

# Wantage and Abingdon Methodist Circuit

## Advent devotional 2021



*[Jyoti Sahi / Dalit Madonna] from the Methodist Modern Art Collection © TMCP, used with permission. [www.methodist.org.uk/artcollection](http://www.methodist.org.uk/artcollection)*

## Cover picture

This image echoes the Indian folk symbol of the grinding stone, found in every traditional home. This has two parts. The larger “Mother Stone” is fixed and stable, whilst the smaller “Baby Stone” moves to grind food stuffs on the Mother Stone. Relating Mary and Jesus to this symbol links the bond between them to the preparation of daily bread on the grinding stone so we can think of it when saying “Give us this day our daily bread”. “Dalit” means broken (sometimes used by those in South Asia traditionally regarded as low caste or ‘untouchable’). Breaking items on the grinding stone is necessary to create wholesome food for the family. The suffering in the relationship of Jesus and Mary is necessary to create life and hope.

Commentary based on **A Guide to the Methodist Art Collection.**

## From the Manse.....

Dear All,

It is with grateful thanks to all our contributors that I commend this year's Advent Devotional to you.

As in previous years, for each day you will find a bible passage, a short reflection and a prayer to help you ponder upon God's word for us all this Advent season. A time that is about waiting and preparing for the miracle of Christmas that we encounter at the culmination of our Advent journey.

We must not forget however, that Advent is more than a period of getting ready, for it also focuses our attention on the present even as we look ahead. It reminds us of how the things of God are to be found and discovered in the ordinary and every day whilst we prepare for THE special day and the extraordinary.

We thank Alan Grist, Valerie Grist, Irena Byron, Barbara Kershaw, Helen Carter, Liz Wood, Ruth Dams, Libby Bolton, Carol Sturt, Barbara Sexton, Stephen Atkinson, Peter Hemmings, Ian Sturt, Wendy Moorin and Andrew Dixon for their wisdom, insight and reflections as they lead us day by day.

Although I will not be with you this Advent and Christmas, as I take the first part of my sabbatical, I will nonetheless, be travelling alongside you as I use this booklet for my Advent devotions.

With love and God Bless

*Keith*

## The Lord's anointed

### Day 1      1 Samuel 8:4-9

*Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.' But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'*

Samuel's word had authority throughout Israel (1 Samuel 3:20). The following chapters tell how he was guided by God and able to overcome the many attacks from neighbouring hostile countries. But earlier chapters have shown that he did not have authority over his sons, whose behaviour was scandalous.

In today's reading, Samuel is an old man and his authority over the people has passed to his sons. But they misused their authority, ruling unjustly and encouraging worship of heathen gods. This caused some of the leaders of the people to ask Samuel to appoint another ruler - a king as other nations had. This Samuel thought was a big mistake. They should be ruled by the guidance of the God who had rescued them from slavery, and had their true welfare at heart. Kings at that time were despots and self-serving. But God over-ruled Samuel, saying the people were not prepared to serve him, so they should have a king, but Samuel must warn them of the consequences.

As Christians, our lives should be guided by God. Often that does not conflict with the ways of society. But sometimes we must stand up for our values in conflict with those around us. We must be law-abiding citizens but there are occasions when we know Christian values conflict with legislation. Should we not make our voices heard when this happens? We may be guided to join protests, sign petitions, write to our members of Parliament. As Samuel saw in relation to the people of Israel, our ruler should be our God, who has our true welfare at heart.

#### **Prayer**

*Almighty God, as we look forward to celebrating your coming in human form, help us to live by the values of your kingdom, being guided by your Spirit. Amen*

**Day 2****1 Samuel 8:10-22**

*So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'*

*But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.' When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, 'Listen to their voice and set a king over them.' Samuel then said to the people of Israel, 'Each of you return home.'*

Be careful what you wish for - you might get it!

How often, as children, did we pester our parents for something that we really, really wanted - just because everyone else had one? If we got what we wanted (which was rare!) it inevitably turned out to be a bit of a disappointment and was soon discarded for the next new interest.

In this reading, the people decided that they wanted a king, like everyone else, ignoring the fact that God was their King and He had looked after them during some really tough times, fighting for them again and again. No, they wanted a "real" king that their enemies could see and fear, someone who would ride out for them and fight their battles.

Samuel delivered God's message to the people: Did they really want a king? A king would force them to work for him; he would tithe their goods and their produce and they would have to serve him. They insisted that this was what they wanted, and God effectively said, "all right - go ahead, but don't come crying to me when it all goes wrong!"

They went their own way, turning from God, who intended to anoint David as king when the time was right. David's line would lead to the birth of Jesus Christ, His Son; the King who came to serve, not to be served. He had no interest in wealth or power. He came to give, not to take.

