Those who are bereaved & those who are heartbroken

Those who are left behind & those who have left.

For those who are caring for those at home, in hospital, a care home or hospice.

For those for whom life is an unknown country & for those who have a new normal.

For those whose hands we will hold today & those who will hold ours.

*And we thank God that we are held, by the God who allows us to hold Him. **Amen.***