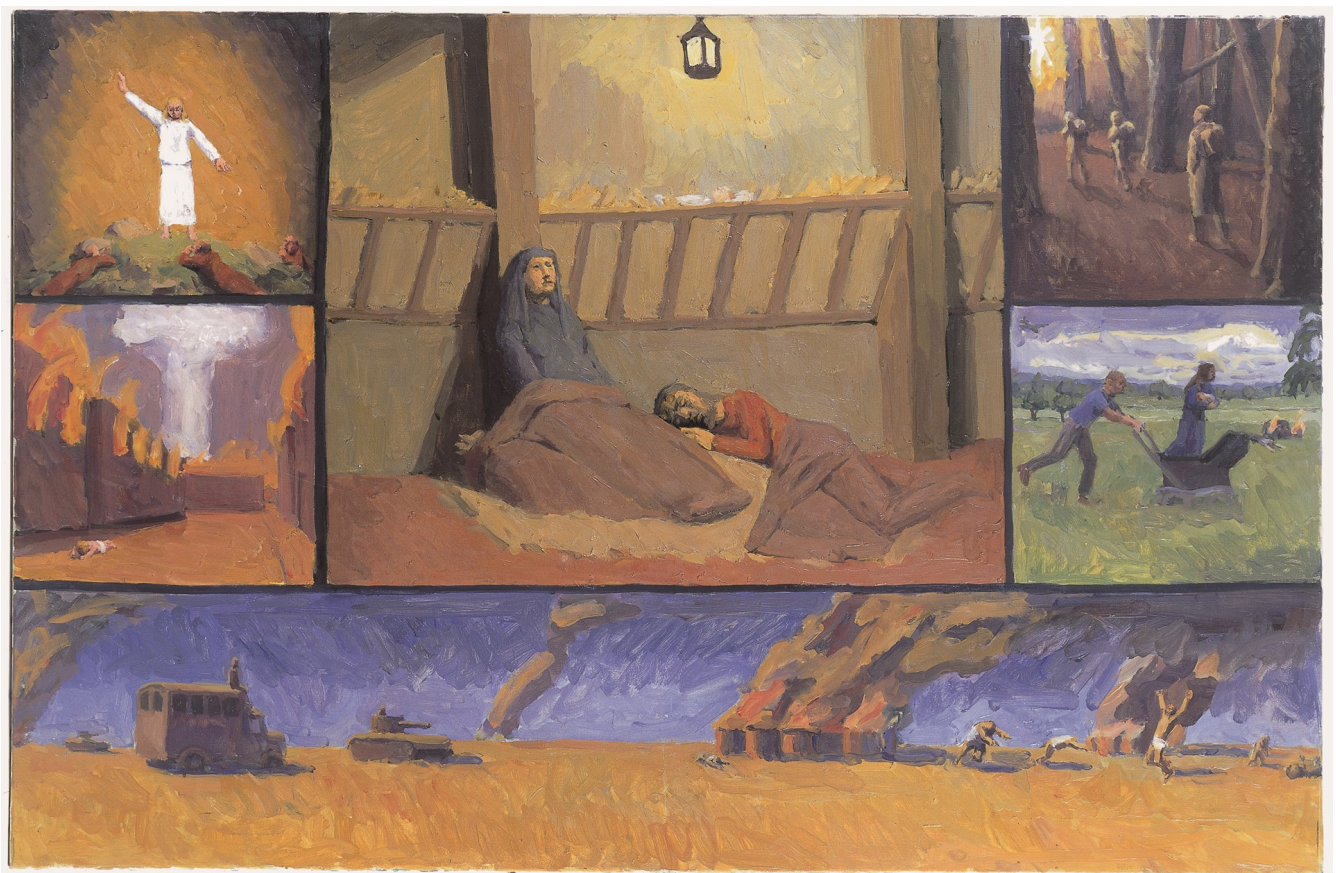


Wantage and Abingdon Methodist Circuit

Advent devotional 2022



[Francis Hoyland / Nativity polyptych] from the Methodist Modern Art Collection © TMCP, used with permission. www.methodist.org.uk/artcollection

Cover picture

Francis Hoyland (1930-) **Nativity polyptych** Oil on canvas 90 x 120 cm 1961 Methodist Modern Art Collection
HOY/1963/1

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Luke 2:7–10 Matthew 2: 16 John 13:2b – 9, 12- 14 Matthew2: 1–2, 11

The central image is flanked by four smaller ones and one predella-like image across the bottom of the panel. Hoyland's central scene shows Jesus in the manger, under a lantern with Mary propped up and Joseph asleep on the floor. The top left image shows the announcement to the shepherds; top right, the Magi's journey (three unregal figures, back-packing, through dangerous-looking Lickey Woods in Birmingham,); bottom right, the Flight into Egypt with Mary carrying the child and Joseph pushing a pram through Richmond Park. The remaining images portray the Massacre of the Innocents. The bottom left shows it as a nuclear attack, with burning buildings and a dead baby. The wider 'predella' shows it in terms of the warfare in the Congo when Hoyland painted the polyptych.