In this time of Advent, let us rejoice that God is our King and as we love and serve Him, so He loves and serves us. His throne is eternal, and no one can ever take His place. Amen.

**Prayer**

*The King of Love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am His, and He is mine forever. Amen.*

### **Day 3**      **1 Samuel 10:17-24**

*Samuel summoned the people to the Lord at Mizpah and said to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you." But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, "No! but set a king over us." Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and by your clans.'*

*Then Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, and the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. He brought the tribe of Benjamin near by its families, and the family of the Matrites was taken by lot. Finally he brought the family of the Matrites near man by man, and Saul the son of Kish was taken by lot. But when they sought him, he could not be found. So they inquired again of the Lord, 'Did the man come here?' and the Lord said, 'See, he has hidden himself among the baggage.' Then they ran and brought him from there. When he took his stand among the people, he was head and shoulders taller than any of them. Samuel said to all the people, 'Do you see the one whom the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.' And all the people shouted, 'Long live the king!'*

Saul hid. Perhaps if he kept out of sight he would be forgotten and his name would be overlooked in the leadership lottery. Yet if the stories in 1 Samuel 10 are recorded in chronological order, he already knew what the result would be. Samuel had anointed him as leader over his people and the prophecies which had been made in that moment to demonstrate Samuel's authority had all been fulfilled.

Every other man from the various tribes and families would have been uncertain when his name was considered. Whether they sighed with relief or disappointment when the "no" was revealed, we'll never know. But hiding didn't work. Saul, son of Kish was identified as God's choice to lead his people and Saul was brought from his hiding place to stand tall before them.

I wonder; was there a shift of attitude from Saul at that point. Did the cowering "Not me, I can't do this" change to the proud "I am God's chosen; I can do this!"? Would things have worked out better if Saul had felt a little less confident; and acknowledged that he would need God's continued help and guidance if he was to try and lead God's people through the problems ahead?

#### **Prayer**

*Loving God, we admit that there are situations when it's easier to pretend that we haven't heard your voice than it is to act or speak, just as there are times when we know what we want to happen and demand your help. Forgive us for the times when we find it difficult to walk humbly with you.*

## Day 4      1 Samuel 16:1-13

*The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.*

A number of years ago in a different appointment, we established a men's group which met monthly for a time of discussion, fellowship and socialising often meeting in one of the local pubs. On one occasion, one of the group invited a friend of his to come along and join us. He mentioned in passing that the minister was going to be present but not to worry as he is quite normal.

When the evening came and everyone was milling around and talking, the visitor was asked by his friend if he could guess which one was the minister. It took him 18 goes before he got it right - and that was out of a group of 25!

Often when we look at others we make assumptions and our perceptions are coloured by our own judgements and prejudices. As today's passage from 1 Samuel reminds us "*the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart*". This was certainly true in the experience of Samuel, who had to wait for the youngest son, (the one looking after the sheep) to arrive and then to be told, he is the one, anoint him!

This truth is of course seen supremely in the Christmas story, where one who is of the line of David, (destined to be the good shepherd) comes amongst us in poverty and homelessness, powerless and vulnerable.

Emmanuel - God with us!

### **Prayer**

*O Lord, in this Advent Season open our eyes so that we may see others as you see them, open our hearts to love as you do and forgive us when we so quickly judge others without knowing them. Amen.*

# Messenger of the Covenant

## Day 5      *Luke 3:1-6*

### *The Proclamation of John the Baptist*

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,*

*make his paths straight.*

*Every valley shall be filled,*

*and every mountain and hill shall be made low,*

*and the crooked shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth;*

*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." ' '*

Luke sets this story very firmly in history. He is telling us this is not mythical or legendary but a real event. Often in the Bible dates are uncertain but we know that Tiberius reigned from September AD 14 until March AD 37. Therefore the 15th year is AD 29. He also sets out the political scene. The Romans are in charge and they allow minor 'royalty' to hold sway over smaller territories. From our perspective we know that social and political scenes are fluid and change all the time. That's how it was then; this is how it is now. But God is never changing. He sends his word to accomplish whatever he desires, whenever he desires. Here God's word comes to John fulfilling what God had said through Isaiah hundreds of years before. At this particular time in history, God's word comes to John and sets him off on the path of the classic prophet, criticising the current thinking and practices; criticising the way the world is now. Preaching repentance, which means turning around, turning away from wrong thinking and harmful ways; turning from the ways of the world, re-finding the right path; turning back to God.

I have a friend who loves the Lake District and cannot bear the thought of it being levelled but that is to hear this with purely worldly ears. John speaks the word of God to people's hearts. We are to prepare our hearts to receive him. To remove any obstacle that hinders. Anything that comes between us and God. The words of John's prophecy echo down the years... Turn back!

