



## **Wantage & Abingdon Methodist Circuit**

### **Advent Devotional 2019**

**Readings, reflections and prayers for the Advent Season**



## Readings for Advent Devotional 2019.

The countdown to Christmas is now well and truly under way.

Lists are being drawn up, preparations are being made, cards are being written, parcels are being posted, decorations are being sorted and trees are being put up. There is so much to do and so little time so it seems.

Add to this, parties, festivities, carol services, concerts and all the other events that happen at this time of year and it can all pass you by in a blur of frenzied activity.

It is in such a context that I have great pleasure in commending this year's Circuit Advent devotional booklet to you.

My grateful thanks to all those who along with myself contributed to this venture; Stephen Atkinson, Libby Bolton, Helen Carter, Ruth Dams, Andrew Dixon, Valerie Grist, Peter Hemmings,, Barbara Kershaw, Esther Miller, Malcolm Newton, Selina Nisbett, Daphne Savage, Barbara Sexton, Carol Sturt, Ian Sturt, and Liz Wood.

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

For each day there is a Bible reading, a reflection upon it and a prayer. By using this booklet throughout Advent, may we all find an oasis of quiet in which we can find time for God as we prepare for the coming of His son once more.

May we find some space each day for a reflective journey towards Bethlehem rather than a hurried dash at the last minute where we arrived exhausted and on our knees.

I know only too well how this can seem to be a luxury that simply doesn't exist, so however you prepare for Christmas and whatever the speed at which you travel – I wish you a peaceful and blessed Advent and Christmas.

With love and God Bless to you all,

*Keith*

**Sunday 1<sup>st</sup>**

**Matthew 24:36-44**

**36** *'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

Noting the date of a September meeting into my 2020 diary I pondered the wisdom of planning ahead. Life doesn't often go exactly as we intend (the corresponding 2019 event was rescheduled twice!).

Thankfully most of us don't live in areas where catastrophic natural disasters wipe out a section of the community at irregular intervals but, on a personal level, many of us know what it is to come to terms with life changing events that we had not expected. But staying awake and alert for an indefinite period is not a viable option - it's a predictable path towards a stress induced breakdown.

The return of Jesus is not an event we can forecast but we can come to know the presence of God with us now. The difference between "God is nowhere" and "God is now here" is just a little extra space. If we can find a routine that allows more time for God amid the daily chores that are too mundane ever to be recorded in a diary, then we can grow and develop that relationship of trust that allows us to recognise the prompts of divine guidance. The little nudges that make us alert to the needs of others; the wisdom which allows us to recognise what is really fulfilling as opposed to that which simply fills up time.

*Lord grant us the grace to trust today and all of our tomorrows into your loving care. Amen*

**Monday 2<sup>nd</sup>**

**Isaiah 1:1-11**

**1** The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

The Wickedness of Judah

**2**

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;

for the Lord has spoken:

I reared children and brought them up,

but they have rebelled against me.

**3**

The ox knows its owner,

and the donkey its master's crib;

but Israel does not know,

my people do not understand.

**4**

Ah, sinful nation,

people laden with iniquity,

offspring who do evil,

children who deal corruptly,

who have forsaken the Lord,

who have despised the Holy One of Israel,

who are utterly estranged!

**5**

Why do you seek further beatings?

Why do you continue to rebel?

The whole head is sick,

and the whole heart faint.

**6**

From the sole of the foot even to the head,

there is no soundness in it,

but bruises and sores

and bleeding wounds;

they have not been drained, or bound up,

or softened with oil.

**7**

Your country lies desolate,

your cities are burned with fire;

in your very presence

aliens devour your land;

it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

**8**

And daughter Zion is left

like a booth in a vineyard,

like a shelter in a cucumber field,

like a besieged city.

**9**

If the Lord of hosts

had not left us a few survivors,

we would have been like Sodom,

and become like Gomorrah.

**10**

Hear the word of the Lord,  
you rulers of Sodom!  
Listen to the teaching of our God,  
you people of Gomorrah!

**11**

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
says the Lord;  
I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams  
and the fat of fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of goats.

Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah during the second half of 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. You might expect the beginning of the book which bears his name to recount Isaiah's call to speak God's word as a prophet, but for that we have to turn to chapter 6, where we learn that his call came in the year that Uzziah king of Judah died i.e. 742 BC. By the beginning of chapter 1, Isaiah has lived through the reigns of Jotham and Ahaz and into that of Hezekiah.

During the reigns of Uzziah and Jotham, Judah had been prosperous, but during the reign of Ahaz, the Assyrians to the north became a threat and conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and in 701BC, when Hezekiah was king, they attacked Judah, capturing many cities, though not Jerusalem. Verse 7 gives a picture of the devastation caused.