Commentary based on A Guide to the Methodist Art Collection.

(A predella is the platform or step on which an altar stands. In painting, the predella is the painting or sculpture along the frame at the bottom of a polyptych or multipanel altarpiece)

Acknowledgement

Our thanks go to the ministers and local preachers of the Wantage and Abingdon circuit who contributed to this devotional, without whom it would not be possible.



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(All bible readings from NRSV)

From the Manse....

On behalf of the Wantage and Abingdon Methodist Circuit and all those who contributed to this devotional booklet, I wish you every blessing this Advent Season.

As we prepare for His coming amongst us once more, may these Bible passages, reflections and prayers help us on our journey towards Bethlehem as we travel together as God's pilgrim people.

At this time and in these days there is much to make us fearful and worried, raising questions as to what is happening and going on and what the future has in store for us and the world.

However, we take comfort in and find strength from the fact that the times and the days into which Jesus was born were also troubled and uncertain, violent and dangerous.

For the one "who forsook the courts of everlasting day to dwell with us in a house of mortal clay", brought with him God's love and light. Indeed, He is the light of the world. The world has never really understood this light and try as hard as it might it has never been able to extinguish it.

For even in the darkest of times, the light of the Christ child is both a protest and a rebuttal to the darkness and it continues to speak of hope, love and peace.

May these words that have been so prayerfully and lovingly offered for our devotions, be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

With much love and God Bless

Keith

December 1st

Isaiah 2v.1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

*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.
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.
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.*

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

Reflection

These early chapters of Isaiah contain his words spoken as he lived in Jerusalem in the second half of the 8th century BC. The countries to the north of Judah were potentially threatening. The inhabitants of Judah had turned away from following God's commandments. Isaiah accuses them of idolatry and false worship, disobedience of God's rules for living, oppression of the poor such as widows and orphans, and of injustice and bribery. It was a depressing picture.

It is, therefore, a surprise to read these verses. Isaiah could see beyond the present to what God could do if his ways were followed. Judah could be an example to other nations of how to live in harmony, and they would want to learn from the people of Judah and follow Judah's God.

There are parallels between Judah's situation and ours. We are adversely affected by distant fighting. The number of people taking any interest in Christianity is diminishing. Some people have become very rich, while many are struggling to pay for basic necessities. It is a depressing picture. But God is not impotent. We can have hope that, if we are faithful to his ways he will transform society. He will work through his followers for a future where he will be honoured and his ways followed.

So let us go forward this Advent with hope.

Prayer

Lord God, strengthen our faith that your ways will ultimately triumph. May we turn to you for guidance in all parts of our lives and go forward this Advent in hope and trust. Amen

December 2nd

Isaiah 6:1-8

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. 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. And one called to another and said:

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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.' 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!'

Reflection

I recently had a dream in which I was walking down a familiar road. There was no traffic and as I walked I noticed that weeds were growing across the road. Then it came to a dead end. On my left was an uprooted tree. The roots were in the shape of a circle and I walked through. Beyond there was a new pathway.

We all have dreams and try to make sense of them.

This dream or vision of Isaiah's has very dramatic and powerful imagery. I remember the passage well from my youth. I envisaged Seraphim flying about with hot coals in their hands! However, the main point of this reading is that it was God's call to Isaiah, his response and his commission. God says 'who will go to the people in need in my world today; those suffering floods, famine, cruelty and injustice? Are we prepared to say' here am I -send me?

Prayer.

Lord our God, throughout the ages you have called your people to follow your will. Through your son Jesus Christ you have shown us the way. Help us to respond to your call to show your love and care across your world. Amen

December 3rd

Isaiah 7:1-14

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. 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. 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, 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. Because Aram – with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah – has plotted evil against you, saying, Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; therefore thus says the Lord God:

It shall not stand,

and it shall not come to pass.

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.)

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.

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.

Reflection

In this reading we find an interesting story about fear and trust. King Ahaz ruled Judah and his people were being threatened by the powerful Assyrians. He faced a difficult decision – should he join with the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim, allied with Syria, against the Assyrians? Or should he cosy up with the Assyrians?

Isaiah wants King Ahaz to see that, instead of either of these options, he should put his trust in God who will keep his nation safe. Ignoring Isaiah's wise advice, the king's courage and faith fail and he chooses the Assyrians, thus drawing the anger of the other nations upon his people. This is despite the sign that Isaiah had given, which prophesies that Ephraim and Syria will be laid to waste. Ahaz's failure to trust in God leads to dire consequences for his own people.