### **Prayer**

*Father God, you promise that if we draw near to you, you will draw near to us. Help us this advent to recognise and remove any obstacles that stand in the way between us, whatever form they may take. Amen*

**Day 6            Zechariah 2:1-5, 10-11**

*I looked up and saw a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then I asked, 'Where are you going?' He answered me, 'To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length.' Then the angel who talked with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him, and said to him, 'Run, say to that young man: Jerusalem shall be inhabited like villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and animals in it. For I will be a wall of fire all round it, says the Lord, and I will be the glory within it.' Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord. Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you.*

Do you or I measure up? The psalmist asks, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" But this is something different. The city is being measured for size. I remember having my first suit ordered. The tailor with his tape measured my arms, legs and everywhere to produce something that fitted perfectly. God is preparing a protective wall of fire because no physical boundary is big enough to contain all the people and animals. Here is another promise that God will dwell with his Daughter Zion. There not many images on the Old Testament of God as Father. But that is how Jesus habitually referred to him. People are rightly proud of their cities boasting of their architecture, their cuisine or famous people. God says he will be the glory of this city. Shout and be glad. I struggle with the competing pulls of glory and humility. But this is the same prophet who spoke about a king coming meekly and riding on a donkey. Ecclesiastes says there is a time for everything. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. And Simon Peter declared, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God".

**Prayer**

*In the cross of Christ I glory:  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time,  
All the light of sacred story  
Gathers round its head sublime.*

## **Day 7      Zechariah 8:1-8**

*The word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts? Thus says the Lord of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.*

A cycle of exile and restoration

Rebuild the temple! Purify worship! The remnant of God's people gather in Jerusalem. By the grace and faithfulness of God they stand on the threshold of an age that promises everlasting fruitfulness and prosperity.

But read on. It turns again, the cycle of failure and exile, refinement and restoration. Zechariah's words (chapter 7:8-14) are echoed by his disciples (chapters 9 to 14). The Lord's people had not listened, so the Lord had ceased to listen to them and scattered them among the nations. Sadly, the cycle will be repeated.

They may build the temple, but for how long will Jerusalem remain a place of rejoicing? For how long can divine jealousy stand in the face of disobedience? Yet the promise holds: return to the Lord, and the Lord will return to you.

The cycle of exile and restoration is a cycle of hope and shattered dreams. It doesn't end with Zechariah. Nor does it end with us. The question echoes through the ages: how can a jealous God keep faith with people who worship idols? We reap worldly blessings from an egoism that neglects justice, mercy and compassion. Jealousy pulls God one way. Constancy brings him back. Something has to give.

Our world advances in great steps. It reaches for moral greatness. It strains to pluck the fruit of goodness: prioritising the needs of others and of a healthy planet. We know what is possible and what a jealous God demands, but we shut our ears and turn our backs. The human spirit is caught still in a cycle of exile and restoration, of hope and shattered dreams.

### **Prayer**

*Lord, we echo the words of the prophet: pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when we look on the one whom we have pierced, we shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child... on that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse us from sin and impurity... (Zechariah 12:10 & 13:1). May we grasp the hope of Advent: the one who is pierced is coming, he who has broken the cycle of exile and restoration.*

**Day 8**      ***Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12***

*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, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 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, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.*

The phrase “spiritual blessings in heavenly places” reminds us that there are times when heaven touches earth. The mundane is transformed into something exceptional.

This passage opens with the statement, “Blessed be God...the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This way of thinking about God became distinctive of Christianity.

In the gospels Jesus spoke of God as Father. The intimate term Father declares the Christian’s faith that the great power who created and sustains and orders all things is not thought of as remote, formidable and unknowable but one who is friendly, and personally loveable, one whose character is known through Jesus.

During the period of the pandemic we may have felt a sense of remoteness. This passage reminds us that God is always close by.

**Prayer**

*Ever present God you are with us through the difficult and easy times of life. We thank you that your abiding presence has sustained us in these challenging times.*

*May we who experience ‘spiritual blessings in heavenly places’ be a blessing to others.*

**Day 9            Zechariah 8:20-23**

*Thus says the Lord of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Come, let us go to entreat the favour of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I myself am going.' Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favour of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'*

Zechariah looks forward to a time when Yahweh, God of the Israelites and God of the Angel Armies (see The Message) will be known to all nations. In the time of Zechariah and in the time of Jesus there were a preponderance of idols, gods for all aspects of life. They were an attempt by humankind to reach up to God.

Zechariah promises us something and indeed someone better. He promises us "God with us."

This is what the wise men of Matthew 2 sought. People of all nations can know the presence of God with us in our daily lives through the life of Jesus, who was and is "God with us" and who did not leave us alone but gave us his Spirit to live within us.