Isaiah tells the people that their suffering is a result of their unfaithfulness to God (v.4&5). In verses 2&3 he reminds them of how God has cared for them as a nation but they have nevertheless disobeyed him. Their actions are compared unfavourably with those of domestic animals which acknowledge the hand that feeds them. They have not ceased to carry out acts of worship (v.11), but that is of no use unless it represents their willingness to serve God in **all** they do.

But destruction does not have the last word. Jerusalem (Zion) has not been destroyed. There are survivors giving hope for a better future (v.8&9)

*Lord, we know that those who suffer most are not necessarily the most sinful. We know too that we often fail you but nevertheless receive you blessings. Help us always to be grateful and may our worship and prayers be an expression of our willingness to serve you in every part of our lives. **Amen***

**Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup>**

**Isaiah 1:12-20**

**12**

When you come to appear before me,  
who asked this from your hand?  
Trample my courts no more;

**13**

bringing offerings is futile;  
incense is an abomination to me.  
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—  
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

**14**

Your new moons and your appointed festivals  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me,  
I am weary of bearing them.

**15**

When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.

**16**

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,

**17**

learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.

**18**

Come now, let us argue it out,  
says the Lord:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be like snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool.

**19**

If you are willing and obedient,  
you shall eat the good of the land;

**20**

but if you refuse and rebel,  
you shall be devoured by the sword;  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Wow! And I thought I was doing alright. Isaiah starts this message with a rocket. Jesus will be saying the same thing later to the Pharisees, calling them Whited Sepulchres.

The Christian songwriter Paul Field has a song entitled "*It's got to make a difference*". It is not sufficient to get a cosy feeling on a Sunday morning. He wants faith that's going to make him good to someone else.

In our desire to do something beautiful for God are we forgetting something? And what's this about feasts and festivals – are not Advent and Christmas prime examples?

In Psalm 51 David remembers "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart."

It is the gambler who thinks he has a good hand who can lose a fortune. He would not bet on a pair of twos.

Isaiah invites his people to take stock. And where are we? He serves a God who can forgive. Sins that are blood crimson can become whiter than snow.

Jesus said it is not right to approach God harbouring a grudge against a brother (or sister). First make peace and then you can bring your gift.

St Paul told King Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Come now let us settle the matter. The invitation is there.

*Father, we come to you in the certain knowledge that the door is always open and that you will be ready to meet us. We come in the midst of our joys and sorrows, with our victories and our defeats. We come knowing we shall be accepted. We come because you are the Lord. Amen.*

*500 Prayers For All Occasions by David C Cook (Kingsway Communications, 2009)*

**Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup>      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!

In the darkest days of winter, we dream of summer, knowing it will come with lighter mornings and warming sun. But in the darkness, we so often see in our world it's harder to see the light of hope, while we know summer will return, do we truly believe peace will come? Can we picture a world where children are not imprisoned, innocents are not slaughtered, and our world leaders are not motivated by power or greed?

Isaiah asks us to believe just that, that in the last days the world will be different, and there will be peace.

Right here, right now, that peace may seem distant, even impossible, but still we dream of it, long for it. We live in hope, hope that one day the world will walk in the light of the Lord and learn war no more. If we believed the dark of the winter would last forever, we would only prepare for winter, but we know the summer will come, so we buy summer clothes and plan our holidays.

Believing that the day of the Lord will come, and the world will live in peace we must prepare for that peace, work for that peace both within ourselves and in our

relationships with others. We are called to live his way, speak his words of peace and shine a light into the darkness of this world bringing hope to others.

*Lord of light we pray that when the darkness seems endless, we may see your light shining through. When the violence seems unstoppable, we may hear your message of peace and when our lives seem hopeless, we may find our hope in you. Amen*

Thursday 5<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 4:2-6

**2** On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. **3** Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, **4** once the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgement and by a spirit of burning. **5** Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory there will be a canopy. **6** It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Immediately prior to this passage, Isaiah talks about the disintegration of society in and around Jerusalem as the result of war and conflict, but also as a result of the people abandoning God. People may have asked “where is God in this disaster” and Isaiah is quick to reply that God has not abandoned his people, however dire the situation may seem. He is in the midst of it, binding up the broken-hearted and washing away their dirt and their disgrace. The concept of remnant is important to Isaiah. Many have been lost to the true faith, just as many have been lost in battle. A faithful few remain. They will be called holy (v3), set apart, dedicated to God.

In our world today, as we talk also about the disintegration of society and the natural and unnatural disasters which we face, we are called to be a holy and distinctive people. Jesus calls us to be salt and light - purifying and improving the world in which we live. We are called to make a difference in the lives of those around us and pray for those beyond our horizons. In this season, we remember that it is not the powerful and wealthy who can change the world, but it is the incarnate Jesus Christ, born in a stable - through him we see the glory of God and through him we are called to be holy.