Isaiah tells King Ahaz to ask for a sign but he refuses, missing the point that there are signs of God's presence all around us. Christian writers sometimes talk about discipleship being about 'reading the signs of the times' and reacting to them.

Advent is a short season full of signs that invites us to make sense of the world. The sign given will be a pregnancy, a period of time during which parents wonder, learn to wait and look forward in hope. These are spiritual lessons we all need to learn.

At the end of this time of waiting, a child will be born called 'Immanuel', a name that means 'God with us'. The birth of a child is always a sign of God's creativity and it is also a precious moment in which to focus on the most important things – love, family, life itself – just as Advent and Christmas are. We are called to wait and wonder, to look forward in hope

Prayer

Time passes.

Lord, I look back, and I thank you. I look forward, and I pray for your blessing. Help me to be still and listen to you when I need to reflect, when I need guidance. Help me to discern you in events, to see you in others, to meet you in the stranger.

For you are Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

December 4th

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' 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." '*

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

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? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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. 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.

'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 the Holy Spirit and fire. 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.'

Reflection

Imagine if you will someone walking round within the community where you live and seeing someone dressed in a somewhat bizarre way standing and calling out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". What would your reaction be to that person? Would you listen? Might you just consider that it would be good to take note of what this person was saying? Would you walk by on the other side of the street? Would you consider calling the local mental health team? Would you even possibly think about calling the police? Or would you talk to the person and find out more about them and their message?

Maybe it is all too easy to skip over this all too familiar bible passage in this time of Advent without considering the impact on the people of the time that John was witnessing to. The message being given was, and still is, profound. John lived in troubled times. We live in troubled times. John had a message to give and it feels like that message is as pertinent today as it was 2,000 years ago. That message was delivered very directly and included some judgement on those who were outwardly observing all the rituals, but inwardly did not consider their motives for their actions or question themselves as to whether they were doing God's will.

The call to repentance, the turning back to God, to doing of God's will, is vital for those of us who call ourselves Christians. We have the advantage of knowing what followed on from John's ministry. We know we have the Holy Spirit that, if we allow it to, will work in us and through us as we look to do God's will. Repentance is not a one-off action; it is a many-times-over action on our part.

Prayer

We pray now to be given the courage to reflect on this passage during today, and to consider the motives behind all our actions, our thoughts and our words. May we listen to those who are calling us to repentance; may we act on that call; and may we thus enable God's kingdom to be furthered on earth.

December 5th

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.

Reflection

The psalmist says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom." unlike Proverbs which says it is the beginning of Knowledge. St Paul was suspicious of knowledge: it will pass away.

The parables and plain teaching of Jesus are full of wisdom and understanding. People came to him for counsel and advice.

It is because God understands our thoughts afar off that we can come to him in prayer. He judges with righteousness (and compassion). Sometimes, when we are not making excuses, we are our own severest critics but Jesus said to Nicodemus that God did not send his Son to condemn the world but save it. And is saving the world the same as saving the planet? If that requires nations working together, then maybe.

So what is this about striking the earth and slaying the wicked? The Old Testament is very severe sometimes and there are people with attitudes that match that: "Hang 'em! Flog 'em! Throw away the key!". But St Paul advocates a more excellent way. May we have the wisdom to follow the Spirit of our Lord.

Prayer

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me- Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me, Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me. (David Iverson (1890-1977))

December 6th

Isaiah 25:6-10

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

Reflection

Isaiah gets to the very heart of the resurrection with this vision of the future, “He will swallow up death for all time and the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces”

Death will be swallowed up, it will disappear completely, cease to exist, God will not only end death he will erase all trace of it and with it all the pain and suffering of our world, there will be no tears because there will be nothing to cause us tears.

The older I get the more that means to me, as a child you think of the tears caused by falling over or being bullied, as a young adult you realise it includes the tears you cry for a broken world where need and war damage and destroy lives and then of course you learn about the tears you cry for loved ones taken from you and the realisation your world will never be the same again. But we live in the promise of Isaiah’s vision, in the certainty that one day all our suffering will pass away, the power of death wiped from existence and we the people of God, the ones who trusted in him, all of us, shall gather at his table and share in the feast he has prepared for us rejoicing in his gift of salvation.

Prayer

Father, take the pain of our lives and wipe it away as you wipe away our tears. Fill us with joy as we prepare to celebrate once again your gift of Salvation, the Saviour whose sacrifice will see death swallowed up. The one who has led us to you and invites us to take our places at the feast of the faithful. Amen.

December 7th

Isaiah 26:1-9

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.

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

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

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

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.

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

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

In the path of your judgements,

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

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.

Reflection

Imagine a world where everything has been swept away and made new; where the poor and the oppressed are raised up and the mighty and powerful are brought low. As we open the Book of Isaiah at Chapter 26, this is exactly what has happened - God's world has been renewed, He has brought His Holy City here and he is living on earth, among His people. This passage is entitled the Song of Praise, but it could equally be named the Song of Redemption!