**Prayer**

*Lord God, we thank you that you are not a distant God, but God with us. May we know your presence with us every moment of every day. May we be a blessing to all nations as we proclaim Jesus as our saviour and Lord. Amen.*

**Day 10      Malachi 3:1-4**

*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?*

*For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.*

As we journey through this time of Advent who I wonder, are the messengers of this age who prepare the way for his coming once again?

As we look at what is going on around us, locally, nationally and globally, where are the ones proclaiming good news and the promise of God's covenant?

As we find ourselves in the midst of the cacophony of noise and the all consuming assault on our senses by the world at large, where are the ones who can give the alternative narrative that is so much needed?

Where are the ones who speak of peace and reconciliation? Where are the the ones who fight for justice and for the end of oppression? Where at the ones who seek to bring freedom and hope, love and joy?

They are there of course, if only we know where to look and what to look for.

At times mistaken, ignored or ridiculed by those of the world (and of the church) the most unlikely of people in the most unlikely of places, are the ones who God sends to us to prepare the way and get things ready.

Do we recognise them, do we hear them and are we attentive to what they have to say?

**Prayer**

*Loving God, may we seek out your messengers for these times, listen to what they have to teach us and in doing so, engage with them, that we too might be ones who get things ready and help prepare the way for your coming. Amen.*

## **Day 11      *Malachi 4:1-5***

*See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.*

*Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.*

*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.*

Much of this final and very short book of the OT speaks to us even now in 2021. Malachi is speaking to a people who were fed up, disillusioned and disappointed. Things were not going the way they had expected. They had assumed that, after years of exile, their return to the promised land would herald prosperity and peace for them as God's chosen nation. This hadn't happened and they blamed God.

They felt that they had been neglected and forgotten by God, so in return they began to neglect Him and became careless in their religious lives. They ignored the laws that had been set down for them by Moses. The Temple and all that it had stood for was now held in contempt. These people clearly needed a serious wake-up call, or, as in some earlier words of Malachi, they needed to meet the God who is like a "refiner's fire" (Mal 3:2).

So, Malachi is sent to spell out to his people the dangers of ignoring God and his Covenant; but the wonderful part of this dreadful warning is that it ends with hope and a promise: their unchanging God believes in them, thinks they are worth saving and promises a prophet who will lead them to better things. A fitting end to the Old Testament.

### **Prayer**

*Unchanging God of hope and restoration, renew and restore our minds when we are distracted by personal and societal circumstances. Strengthen and direct our minds to your Word so that we can become beacons of hope and love in our confused world. Give us the courage and discipline to continually seek your renewal in our lives. In the name of Jesus, we ask this. Amen*

## The promised Christ

Day 12      Luke 3:7-18

*John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin 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. 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.'*

*And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'*

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*

*So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

*Encountering John the Baptist must have been an uncomfortable experience – his warning of the need for repentance and of the dire consequences of not repenting. It was not sufficient to feel sadness for what they had done in the past, they must show that they were following a different path by the way they lived. In reply to questions from the crowd they are told important things about a life pleasing to God. They must be compassionate, sharing what they have with those in need. They must act fairly and if they have power, they must not exploit others.*

*John had become famous by his preaching. He might well have become proud, but he did not. He pointed away from himself and encouraged people to look out for the coming of the special one whom God would send.*

*The emphasis in preaching at the present time is inclusiveness – everyone is welcome in our churches. But that must not obscure the necessity for high standards among Christians. We do not by our actions earn our status in God's sight, but we do our best to live in ways pleasing to God **because** we are accepted by God. The values of compassion and justice are important for us too. We show our compassion when we try to meet the needs of the disadvantaged and we do what we can to promote justice in this country and around the world.*

*John's humility reminds us that we should acknowledge what others have done for us by their teaching and example; and what God has done for us by the guidance and strength of his Spirit.*

### Prayer

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour  
Live in me from day to day,  
By his love and power controlling  
All I do and say.*

*May the Word of God dwell richly  
In my heart from hour to hour,  
So that all may see I triumph  
Only through His power.  
{Hymns and psalms 739 v.1 and 2}*

## **Day 13      *Matthew 1:1-17***

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*

*And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

*So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.*

The popular BBC programme 'Who do you think you are?' and the large number of people who research their family tree indicates that there is a huge interest in who we are and where we came from. Matthew, the author of the first gospel which appears in the New Testament, is not considered the first to be recorded. This is widely believed to be the gospel of Mark, thought to be recorded by John Mark who accompanied the disciples in their early ministry after the resurrection and ascension. Matthew, the disciple chosen by Jesus, was a Jew who collected taxes for the Romans and was hated by most of the inhabitants of Judea. When he was challenged, accepted fully the teachings of Jesus and became a disciple, he was enthused to tell the good news to his fellow Jews. To do this he pointed them directly to the genealogy of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, who had some very important ancestors. He goes back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through 41+ generations. Jesus' mother Mary on the other hand was a young Jewish girl chosen by God to bear his son who would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and incarnate in Bethlehem, the home town of David and all his ancestors.