*Lord God, we thank you that you call us to be holy, your children. Use us, we pray, to shed light in darkness, to build up the broken hearted and to glorify your name. Amen.*

Friday 6<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 6:1-8

**6** In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. **2** Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. **3** And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' **4** The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. **5** And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' **6** Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. **7** The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' **8** Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

Entering into this powerful image, we see Isaiah, a man in despair, calling out his vulnerabilities, and then marked by the apparent suffering of searing burning coals upon his lips. Yet through that pain, he is somehow "cauterized", strengthened and transformed and he steps forward to take upon himself the unenviable and inevitably challenging role, of a prophet of God.

Henri Nouwen speaks powerfully to me, of using our pain for good. He said, "When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers." I don't think that Nouwen is forgetting that for some, woundedness can have very grave consequences indeed, but he highlights that within those who have gone through their personal crucibles of suffering, there lies a greater sensitivity to the pain of others and the possibility of healing, and triumphant release.

Martin Leckebusch, STF 271, speaks of Jesus, our wounded healer, sharing in our suffering and reminds me of the image of the resurrected Christ in the fascinating, yet disturbing, Isenheim Altar piece by Matthias Grunewald. It depicts a resurrection that is born of the horrific, cauterizing crucible of the suffering-cross; complete, beautiful, triumphant, yet wounded, fully identifying with our humanity. So we give thanks for Christ incarnate;

*"Come, broken Victor, condemned to a cross —  
how great are the treasures we gain from your loss!  
Your willing agreement to share in our strife  
transforms our despair into fullness of life."*

Saturday 7<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 7:1-14

**7** In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it. **2** When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

**3** Then the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, **4** and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah.

**5** Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying,

**6** Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; **7** therefore thus says the Lord God:

It shall not stand,

and it shall not come to pass.

**8**

For the head of Aram is Damascus,

and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)

**9**

The head of Ephraim is Samaria,

and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.

If you do not stand firm in faith,

you shall not stand at all.

**10** Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, **11** Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. **12** But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.

**13** Then Isaiah[d] said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? **14** Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman[e] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.[f]

Don't be put off by all the names of people and places.

This is what was happening. The powerful kingdom of Assyria to the north was threatening its southern neighbours.

These were Aram (Syria), capital Damascus and king Reza; Israel, the northern Jewish kingdom, capital Samaria and king Pekah; Judah, the southern Jewish kingdom, capital Jerusalem and king Ahaz. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem and God spoke to Ahaz through him. Rezin king of Aram and Pekah king of Israel were determined to resist invasion and wanted Judah to join them. Ahaz was reluctant to do this, so Reza and Pekah were planning to overthrow him and put a compliant leader, the son of Tabeel, in his place.

The message from God via Elijah (v.3-9) was, "Don't be afraid. They will not conquer you if you put your trust in God." Despite Ahaz reluctance to seek a sign from God confirming that he would protect Judah, Ahaz was given a promise - a picture of peaceful and joyful normality. "A young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (which means God with us). That this normal event would happen would prove that God was active in Judah. In his gospel, Matthew takes this verse and applies it to the birth of Jesus to Mary. That event showed even more clearly that God is with humankind, and is with us always through his

spirit. So the message of this passage to us is that always, even in times of difficulty, we should “stand firm in faith” because God is with us.

*Father God, as we look forward to the celebration of Jesus' birth, may we be truly thankful for this sign of your love for us and all humankind and of your presence with us always. Help us to put our trust in you and live our lives guided by your Spirit. **Amen***

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup>**

**Matthew 3:1-12**

**3** In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, **2** ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ **3** This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.”

**4** Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. **5** Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, **6** and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

**7** But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruit worthy of repentance. **9** Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. **10** Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

**11** ‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with [c] the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

John the Baptist is a ‘root and branch’ man; a preacher looking for radical conversion. At one level, that means that the repentance he demands requires an ethical response, and one that goes more than skin-deep. If someone says they have turned away from evil, and turned towards God, the reality of that change needs to be seen in a life lived differently, one closer to the life God means us to live.

As a mark of this repentance, John administered baptism. His followers were many, and their influence persisted beyond the New Testament period. But John never thought of himself as anything other than a forerunner, one who prepares the ground for someone immeasurably ‘mightier’ than he. Thus, while the baptism John performed was symbolic, the outward sign of repentance, he looked forward with the prophets – with Isaiah, for example – to ‘the Spirit poured upon us from on high’ (Isa. 32:15); and with Malachi to the ‘refiner’s fire’ (3:2); both Spirit and fire to purify and cleanse, creating true holiness of heart.

Here, says John, is the work of the one ‘whose sandals I am not worthy to carry’; in whose challenge is both judgement and salvation; in whom the Messianic age has come: Jesus of Nazareth.

*Lord, make our repentance real; help us to live out what it means, and to know the security of your forgiveness and love. Let our lives point to you, so that people may come to know you as Saviour and friend. Amen.*

**Monday 9<sup>th</sup>**

**Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12**

**3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **4** just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. **5** He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

**11** In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, **12** so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

Count your blessings. God blesses us in so many ways and in so many different circumstances. I have a mental picture of Jesus standing on the mountain and seeing various groups of people: some in low spirits, a family in mourning, meek ones who expect nothing, kind people who show mercy to others, someone else settling an argument and people persecuted for what they believe. Jesus has a blessing for all of them.