God has brought salvation to His people and flung wide the gates to the Holy City to those who trust and believe in Him. At last the poor and the oppressed who have been downtrodden, abused and ignored through all the centuries are receiving their promised inheritance, together with all righteous people - eternal life with God, in the Holy City, the new Jerusalem.

Imagine the laughter, the singing, the shouts of joy, the air of excited expectation and anticipation as the throngs pass through the gates, which have been thrown wide open in welcome and invitation. This is God's promise to all those who trust and believe in Him - a wonderful welcome into His Holy City and eternal life with Him. No more death, no more tears, no more pain, no more poverty or oppression. As we continue our Advent journey, we need to remember that although the season of Advent concludes with the birth of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, our lives are also a journey - a journey of faith, as we walk with Jesus, trusting in Him to love and care for us and bring us at last to eternal life in that beautiful, Holy City.

Prayer

Lord, we ask you to open our hearts as wide as the gates of the Holy City, that we might make room in them for the homeless, the hungry, the poor and the oppressed. Help us to seek out those who are in need, and love them with the same love that you have for us, that together with them we may at last enter your gates with joy, thanksgiving and singing. Amen.

December 8th

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.

Reflection

Progress or providence?

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. (verses 11 & 12)

These words come near the end of the doxology, which is a hymn of praise and a song of thanksgiving for God's providential care. God does not just create and sustain what is created, but works towards an ultimate goal. The doxology does not claim that history will run its course towards a perfect end. Nor does it betray a naive belief in human progress. But it does declare God at the beginning and God at the end, so that no situation can be completely hopeless; and it does insist that God works, not by waving a wand, but by blessing the world through Christ and through the adoption of those who know him. For God uses every human impulse towards goodness, every move beyond our own narrow interests, to open up constructive possibilities and frustrate acts of inwardness and hatred.

In other words, progress is not guaranteed, but providence is; God will achieve God's purpose, but expects to have a bumpy ride.

Prayer

*This truth is beautifully expressed in the third (and last) verse of a poem by Dorothy L Sayers called *The Carpenter's Son*:*

*How shall I end the thing I planned?
Such knots are in the wood!
With quivering limbs I stoop and stand,
My sweat runs down like blood . . .
I have driven the chisel through My hand.*

God has a plan and works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. It is difficult at times to find signs of such providential care. But the advent of the carpenter's son is both its guarantee and the ground of our hope.

December 9th

Isaiah 30:19-26

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. 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. 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.' 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!'

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; and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. 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. 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.

Reflection

Thank God for reminders from His Word that even at such times He still has each one of us in His care, 'How gracious he will be when you cry for help'. With the world going 'to hell in a handbasket', it is good to be reminded that there is always hope. I have been more and more depressed with the news of natural and man-made disasters, politics, cost of living and energy crises. Not surprising that the word of the year, in the Collins dictionary, is Permacrisis ("an extended period of instability and insecurity"). At such times we can feel hopeless and helpless, what can one mere mortal do to change anything? There is the key in this passage from Isaiah, that we cry for help, for we cannot face this alone, God can turn this around if we keep our eyes on him and hang on to His hope. But how do we do that when we are surrounded by so many challenges, when across the world there is the same anger and despair?

The world seems to have lost sight of God's love and hope, the things that can change what is happening. God has given us all gifts to deal with the practical issues, yet we use these gifts in our own strength instead of His, consequently we fail to make right decisions. In this Advent, this season of hope, do you feel despair and anxiety? Use this time to reflect on how God is working in your life; are you listening when he reminds you of His love for you and the hope we all have in Him?

Prayer

Dear Lord,

What am I to do? What is it you want of me?

I feel helpless to bring hope into my own life let alone the lives of others.

How can I face each day? I cry out for your help!

Help me to trust in your message of hope, help me to use this time to focus on what I can do in your strength and not what I cannot do in my own strength.

Where there is conflict, make me a channel of your peace.

Where there is despair, make me your instrument of hope, love and healing.

In this season of Advent, when the world is in darkness, help me to focus on the light that Jesus brings into the world.

Amen.

December 10th

Isaiah 35:1-10

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus 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.*

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

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

*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.
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.
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.*

Reflection

There are a number of ways to read this passage. As you read, you may well hear the words and music from Handel's 'Messiah'. You may well feel that this is a preview of the return of those in exile in Babylon who desire a return to Jerusalem. Or, given the focus that is rightly given to the changes in our climate, you may sense that this passage refers to an ecological restoration. After the intense heat of the summer when both my wife and I were away from home, we look forward to the restoration of our garden via the rain! And then again, you may pick up on verse 4: Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you." as being a word for those in Ukraine and elsewhere, where war is being waged.