God in his infinite great wisdom chose Joseph and Mary to parent his son, so they are immediately considered as unique and special. We know from Gospel writings that God communicated directly with them both through visitations and dreams, but apart from that they were just an ordinary couple engaged to be married with no forethought of a future family. Matthew placed great emphasis on Joseph's ancestors and with the connection to the founding fathers of the Jews, hoped to verify Jesus as God's chosen one, the Christ, the Messiah. Jews who have accepted Jesus as the Messiah, Messianic Jews, are amongst the most enthusiastic believers and always look to the prophecies in the OT to prove Jesus' heritage. Matthew has in that respect, fulfilled the need to look back and see how God worked through their ancestors. Their prayer is that their fellow Jews would also come to see and believe the truth.

### **Prayer**

*Gracious God, father of us all, we commit ourselves to you and your purposes for our lives. Humble and insignificant as we are, you have called and chosen us to be vessels to convey your message of love and acceptance to all irrespective of race, gender, age and personality. Accept us, guide us and teach us how to be the very best we can for your sake and for the increase and the growth of your kingdom here on earth. Amen*

**Day 14**      **Matthew 1:18-24**

*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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,*

I love this aspect of the Nativity, God's intervention in human behaviour. The most natural thing would be for Joseph to walk away from the whole situation.

I don't believe he really needed a lot of persuasion to rescue Mary from all the embarrassment and possible persecution, nonetheless, God gives him a nudge in the right direction. I do wonder, however, just how much of the angel's story Joseph could comprehend and it may not have been until much later that he realised the implication of Jesus' birth. Was it when he discovered that Elizabeth was also pregnant, when prophecy was being fulfilled that they had to travel to Bethlehem, or when shepherds and wise men arrived with gifts?

There are a variety of reactions when a child is adopted, is there a conflict between the birth parents and the adoptive parents? Each has a role, one is the nature and the other the nurture of a child.

God handed over his son to be nurtured by Mary and Joseph, parents who would love, and teach faith, compassion and human understanding.

We are all born to human parents, whilst also being children of God, taught by Jesus' example to have faith and follow God's way.

During Advent we look to the 'Second Coming', a completion of God's work in us, that we may be perfectly acceptable to Him.

**Prayer**

*Lord God, just as Joseph accepted Jesus as his adoptive son, may I be welcoming of the unloved and the different as children of God. Help me to welcome the unexpected challenges you give me, that I may follow the faithful path and be worthy of my calling.  
Thank you Father for Jesus, who shows me the way. Amen*

**Day 15**      **Luke 1:5-25**

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

*Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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.' 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.' 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. 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.'*

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

*After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, '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.'*

“Your prayer has been heard!” What a wonderful message to hear! But how hard to believe. Zechariah’s eyes are focused only on what he sees; only on his own understanding. “I and my wife are old, how can this be?” It’s so easy to become locked into a worldview that somehow acknowledges and worships God but at the same time doesn’t really think that he is either willing or capable of acting on our behalf. We believe but we don’t believe, so we become worldly, seeing only the evidence of our eyes. Our *real* faith is transferred to and reserved for other things; science, politics, psychology, social work, family, hobbies etc. you name it. It can be amazing the things we are able to put our faith in. But God answering prayer? Someone once said “When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything.” Even in the fearsome presence of the angel, it was hard to believe.

Jesus once encountered a man who asked him for help ‘if he could.’ Jesus told him “everything. Is possible for one who believes” and he replied, “I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:23,24)

If we are to overcome our unbelief, we need the help of Jesus.

**Prayer**

*Jesus, help our unbelief. Wherever our faith is small or we find ourselves in doubt about you. Help us. Come to our hearts, Lord Jesus. Amen*

**Day 16**      **Isaiah 9:2-7**

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onwards and for evermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

**A Message of Salvation**

Christians understand this prophecy, given eight hundred years previously, as being fulfilled in Jesus, God incarnate. It was delivered to God's People who are to undergo judgement in exile for their unfaithfulness to Him. It is a promise of certain, glorious hope, for them and for people of all nations and for all time. The Lord God is both Judge and Saviour.

The promise is so sure it is expressed as having already happened. Into the darkness, devastation and distress, light has dawned, burdens are lifted and there is freedom and great joy.