Jesus told the disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit". Others have spoken of the grace of God that goes before us. Paul was particularly conscious it was that God had chosen him and that God had given him a task to perform. But what a challenge: to be holy and blameless in God's sight! A noble aspiration – but I do not see myself as either. Paul reminded the Romans that "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us". I am the prodigal who says, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son".

It is important for Christians to encourage one another in their discipleship. Here Paul offers us a reminder of both the privilege and the responsibility of being faithful servants.

God be praised!

To God be the glory! Great things he has done!  
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,  
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,  
and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!  
Let the earth hear his voice!  
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!  
Let the people rejoice!  
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;  
and give him the glory – great things he has done!*

*Fanny Crosby (1820-1915)*

**Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup>**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

**11**

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

**2**

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

**3**

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;

**4**

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

**5**

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

**6**

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

**7**

The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

**8**

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

**9**

They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.

**10** On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

In the Hebrew ordering of the books that we refer to as the Old Testament, the books of Kings and Isaiah stand back to back.

The books of Kings end with the sad story of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Hebrew people. The book of Isaiah deals with the destiny of Jerusalem within the crisis of exile and the promise of what will happen when God brings Jerusalem out of exile into a new creation.

The fruit of Jesse's tree will offer a new way of life - one in which wolves will live with lambs, and little children will lead them.

It will be a time when all will understand what God wants the created world to be, a place of peace, justice and new life. In this passage, he gives us a vision, a magnificent glimpse of this new way of life.

*Root of Jesse,*

*We pray that you will use each of us to bring about your peaceable kingdom so that all the world might know true peace. Help us to set the example of your love, your selflessness, your justice and mercy to all. Amen.*

**Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup>    Isaiah 25:6-10**

**6**

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

**7**

And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

**8**

he will swallow up death for ever.  
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.

**9**

It will be said on that day,  
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

**10**

For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.  
The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place  
as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit.

One of the wonderful features of advent is anticipation; 'looking forward'. Advent means 'coming' so we look forward to and anticipate what's to come. We anticipate and get ready for Christmas. We look forward to singing carols celebrating the birth of Jesus and we look forward to good food, presents and festivities, and we thank God for providing us with salvation.

This passage also looks forward. It is part of what's known as the 'apocalypse of Isaiah'. It has much in common with other apocalyptic literature in the bible, such as the book of Revelation where similar things are foreseen and looked forward to. The themes are also familiar to us from Jesus' life and teaching; the wedding feast, new wine, judgement and end of days.

It is also a powerful precursor of Mary's song of praise in Luke 1; His mercy is for those that fear him, the lowly are lifted up and the hungry filled, the powerful oppressors are sent away. It anticipates and welcomes the salvation of God; death is vanquished, tears are wiped away and a banquet prepared for the coronation feast, or wedding feast, the joining of the bride of Christ (a picture of the church) and the lamb of God presented in Revelation as the city, the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. This is what we look forward to. All is available to those who put their trust in him, it is their vindication and reward, and rejoicing is the order of the day.

*Father, as we look forward to celebrating the birth of your son, and as we anticipate his coming again, help us to put our trust in him and fill us with joy in him for he is our shield and our very great reward. Amen*

**Thursday 12<sup>th</sup>      Isaiah 26:1-9**

**26** On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

We have a strong city;  
    he sets up victory  
    like walls and bulwarks.

**2**

Open the gates,  
    so that the righteous nation that keeps faith  
    may enter in.

**3**

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace—  
    in peace because they trust in you.

**4**

Trust in the Lord for ever,  
    for in the Lord God[a]  
    you have an everlasting rock.

**5**

For he has brought low  
    the inhabitants of the height;  
    the lofty city he lays low.  
He lays it low to the ground,  
    casts it to the dust.

**6**

The foot tramples it,  
    the feet of the poor,  
    the steps of the needy.

**7**

The way of the righteous is level;  
    O Just One, you make smooth the path of the righteous.

**8**

In the path of your judgements,  
    O Lord, we wait for you;  
your name and your renown  
    are the soul's desire.

**9**

My soul yearns for you in the night,  
    my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.  
For when your judgements are in the earth,  
    the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

Today's reading could have been a psalm. Words of someone who has confidence in God. There is not a 'why?' in sight.

Isaiah knows the Lord as the Rock Eternal. We can see the words of experience from a man who has had a hard time and found the God had not abandoned him.

Isaiah understands the meaning of Salvation and finds it in the city of God. Walls and ramparts are defensive structures: like the Shield of Faith which is able to quench the fiery darts or flaming arrows. He knows the power of evil: and the need to have a sure defence.