This passage is about hope in restoration, faith in a God who is active in the world and can be known and seen in Jesus. And sometimes, perhaps like today, that is hard to see and find. I often feel as though I am in exile, in a world that I didn't expect and don't feel comfortable in. I want to return to the world that I thought we were building. Those who are in exile from Ukraine want the war to stop so they can return to rebuild. Those who campaign against climate change want to see the ecological world restored to balance.

We hope, have faith in and pray to the God who restores and renews, for a time when "there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy!"

Prayer

Restoring God, restore our faith in your power to strengthen tired hands and tired hearts, to rescue our embittered and embattled world and to bring comfort and colour to those who live in ugliness and grey. May the coming of Christ into our world be a sign that all will be well, that sorrow and mourning will disappear, and we will be filled with joy and gladness.

December 11th

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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."*

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.

Reflection

John was in prison and the prospects for a long life didn't look great. His concern was not for his own wellbeing but whether he'd done the job assigned to him. Had his preaching been effective? Had he indeed "prepared the way" or was Jesus not the one he'd been waiting for? I expect he'd have liked a straightforward answer but it doesn't seem as if he got one.

The reply Jesus sent him could not have been more different from what John had been preaching. John had challenged people to repent in the face of the wrath of God; he'd spoken of the axe cutting down dead trees and of the unquenchable fire waiting for the empty husks on the threshing-floor. Jesus by contrast spoke of mercy, of healing and rejoicing. How can such seemingly diverse messages belong together?

But Jesus was quoting from Isaiah 35; words that John would surely have known. Earlier verses in that chapter speak of the way the wilderness (John's home for so long) would break into flower and how the fearful would be comforted. John would surely have realised that Jesus is talking about the continuation and fulfilment of his own message; Jesus was indeed the one he came to herald. John could step back, confident that the next part of God's plan had begun.

Prayer

Lord, we'd like the reassurance of a simple "yes or no" when we ask "Is this what you want me to be doing? Help us to keep trusting you and to keep sharing the good news of your kingdom even through our times of personal doubt.

December 12th

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.

Reflection

Malachi is a 5th. Century BC prophet. The exiles have returned to Jerusalem, the Temple has been rebuilt as the focus for religious and national life. But Malachi complains that those in authority are misusing their power and they will be judged for their corruption.

The later prophets, like Malachi, looked forward to a 'golden age' when 'justice would flow like a mighty stream.' Such a time would be inaugurated by radical and transformational action. This 'golden age' would be heralded by a messenger sent by God to prepare the way.

In our Christian story we see the herald as John the Baptist and the life and teaching of Jesus challenging the injustices in society.

Malachi says, "The Lord almighty says,... I will judge...those who cheat employees out of their wages, and those who take advantage of widows, orphans and foreigners." (3:5)

The prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus spoke truth to power – challenged the status quo and called for repentance and just living.

The prophet's challenge and its fulfilment by Jesus speak clearly to our present human condition !

Prayer

*Heaven shall not wait
for the poor to lose their patience
the scorned to smile, the despised to find friend:
Jesus is Lord;
he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice confronts a timely end.*

John Bell and Graham Maule (StF 701)

December 13th

Malachi 4:1-6

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. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

Reflection

The general thrust of Malachi's prophecy is the all-pervading disregard of the Laws of Moses by both the people (the offering of blemished sacrifices etc.) and more particularly the priests who he holds responsible for turning the people away from the truth by their false teaching, causing them to stumble. Here he promises that the "Day of the Lord" will supersede a religion that only offers lip service. In its place will be those who truly honour and revere God, and a new age is ushered in when 'the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.'

He advocates a serious return (a repentance) to Moses' commands given at Horeb.

To announce this new age is another visitor to Horeb; Elijah, whose life contains many parallels with Moses. Amongst other things he upholds Mosaic religion in the face of Baal worship, crosses water by parting it, is fed in the wilderness, intercedes for idolatrous Israel and is hidden in the rock as the Lord passes by.

Luke says of John the Baptist "he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." Jesus also validates him "if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."

Who will John 'go before?' Jesus!

Who will be 'a people prepared?'

Are we willing to accept it?

Prayer

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings,

risen with healing in his wings.

Charles Wesley

December 14th

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.'

Reflection

Today's reading is about a woman who became pregnant against all the odds, not that dissimilar from Sarah, wife of Abraham, many centuries before. Today we read about Elizabeth and Zechariah who were pious people, living according to the Law and getting on with their lives, despite the regret of not having any children and being 'well on in years' as the New International Version of the Bible puts it.

Unlike young Mary, the mother of Jesus, for whom the idea of bearing a child was something she anticipated in her future, for Elizabeth the same idea was lost in the past – an unfulfilled hope, a regret, a cause for sadness.