This is because an ideal ruler will be born, a special child gifted, coming in humility and vulnerability. His throne-names indicate His divinity and supremacy:

- Wonderful Counsellor – one of inspired, wise judgement and understanding,
- Mighty God – one of divine strength and power,
- Everlasting Father – one of unfailing love, care and compassion,
- Prince of Peace – one of peace and justice.

He will bear the burden of government and rule for ever. This promise is guaranteed by God's zeal for His People. Nearly three thousand years after Isaiah's time, we are acutely aware of gloom, darkness and distress in the world, due to oppression, injustice, wars, persecution, natural disasters, climate change, disease, the coronavirus pandemic, the economic situation. We are aware of people suffering from homelessness, unemployment, mental and physical illness, poor relationships. We are preparing to celebrate Jesus's birth and the coming of His Kingdom whilst millions still have never heard of Jesus nor the message of Salvation.

**Prayer**

*Lord God, we thank you for your coming in Jesus. May we and all your People be messengers of that Good News which will illuminate the darkness of the world, and reflect His Light in our lives, for your glory. Amen*

**Day 17      *Isaiah 11:1-10***

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
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.  
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;  
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.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*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.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
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.*

*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.*

This is the scripture that Jesus quoted when he began his ministry in Nazareth. He knew his family history having been born in Bethlehem, David's town. Jesus quoted this scripture following his baptism when he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove. The story of the church is how the Holy Spirit transforms people. Saint Paul said he could do all things through Christ who strengthens him. Delight in (the fear of) the Lord.

We live in an age of fake news. We are asked to believe all sorts of things. Jesus does not judge by appearances or contrived situations. Justice and fairness (righteousness) guided his life. The image of righteousness as a belt reminds us of Paul's armour of God (where righteousness is the breastplate, and the belt is truth).

Sometimes things seem inevitable. There are things we see, either in history or modern society, which we seem powerless to control. Knife crime, poverty, materialism or just plain selfishness blind to the need of others. Isaiah's vision is that what we call inevitable will change when the earth is filled with knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the (rising) sea.

**Prayer**

*Father, when we see a lost and troubled world, and when we are aware of the sadness, sorrow and pain all around us, we pray, send your word of hope, love and joy to bring an end to guilt and fear and suffering. Lord in your mercy ... (David Clowes)*

**Day 18**      **Luke 1:26-38**

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.' 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.*

How, I wonder would we have reacted if we had been in Mary's shoes, not only to someone claiming to be a messenger from God but to such life changing news? Even in our modern world it's a hard thing for many young women to come home and tell their parents yet alone their fiancé that they are unexpectedly pregnant.

How much harder for Mary, a good Jewish girl in Old Testament Israel, the possible reactions and punishments were terrifying, proof of her innocence was utterly impossible for her and everything was on the line. What thoughts must have run through her mind? What terror possessed her? What doubts raced across her thoughts?

No one will ever know! Because Mary's response is calm, simple, faith filled, "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.". No questions, no fear, no hesitation, only faith, a faith beyond question in a God beyond doubt.

Would we have said the same? How often has God called us to a task that was hard, frightening, even potentially dangerous? When he does call, do we leap at the opportunity without so much as a thought to the dangers or difficulties it creates or worrying about how it might inconvenience our lives and plans?

This young girl is already a woman of deep faith, ready to entrust her entire life to her God and face whatever lies ahead with him, sure in the knowledge that he is in control.

May we too find the faith to proclaim ourselves the Lord's servants ready to give our all and risk our everything in service of him.

**Prayer**

*Father, when you call us to your service,  
May we set aside our fears  
And find within ourselves the faith of Mary,  
A faith that does not question  
A faith to conquer all fear  
A faith that declares whole heartedly  
I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled  
Amen.*

## Heaven to earth

**Day 19**      **Luke 1:39-45**

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

This passage can for many people be a difficult one.

However, reading it through a number of times before sitting down in front of my keyboard, I was struck by some words of Elizabeth in verse 43; *"And why has this happened to me....."*

"Why me?" is so often and understandably a cry from the heart in times of difficulty, tragedy, sickness, loss and trouble. Why should this happen to me, what have I done to deserve this?

In the context of this passage though, the words of Elizabeth are tied up with a sense of being unworthy, undeserving and of not being good enough.

Why, she exclaims should the mother of my Lord come to me? In other words, who am I that this should happen to me?

Perhaps one of the reasons why self-help books are so popular and the problem pages of magazines are read so eagerly stems from the fact that we do not think much of ourselves and that we can so often feel unworthy and undeserving.

Christmas is about God and his love for all. A love that is not about whether it is deserved or not, or the recipients being worthy enough.

The final line of the Christmas record *"I believe in Father Christmas"* sung by Greg Lake says *"The Christmas we get we deserve"*.