Here is a soul that yearns for God in the night. The time when doubt and sorrow invade the soul: when problems seem their worst.

Jesus told his disciples that they would experience persecution. The way of the righteous is **not** always smooth. Scripture tells the stories of people who trusted the Lord.

This trust is coupled with a belief that justice and mercy will eventually triumph. Verses 5 and 6 anticipate The Magnificat humbling those who dwell on high. Isaiah looks forward to the day of God's judgment coming and people learning righteousness.

Jesus speaks of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness: they will be filled. In the morning Isaiah's spirit longs for God.

We sing the line "My spirit longs for thee, O Living Word!" Are you an evening or a morning person? Either way, trust the Lord.

*Prayer by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)*

Give us, O Lord, a steadfast heart, which no unworthy affection may drag downwards, give us an unconquered heart, which no tribulation may wear out; give us an upright heart, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Bestow upon us also, O Lord our God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friday 13<sup>th</sup>

Isaiah 30:19-26

**19** Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. **20** Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. **21** And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.' **22** Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, 'Away with you!' **23** He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; **24** and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. **25** On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. **26** Moreover, the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

This is one of those Bible passages which, on first reading, seems to have little to do with the life that we live today in 2019. Written about 700BC, it is set within a collection of prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Judah. But we are here in the UK, looking forward to Christmas, so what has it to do with us?

However, for the first time in 200 years, and at the time of writing, we are in the midst of a campaign that will end in a December general election, and, in a country that feels more fractured and divided than we have ever known it. An election that we are told will 'settle Brexit' one way or the other. Depending on when you read this, we may know the outcome and may, or may not, feel more hopeful that our country will begin to heal itself and, as Isaiah stated: "*you shall weep no more*".

Isaiah, though, is also giving a deeply personal message about a gracious God who hears his people cry and responds. A God who wants to be seen and heard. This is where we DO understand, despite the huge differences between us and those first hearers of this prophecy, because we look forward to celebrating the greatest of gifts, a God we can see **in** Jesus and hear **through** Jesus. A God who, through his Spirit, is always behind us gently urging us on "*This is the way; walk in it.*"

*Gracious God, may we recognise anew the trust you place in us as your people when we recognise and accept your gift of Jesus. May we remember that the gift is given not to keep, but so that we will share it with others. In this Advent help us to see and seize an opportunity to share the story of our loving God, who wants to be seen and heard, and the joy and peace that came when we found the way and walked in it. Amen*

**Saturday 14<sup>th</sup>**

**Isaiah 35:1-10**

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus **2** it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.

**3**

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.

**4**

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.'

**5**

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

**6**

then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;

**7**

the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

**8**

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

**9**

No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.

**10**

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

I find it impossible to read this poetic passage without smiling as the joy it describes fills my heart with hope and happiness.

Our reading starts in the wilderness, a place where we are completely dependent on God to provide for our every need. There is no water, no food, no shelter, but we don't need to worry because God is with us. He provided the Israelites with manna for forty years as they wandered in the desert. He provided John the Baptist with locusts and wild honey as he ministered in the desert. He looked after Jesus when he was tempted in the desert for forty days and nights.

Then, amazing news! God is sending His Son to save His people! The desert will become a place of vibrant colour and life. He will give sight to the blind, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap and the dumb will shout for joy!

Jesus, the living water, the way, the truth and the life, is about to be born. As long as the people of God walk with Him, they will have nothing to fear. The wicked will not travel with them and no wild animal will harm them. They will enter the City of God with singing and everlasting joy.

As we journey together through this period of Advent, let us travel with joy and thanksgiving in our hearts as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas.

*Loving Lord, as we travel through the wilderness of life, in all our trials and tribulations we know that You are there beside us. Help us to seek the Way of Holiness as we walk with You, that we may come at last to that wonderful place of gladness and joy. Amen.*

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup>**

**Matthew 11:2-11**

**2** When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples **3** and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' **4** Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: **5** the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. **6** And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

**7** As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? **8** What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. **9** What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **10** This is the one about whom it is written,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you."

**11** Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Our hearts and minds can be in conflicting spaces. Thus it was with Paul. He had preached about the coming of one greater than him and had then baptised that same person – namely Jesus, the Messiah. And yet... Now in prison, Paul sent two of his own disciples to question Jesus. "Are you really the one we have been waiting for, or should we be looking elsewhere?"

Jesus didn't give a straight answer, but just told Paul's disciples to go and tell Paul of what they had heard and what they had seen, and went on to give them examples of what that might be.

Maybe Paul had expected the Messiah to act in very different ways to what he had heard from others about what Jesus was saying and doing. Paul needed to know that what he had been saying about the one who was to come after him was true, and somehow from within prison he doubted. His heart and his head were in very different places. When that is true of us, when our hearts and minds are in different places, we cannot be at peace.