Zechariah was still active as a priest in the temple and on this day that we meet him, he is one of many priests on duty. It turns out to be a special day because, by the drawing of lots, Zechariah finds himself chosen for the honour of going into the temple to burn incense. It is there at the altar that the angel Gabriel appears to him to deliver the astounding message that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son, who is to be named John. "He will be a joy and delight to you" the angel says, which must have seemed the understatement of many years to Zechariah, and later to Elizabeth when, to her amazement, she became pregnant.

For Elizabeth who, in those days, would have endured many years of pitying looks and words from neighbours who were mothers, this was an answer to prayer. As she said "The Lord has done this for me, in these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people." A touching reminder of how much thoughtless words can cause enormous and lasting pain to other people – and we know that has not changed over the two thousand years that have since passed.

Continued...

Prayer

Loving God,

*We are reminded today that it so easy to speak thoughtless words,
too easy to make judgements about other people's lives,
and to be unaware of the harmful effect on those people.
Especially when they may bear burdens of sadness, regrets or hardship.*

Remind us that judging people is what you do.

Loving people in your name is what you call us to do.

Help us to show and share your love this Advent. Amen.

December 15th

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.

Reflection

The Lord is with you. Mary was the first to know. Matthew's account refers to Mary being with child. True. But Luke reports Gabriel saying the Lord is with you. Here is the miracle of the Incarnation: that God dwells among men and women. We might speculate as to how Mary had found favour with God but that is to miss the point. God found someone who was willing to say, "I am the Lord's servant."

In this short passage we see Mary is first troubled, then questioning, then obedient and then praying. Many who encounter the word of God go through a similar process.

But who is Jesus? He has already been given a name which means Saviour but Gabriel spells it out: Son of the Most High, Son of God; and also King forever. Gabriel adds that No word from God will ever fail. After this encounter Gabriel disappears. Preaching is sometimes described as a hit and run activity: do I remember to pass on the good news? The Lord is with you. God our Redeemer, you chose the Virgin Mary, to be the mother of our Lord and Saviour.

Prayer

*Fill us with your grace that in all things we may embrace your holy will
and with her rejoice in your salvation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*
MWB Collect for fourth Sunday of Advent

December 16th

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.'

Reflection

Sometimes our lives are turned upside down by events beyond our control. So it was with Mary, as Angel Gabriel informs her that she is to have a baby. Her response is to seek out someone who can help her make sense of it and put it in context. Elizabeth is also to have a miraculous birth long after she had given up believing that it was possible. Mary cannot be certain what reception she will receive, but she did not need to fear for Elizabeth blesses her as does her unborn son, John.

How often do we doubt that God's promises are for us? Elizabeth blesses Mary because Mary has believed that however unlikely this event is, that it is God's will and it will happen. We too can hold on to the promises of a God who keeps his word, a God who, through Jesus, is here with us and understands how we feel and what we need.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are always with us. When we are confused, when we are fearful or distressed, give us strength. Thank you for others who stand alongside us and share your love with us. May we too, stand alongside those who are in need and share your love with them. Amen

December 17th

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.

Reflection

Today's reading, the Magnificat or Mary's Song, is so very familiar because it is also one of the eight most ancient Christian hymns, so we also sing it. Most often these days, perhaps, it is when we raise our voices in the hymn Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord – in the Advent section of Singing the Faith but a favourite all year round, often as a rousing and inspiring end to a church service! Written by Timothy Dudley-Smith in 1961, it is partnered with an older tune, Woodlands, composed by Walter Greatorex in 1916. Timothy Dudley Smith writes that he was reading a review copy of the New English Bible and found that the first line of the Magnificat read "Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord". He was so inspired by that statement of faith and praise that he adds, "I very swiftly wrote the rest".

It is an interesting exercise, if you have a moment, to look for the many hymns inspired by Mary's Song over the years.

We cannot forget, however, that this is Mary's song, not just a shout of praise, but a very specific description of what God has done in Mary. Another way to help understand it is to read it and think how some of the lines can be applied to our own society today. The poetic words conjure up a picture of a world turned upside down by God. He challenges our ideas of who is important. The world values the rich and powerful, but in God's eyes, the poor and humble are the ones that really matter.

Mary was inspired to say these words because she felt blessed (as we read yesterday) and feeling blessed is still a gift for those who believe and trust in God. Realising and feeling that we are blessed brings us joy, peace and inner fulfilment, and, as importantly, enables us to be a blessing to others.

Prayer

As I read this prayer today

I am gathered with many others who are reading it in their homes.

We are together on this day of Advent

marking the hope is always present among us,

even when we do not see it.

Let us find hope and strength in the faith of others

even when we are apart and perhaps alone.

Let us share in a great song of praise

to our loving God who is always with us. Amen.