None of us deserve God's love and yet, this is what is at the very heart of Christmas, for from the manger pours forth an extravagant, generous, lavish, excessive, profligate love for each and every person. A love that is unconditional and beyond our understanding.

### **Prayer**

*Gracious God, we thank you that you love us for who we are. Help us to claim that love and know that we are of worth and value to you. May we share your love with all we meet each and every day. Amen.*

**Day 20      Luke 1:46-56**

*And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*  
*And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.*

**The Magnificat**

Luke opens a window here on the personality of Mary, a young woman of humility, obedience and an inner strength. The song, which we ascribe to her and which we know as the 'Magnificat' reflects on previous scriptures and is a reminder of the way in which God turns things upside down. It is not the rich and powerful whom God chooses but 'lifts up the lowly and has filled the hungry with good things' v 53. Mary recognizes and rejoices in the fact that she has been chosen by God.

Do we, in the world today, tend to get our priorities upside down, seeking status, wealth and prosperity?

The prophet Micah reminds us that 'what the Lord requires of us is to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God' Micah 6 v 8.

Perhaps now is a good time to reflect on how God wants us to proceed. Where is God leading us and what are we called to be and do, not just as individuals but as God's church in the future?

**Prayer**

*God of grace and magnificence, you have been our refuge throughout generations. You lift us up when we are low. You give us hope when we are in despair. You are merciful and forgiving when we go astray. Help us to follow the way that you have chosen for us. Amen*

**Day 21      *Isaiah 62:10-12***

*Go through, go through the gates,  
prepare the way for the people;  
build up, build up the highway,  
clear it of stones,  
lift up an ensign over the peoples.  
The Lord has proclaimed  
to the end of the earth:  
Say to daughter Zion,  
'See, your salvation comes;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.'  
They shall be called, 'The Holy People,  
The Redeemed of the Lord';  
and you shall be called, 'Sought Out,  
A City Not Forsaken.'*

**The restoration of Jerusalem**

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done...* every time we pray these words we express a wish for something which has not yet been fully realised and is not within our direct control. We express fervent desire and determined praise, but the subjunctive mood reflects the uncertainty inherent in longing.

Praise does not rest entirely on experience of what God has done. Throughout the Old Testament, particularly in the psalms and the prophets, it rests also on what the Lord has promised to do and on what is known about him through the promise, as well as through past acts of deliverance.

Isaiah proclaims the approaching restoration of Jerusalem. The signs are clear but it has not yet happened. God will lead his people back to the city and will establish them there. This colourful scene appears to take place before the prophet's eyes. But he has just prompted sentinels posted on the city walls (he probably means the prophets) to take no rest in reminding the Lord of his promise, and to give the Lord no rest until he has done it and has made the city renowned throughout the earth (verses 6&7). It has not yet taken place, but it is like the imminent birth of a child or a wave that is about to crash upon the seashore.

Like Isaiah's proclamation, Christian prayer in Advent looks ahead to the saviour's coming. The promise has been heard but the saviour is not yet in sight. We live in hope and pray with conviction, reminding God not to delay, determined to pray as if the expectation had been met already, praising God for what he will do, as though he had done it already.

**Prayer**

*O Lord, you promise to lead the people back into a desolate city. You lead us through the trials of life, supporting us where we can act, spurring us on in prayer where control is out of our hands. May the promise of salvation be so real to us this Advent that your leading and our hope become as tangible as a procession through the city gates. Amen*

## Day 22      **Hebrews 1:1-6**

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.*

*The Son Is Superior to Angels*

*For to which of the angels did God ever say,*

*'You are my Son;*

*today I have begotten you'?*

*Or again,*

*'I will be his Father,*

*and he will be my Son'?*

*And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,*

*'Let all God's angels worship him.'*

As we look towards Christmas Day, this reading gives us a hint of the celebration to come. The writer of Hebrews wants to reflect exactly who the Christ is and chooses these descriptions:-

- The heir of all things
- Through whom the world was created
- The brightness of the Father's glory
- The exact imprint of God's very being
- Upholder of all things by his powerful word
- Himself purged our sins
- Sits at the right hand of God the Father

How can we not want to celebrate the coming of such a being? And surely we want to bring others to know Jesus, the Christ, and celebrate with us. As individuals, as a church, as a Circuit are we not bidden to bring others into the knowledge of our Saviour?

At the very start of this passage we read that "long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets", and today God still speaks to us in many and various ways by the prophets.

We have been given the gift of a Circuit prayer as we look forward to what God is asking of us as individuals, as a church and as a Circuit. Part of this prayer says, "Speak to us through the prophets of this age who are doing your will working in our communities as well as in our churches".