As we wait, may we do all we can to bring our hearts and minds together, and thus be at peace. May we be certain of what it is, who it is, that we are waiting for this Advent.

*Jesus, in this time of Advent, we wait with love in our hearts. We know that we are loved with a love that is beyond our understanding, and yet at times we have doubts. May your words and actions that we read of within the bible give us the good news we need to hear, and may our hearts and minds be as one. Amen.*

**Monday 16<sup>th</sup>      Isaiah 56:1-3, 6-8**

Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance be revealed.

**2**

Happy is the mortal who does this,  
the one who holds it fast,  
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,  
and refrains from doing any evil.

**3**

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’;  
and do not let the eunuch say,  
‘I am just a dry tree.’

**6**

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,  
and hold fast my covenant—

**7**

these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.

**8**

Thus says the Lord God,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already gathered.

Isaiah, speaking to the Jews, the 'faithful', also includes 'foreigners'. These are those who are excluded from the covenant and the temple by reason of birth or religion, or have 'damaged' themselves, like the eunuchs. Many today are 'damaged' in some way, either self-inflicted by addictions, behaviours or the pursuit of destructive lifestyles. Or they have been damaged by others and perhaps have damaged others themselves. Nevertheless, a wound is still a wound (even if self-inflicted) and requires healing. Many are in need of the healing which comes from God, but feel excluded. Many Christians, too, rather than encourage and welcome them, also feel like excluding them.

This is not God's way. Through Isaiah he welcomes them. God is not simply for those who are born into it, or those who appear perfect. God is for those who *join* themselves to him.

He speaks words of hope through the prophets. "My salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed"; "I will gather others... besides those already gathered." And "No one who takes refuge in him will be condemned." (Psalm 34)

This is the good news. We have a new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ, the 'friend of sinners,' and he says "anyone who comes to me I will never drive away." (John 6:37) Let's come to him afresh this advent, confident that we are welcome.

*Thank you Jesus for your love for us. Thank you that in you we always have a welcome. Help us to join ourselves to you and be gathered by you and healed by you. Amen.*

**Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup>**

**Genesis 49:2, 8-10**

2 Assemble and hear, O sons of Jacob;  
listen to Israel your father.

**8**

'Judah, your brothers shall praise you;  
your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;  
your father's sons shall bow down before you.

**9**

Judah is a lion's whelp;  
from the prey, my son, you have gone up.  
He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion,  
like a lioness—who dares rouse him up?

**10**

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
until tribute comes to him;  
and the obedience of the peoples is his.

The last words of anyone can often be memorable, from Spike Milligan's "I told you I was ill" to John Wesley's "The best of all is that God is with us".

In this passage, Jacob is giving his farewell message to his sons and it is Judah who comes in for special praise. His descendants would be strong like a lion and highly regarded by many. A long, long time later these words came to pass when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of the tribe of Judah.

The sentiments of John Milton's hymn "The Lord will come and not be slow" can seem to be at odds with the time scale that God often works to. Sometimes God seems very slow and it can feel that nothing is happening.

It took hundreds of years for Jacob's predictions to come to pass and for the Lion of Judah to appear.

May we take heart from this when God seems slow in coming to our aid.

It was in the fullness of time that Jesus came and the advent message is that he still comes to all who will receive him.

*O come, O come, Immanuel. Amen.*

## Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup>     Jeremiah 23:5-8

**5** The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. **6** In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

**7** Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, 'As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt', **8** but 'As the Lord lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.' Then they shall live in their own land.

We often think of Jesus as the 'Good Shepherd' as he himself used the description (John 10)

At the time of Jeremiah it would seem that those who were supposed to be 'shepherds' of God's people had failed to look after them. The people were scattered and some were lost. Jeremiah points out that God will not allow this to continue. God will raise up a 'righteous branch'; a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ( V5.)

At this time of Advent, as we re-enact the coming of Jesus into our world we are reminded of many words which describe him – wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace. (Isaiah 9 v 6). Here we are told of one who will be called 'The Lord our Righteousness' he will establish equal rights and justice for all.

Jesus comes to make things right between us and God. For us righteousness means being in a right relationship with God and with our neighbours.

In his letter (1John 2v1) John refers to Jesus as 'the righteous one' and goes on to say "whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did". This means that there is no room for self-righteousness which is putting ourselves first and foremost but quite the opposite – considering others before ourselves! A big ask?

*Righteous God, you come into our world of turmoil. At times we despair, wondering when your peace will come, wondering when your kingdom will be established. Yet you bring us Hope. In your vulnerability you come alongside us, to be with us in all aspects of life. Help us to be your instruments of peace, love and justice. **Amen***

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup>**

**Luke 1:5-25**

**5** In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

**6** Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. **7** But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

**8** Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, **9** he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. **10** Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. **11** Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. **13** But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. **14** You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, **15** for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. **16** He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' **18** Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' **19** The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. **20** But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

**21** Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. **22** When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. **23** When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

**24** After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, **25** 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

As I write, our political parties are in full blown election mode with promises being made left, right and centre. The headlines of each news broadcast seems to bring with it a promise of something new to entice voters to put a cross in the respective party's box printed on the ballot paper.