December 18th

Matthew 1:18-25

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, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reflection

In this passage, we have a portrait of Jesus' earthly father, Joseph. He was engaged to be married to Mary, but, although he had not had a sexual relationship with her, he discovered that she was pregnant. In an engaged woman, this was regarded as adultery. Joseph was a man of principle to whom marriage to an adulteress was unthinkable. But he was also a man of compassion. He did not want Mary to suffer the taunts of others so he decided to end the contract as quietly as possible.

Joseph was also sensitive to God's guidance. We are told that this came to him in a dream. He was not to end the marriage contract because Mary was not an adulteress. She was the means by which God was to make his presence known to the world. Receiving this message, Joseph obeyed and married Mary. He was a man of principle, compassion, sensitivity to God and obedience.

We also learn about the son who will be born. He is to be Christ, which is the Greek form of the Hebrew "Messiah" - the one whom God has promised to send. He will be Emmanuel "God with us". He is to be named "Jesus" which means "Saviour". The barrier of sin between man and God will be removed, because he will reveal God's forgiveness and reconciliation.

One week from now, we shall celebrate the coming of God, who has since creation been present in the world through his spirit, to be with mankind in human form. Let us rejoice in his continued presence and the reconciliation it has brought.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we know that we can come to you because you came to us in Jesus Christ. Forgive our sins, we pray, and help us like Joseph to show your presence by the quality of our lives. Amen

December 19th

Isaiah 40:3-8

A voice cries out:

*'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'*

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

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

Reflection

Reading these words from my favourite Old Testament prophet yet again, I was struck by the dramatic use of opposites in this passage. Here we see how the physicality of our world, its very fabric, will find its fortunes reversed as God's reign comes sweeping in. Valleys will be raised up even as mountains become low and that which is rough made smooth in the new world order that reveals the glory of the Lord.

We saw this idea of opposites and the reversal of fortunes just a couple of days ago (Luke 1:46-56) in the song of Mary also known as the Magnificat.

The images that Isaiah uses are of those which seem permanent, unshakable, unmovable, unchanging. They form the iconic backdrop to the human story within the Bible. The Mountain where another prophet hid his face as God came past, the mountain where the law was given, the desert where God's people sojourned for 40 years.

Luke's imagery focuses on rulers both powerful and rich, who will find themselves usurped by those who are hungry and poor, those who are at the opposite end of the spectrum. Mary's words in her hymn of praise speak of people, regimes and systems whose days are numbered and who are as fragile as life itself.

In these two different yet similar passages it is clear that God's reign turns that which we know both upside down and inside out and for good measure thoroughly shaken.

When God's reign arrives it will transform in its wake all that is and it begins with a voice calling out.

Prayer

Come Lord, transform your world that cries out in need and make known your Kingdom. Amen

December 20th

Luke 1:57-66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Reflection

There is a part of me that pities John, many of us will have had parents who had expectations of us, be it behaviour, level of education or what we might do with our lives. Some of those expectations we may have successfully achieved, others we will have failed at completely and perhaps a few we never wished to accomplish.

But none of the expectations placed upon us can have possibly compared to those placed upon John, here he is a new-born baby and already his parents know he is the forerunner of the Messiah and even his neighbours are beginning to wonder who this child will grow to be. He was born for a purpose and I have no doubt that knowledge empowered and tormented him for much of his life, for once you recognise your purpose its hard not to be constantly asking yourself if this is the right path.

But of course we were all born for a purpose, God created each one of us, just the way he intended us to be so we could be where we are right now serving his purpose.

I suspect at least half of you just thought that you're hardly serving the purpose of God where you are right now in your lives, but you're wrong.

Today you chose to pick up this booklet and prepare for the coming messiah, you set aside time for him to reach out to you through these words and you opened your heart to him.

You fulfilled his purpose for you in this time and place! Just as every smile you share, every kind word, every moment in prayer or thought for another fulfils his purpose.

So, much of Gods expectations for us are not about the big world changing, desert proclaiming moments. They are about the small moments, the time we offer to him and others, the moments spent in his presence and the love we share with his world.

You are exactly where God wants you to be and he is working his purpose out in your life.

Prayer

Father, take all we are and use us to your purpose in our world,

Let our little actions, quiet words, times of stillness and heartfelt prayers speak of your love to those around us.

May they see the beauty of your plan in our lives and see your love for this world in all we say and do.

Amen

December 21st

Luke 1:67-80

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

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty saviour for us

in the house of his servant David,

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

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

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

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

Reflection

Most of my classmates in Junior school had a good idea of what their parents wanted them to become. The sons of the local farmer, the local doctor and the policeman were expected to follow the established family tradition. Most of the miners' sons knew that their fathers wanted them to find useful employment – but preferably not down the mine. In those days, there were no clear expectations of what daughters might do, beyond becoming wives and mothers.