### **Prayer**

*May we have the humility to seek out those prophets, listen to their wise words and act on them.  
Amen.*

**Day 23**      **Isaiah 52:7-10**

*How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news,  
who announces salvation,  
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'*  
*Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,  
together they sing for joy;  
for in plain sight they see  
the return of the Lord to Zion.*  
*Break forth together into singing,  
you ruins of Jerusalem;  
for the Lord has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*  
*The Lord has bared his holy arm  
before the eyes of all the nations;  
and all the ends of the earth shall see  
the salvation of our God.*

We could all do with a bit of good news! Over the last couple of years it has become more and more difficult to see it amongst the global disaster of Covid and localised disasters of flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane and more.

Isaiah was prophesying good news amongst so much trouble, not everyone would understand, but may well have hung on to a positive message to carry them through.

So what is the good news that will sustain us in these difficult times.

When we are lonely and isolated, where do we find the comfort and support?

When we are unwell and the NHS are so overloaded, where do we find healing?

When we are overwhelmed by the struggles around the world, where do we find hope?

I have been quite angry over the last weeks as the media is filled with 'Saving Christmas'! What exactly are they saving? No mention of a birthday which will happen with or without all the trimmings; we are led to believe that it is all about getting the consumer goods on to the shelves, presents under the tree, an over indulgence of food and drink. There was some furore a few years ago when a 'Winter Festival' was declared in some of our cities rather than Christmas; I liked it, it was a far more honest description of what happens, and, along with other faiths celebrating Hanukah and Diwali, Christians could celebrate the birthday of Jesus, somehow separating it from all the hype.

Advent is a season largely ignored by most outside of church circles, yet it is the Good News that looks forward with a promise of hope, healing, comfort and more that comes with knowing Jesus, prophesied by Isaiah and begun with the birth of Jesus. When we see with our own eyes, know him in our hearts, we will burst into songs of joy of our salvation.

**Prayer**

*Lord God, help me to be a bringer of good news, that in the midst of festivities, I will not compromise the celebration of a birthday that has changed my life. As I prepare myself during Advent, help me to hear your voice, guiding me to be a light in darkness. Show me what I can do that will enable others to know your presence in their lives.*

*Amen*

**Day 24**      **Isaiah 7:10-16**

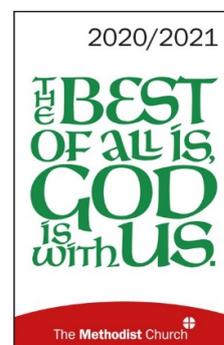
*Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.*

How frustrating when you ask someone what they want and they refuse to say. Either they do not know what they want or they will not let you give them anything. King Ahaz was in trouble but he refused to put the Lord to test. Enough to test God's patience.

How many times have I tested God's patience? Let alone my family and friends. Am I too proud? Or do I know what I really, really want?

The book of Psalms repeatedly refers to the heart's desire. (*You have granted ... the desire of his heart. Ps 21:2*). When Jesus asked Bartimaeus what he wanted the answer was "I want to see". When we pray, we are putting our trust in God. Tell him what you want. King Ahaz was not prepared to do that.

Isaiah's message here is that God gives hope to those who have none. **Immanuel: God with us.** This is the essence of the Christmas message. As I type these words I can see my membership card opposite.



**Prayer**

*And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:*

*"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."*

*And he replied:*

*"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.*

*That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."*

*So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.*

*And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.*

*(Minnie Louise Haskins 1875-1957)*

**Day 25**      **John 1:1-14**

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

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

*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Before Jesus' crucifixion Pilate the cynical politician sneers "What is Truth?" (John 18:37,38) We live in times when the idea of there being any objective truth is discounted. All truth we are told is subjective truth; your truth, my truth. What's true for you is not true for me. I create my own truth.

Here, John begins his Gospel (which means good news) by looking behind the beginning of the book of Genesis. He addresses the Greek speaking world using Greek philosophical concepts. The 'Word' in Greek is Logos, by which the Stoics understood the generative principle of the universe and the related Platonic idea of the Divine Craftsman. *This* 'Word', this divine expression of God is the true enlightenment. Faith in *this Word*, this man is not simply human or intellectual truth but 'The Truth,' the one who is the origin of all things. And faith in this man enables us to be not only created humans, but re-created children of God, born anew by the will of God.

As we think about and celebrate the coming of this truth in Jesus the Christ, we may remember the recent clamour of the media about Christmas needing to be saved, with headlines saying "24 hours to save Christmas!"

The TRUTH is that Christmas saves us!

**Prayer**

*Jesus, in you is light and life. We ask that you will open our eyes to the full light of your truth. Help us to accept and receive the gift you bring. The gift of eternal life. Amen*



**© 2021 Wantage and Abingdon Methodist Circuit**  
(All bible readings from NRSV)