A radio phone in this morning spent sometime looking at how reliable any parties promises during an election campaign are, and how often what is promised actually comes to fruition once that party find themselves in Government.

We all know from our own experiences of life that promises are very easy to make, but a lot harder to keep. How much more difficult for those in power, especially when there is so much that they cannot control not to mention the vagaries of this world against which they are powerless.

Running throughout this Advent period is the knowledge of the One who not only makes promises to His people, but who is also faithful to them and keeps them.

In the birth of the Christ child, those who knew their scriptures saw the promises of long ago before being fulfilled. Centuries might have come and gone, but in this tiny helpless baby, the longed for promise was at last happening.

Our politicians may well be promising the earth as they look to short-term expediency to get them into power, but God's promises are on a different scale altogether and come with the grandeur and splendour of the one who was and is and ever more shall be - the one who keeps his promises and ensures that they are fulfilled.

*Eternal God, help us to place our trust in you and to have faith in your promises, for in you we place our hope, our trust and our very lives.  
Amen.*

Friday 20<sup>th</sup>

Luke 1:26-38

**26** In 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. **28** And 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. **30** The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. **31** And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. **32** He 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. **33** He 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?' **35** The 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. **36** And 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. **37** For 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.

God reaches down to humankind to announce the much anticipated birth of His son. Simply and with no fanfare or ceremony Mary, a young girl of no status, from the village of Nazareth, an utterly insignificant place, is singled out and visited by the angel Gabriel.

She struggles to understand the enormity of what she is told: her son will be called the Son of the Most High and be handed the throne of David by God, along with a kingdom that will never end.

This cannot be possible. Surely it should be a great blessing; but if it is, then it is certainly a blessing in disguise! It places her in a very difficult position in all areas of her life – socially, culturally and religiously, not to mention personally.. She is understandably fearful yet accepts when she is told that "*nothing will be impossible with God*". She goes on to say "*here am I the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word*". After such a revelation these are real Wow! moments. Some would say this this gentle obedience and acceptance makes Mary the very first disciple of Jesus.

The challenge for us at this time of hopeful anticipation is, would we have been able to say the same in her shoes? How easily do we say – *Here am I, the servant of the Lord?*

*Lord,*

*Help me to count it an honour to be your servant, and to be asked to serve you in a particular way. Help me to serve with joy and not with a grudging or complaining attitude. Help me to be a servant of whom you can be proud. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

Saturday 21<sup>st</sup>

Luke 1:39-45

**39** In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40** where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42** and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. **43** And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? **44** For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Notice where Elizabeth's emphasis lies as she greets Mary. She proclaims first that Mary is blessed, and only then refers to the child Mary bears. Elizabeth counts herself favoured that *Mary* has come to visit, and proclaims Mary blessed a second time because she believed the message the angel proclaimed. Given that all this was happening because of Jesus, you might think Elizabeth was missing the big picture.

But it's not that Elizabeth had misplaced priorities, she knew that Jesus was greater than Mary. Even so, Elizabeth's greeting and blessing were given first and foremost to the pregnant young woman who had travelled in haste from Nazareth.

Maybe such affirmation was what Mary needed.

It can be so easy to respond to God with enthusiasm, only for the doubts to come and lurk afterwards. Being both betrothed and pregnant, Mary would have faced immense suspicion and condemnation from her community. I doubt even Mary's family would have braved the ridicule of proffering, "Oh, but she's the mother of the promised Messiah!" And even if people had believed her, she would likely still have been subject to envy.

It was the greatest calling in Mary's life (so far), but so few whom she could tell about it.

Imagine then how she must have felt, coming to Elizabeth and being greeted with such enthusiasm, such lack of shame, such joy at another's blessing. What an encouragement to hear that it was *good* that she had believed – and good that she still believed.

**Prayer.** *Lord Jesus, from cradle to grave, you were the subject of disbelief and scandal, yet all the while you were blameless and faithful to your calling. Give us the faith to persevere in the tasks you give us, the willingness to encourage others in their work, and the imagination to believe you can do the impossible. Amen.*

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup>**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

**18** Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19** Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. **20** But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' **22** All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

**23**

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' **24** When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, **25** but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The living, creator God was working and would continue to work in His amazing, surprising, miraculous way.

When his betrothed wife, Mary, was found to be "with child" the just, honourable Joseph decided to act in a way that was least shameful to her by privately divorcing her. But he was told by an angel of the Lord that the son to be born to Mary was conceived in her by the Holy Spirit.

He was to name Him Jesus (Gk.) /Joshua (Heb.) (Jehovah is Salvation). He will save His people from their sins. He is the promised Messiah.

This was in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 7:14), applicable at the time of writing regarding Israel's deliverance from the enemy and in a much greater way through the coming Saviour of the world.

In costly obedience to God, Joseph took Mary as his wife and cared for her during her pregnancy.

God continues to work true to His nature indicated in the names of Jesus. He is a present Saviour.

*Loving God,  
thank you for coming in Jesus to save us from our sins.  
Thank you that you are with us always by your Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*

**Monday 23<sup>rd</sup>**

**Luke 1:57-66**

**57** Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. **58** Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. **59** On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. **60** But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' **61** They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' **62** Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. **63** He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. **64** Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. **65** Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. **66** All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

A young woman was speaking on the radio about the Gaelic tradition of chanting: the unaccompanied harmonies in which people on the Isle of Lewis still sing the psalms. She said that religious and sacred music is in her heart, that 'whilst I don't practise it now, it's very much in me'. Listening further, I wondered whether she had left faith behind with her 'religious practice', whatever that might mean, or whether she had left 'religion' behind, like an empty shell, and through song and poetry was bringing faith, or at least the seeds of faith, into the wide world discovered beyond her religious upbringing.

John's birth opens the window on a new wide world of faith. Every baby is a closely-knitted bundle of possibilities. For John the signs are unusually auspicious. Not only is his mother too old to bear children; miraculously, she names him 'John', the name given by the angel to her dumb-struck husband. John will prepare the way for Jesus, and the endless possibilities of God's kingdom edge into view.

As a new age dawns, does the essence of Jewish faith get left behind? His very name reveals the heart of the belief of his people. For 'John' or 'Jehohanan' means 'God is gracious'. Jesus will bring a new vision of God, and his death and resurrection will seal a new covenant. In some ways 'religion' will be left behind. But at the heart of Judaism lies that trust in God's grace which pervades the beatitudes and the selfless faith of Christ. At John's birth we step over a threshold: a quickening of ancient faith.

*Lord God of Israel, these are refreshing and exciting times for us as well. We have John's example. May we too go before the Lord to prepare his ways. May our faith enlighten those who sit in darkness and guide us all in the way of peace.*

**Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup>**

**Luke 1:67-80**

**67** Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

**68**

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

**69**

He has raised up a mighty saviour for us  
in the house of his servant David,

**70**

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

**71**

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

**72**

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,

**73**

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us **74** that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, **75** in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.

**76**

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

**77**

to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.

**78**

By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

**79**

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

**80** The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

I was at a concert a few weeks ago at the O2 Academy in Oxford. Before the main act came on to rapturous applause, there were two supporting artists who entertained us.

There is a part of me that always feels sorry for the support acts, performing as they do to a crowd that hasn't yet reached its full capacity, that doesn't always pay full attention and is often unaware of their music. The crowd is simply waiting for the star attraction to come on stage. What must it be like I wonder to be a support act?

Of course, there is another way to look at things. For it is the chance and an opportunity for new, up and coming artists to share the stage with those who have already made it and are successful, well known and famous. There would be so many other bands and artists out there who would give their eye teeth for just such an opportunity.

In being a support act, there is so much that you can learn from that experience, let alone ensure that your music reaches a much wider and hitherto unknown audience.

Being a support act could in fact be the greatest honour to be given to them.

John the Baptist is an important part of our Advent reflections. His task, to prepare for the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lord's. His role is to be the most famous support character of all time. He never sought to steal his Lord's thunder and was totally content to fulfil the task that had been given to him - to prepare the way.

*Lord God, in this time of preparation, help us to not miss what you would have us learn from all those who are preparing the way. Amen*

**Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup>     Luke 2:1-20**

**2** In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** Joseph 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. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And 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.

**8** In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' **13** And 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!'

**15** When 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.' **16** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. **17** When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. **19** But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sometimes a new translation of a familiar Bible passage can make it come alive in a new way. What do you make of this version of vs 7 I wonder? "She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger because there was no place for them in the living room"!

This translation I was looking at recently suggests that Jesus may well have been born in one of the houses of a family relative that Joseph may have had living in Bethlehem. It goes on to say that the chalk hill on which Bethlehem was built had many natural caves which were used as dwellings for those who were poor. The cave where Jesus was born may have consisted of two rooms separated by a rock formation. The innermost room would probably have been used as a shed or stable. Since there was not enough room or privacy in the common room, Joseph & Mary used the area where the animals were kept.

This version (Christian Community Bible) as well as the more familiar ones we know and love make the same point, that Jesus was born into our ordinary every day world. Jesus knew the experience of being human and that his place of birth, (whatever and wherever it was), like that of his burial, was borrowed and not his own.

Into our ordinary and every day world, He still comes, Immanuel, God with us!

*Father God, for the miracle of Jesus' birth, for the fact that he was born as one of us, we give you thanks. Help us to remember not just on this day, but all days that you know what it is like to live as us; for you became what we are, so that at the end, we may become like you. Amen.*