Zechariah's prophecy doesn't just speak of what God will do; it also makes clear what his infant son is called to be. I wonder how often John was reminded of the stories associated with his birth as he grew up? I expect that by the time he was an adult every word of his father's prophecy was indelibly etched on his memory. Was he a dutiful son, happy to do all that was required to train as the prophet his father claimed he would be? Or did his time in the wilderness initially begin as something of a rebellion? An attempt to escape the future his father had prophesied? There's no way of knowing – and it really doesn't matter because John ended up where God needed him to be and he spoke the words which needed to be heard if people were to be ready to listen to the good news of Jesus.

Prayer

Lord, we don't always make the wisest choices in life but ask that you will continue to guide our path. When we are in the places you need us to be, grant us enough wisdom to encourage, not hinder, those who are seeking to know you better.

December 22nd

Isaiah 42:1-9

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

*Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched
them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes
from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in
righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.
A bruised reed he will not break....*

Reflection

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

2 He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

3 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

4 he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope. ...

Here is an image to savour: the association with one who brings justice to the nations of an active delicacy, which steps with care over bruised reeds and makes breathing space for smouldering wicks. Isaiah's servant has power to change the world, and yet so feels for any who are vulnerable that he shapes policy around them, and builds hope that they shall not be broken or extinguished by the exercise of power. What a vision for government!

At their most insightful the Old Testament prophets see through Israel's longing for the fulfilment of God's promises a vision of justice in the world at large, 'the nations'. They see through inward-looking demands for victory over Israel's enemies, daring to hope that God will cover all people with the mantle of righteousness.

Advent is a time to register our longing for justice, hope that it may break upon the world like the birth of a child. As the latest politician to trip over the threshold of 10 Downing Street threatens austerity (again!), it is time to remain alert, ready to deny the justice of a monochrome view of public policy, which targets growth with an indelicacy that tramples bruised reeds and snuffs out smouldering wicks. Advent hope sits uneasily with the blunt instrument of economic austerity, which is felt most by people least able to withstand its impact.

Prayer

Lord, we echo the words of the prophet: our hope is in one who leads as a servant, whose justice knows no national boundaries or qualifying principles, whose spirit will never falter in the struggle for adequate housing and income for all, or for more generous aid for millions overseas, who trample through deserts to relieve hunger in make-shift camps, or walk miles every day to fetch drinkable water. May the spirit of Jesus rest on us as we seek to bring justice to the nations.

December 23rd

Jeremiah 23:5-8

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. 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.'

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', 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.

Reflection

In Jeremiah's time Israel, the northern kingdom, has been carried off by the Assyrians and the southern kingdom Judah is suffering the same fate at the hands of the Babylonians. He looks forward to a 'new exodus'. God himself bringing his people out of captivity. Not from Egypt this time, but all the other lands. God's people are given hope that he hasn't forgotten them and will restore them.

Prophecy seems to work on multiple levels. Of course, it speaks directly to the people the prophet addresses, but as a word from God it carries echoes into every age. Who are God's people today? Who needs saving and from what?

Moses led the exodus from Egypt but it was Joshua (who's name means 'God is salvation') who led the people into the promised land. The name Jesus is a later form of Joshua.

God promises an exodus for his people, not by the hand of Moses, but by God's king, a descendant of David (a man after his own heart). Not by our own righteousness or abilities, but by one who is called 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Jesus has made us righteous; "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:22)

Prayer

Jesus is the name we honour;

Jesus is the name we praise.

*Majestic name above all other names,
the highest Heaven and Earth proclaim
that Jesus is our God.*

Philip Lawson Johnston STF 354

December 24th

2 Samuel 7:8-12

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

Reflection

Many of our children are involved with houses at the moment. Two have undertaken major refurbishments including significant extensions; my eldest is trying to find a mortgage they can afford whilst my youngest has just had an offer accepted and, legal processes being what they are, is expecting to move into their first house in February. In this country, buying a house allows you to feel that you have put down roots, to feel a sense of permanence and belonging, and to perhaps think about starting a family.

David, the shepherd boy turned king, wants to build God a house. After all, David has a house but God, manifest in the ark of the covenant, currently lives in a tent. God, however, has different plans; so via the prophet Nathan God makes a covenant promise with David – that God will build a house for David, not of stone and wood, but a dynasty – a house of people, from one generation to the next. For God is not restricted to being in one place and one time – God was, God is, and God will be, in all times and in all places.

Paul, I believe, picks up on this idea when he calls Christ the chief cornerstone within a holy temple, “in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:22). We, like David, are in danger of being preoccupied with bricks and mortar, when Christ’s coming offers us a wider perspective and calls us to build up the people of God.

Prayer

*O Christ, the Master Carpenter,
who at the last through wood and nails purchased our whole salvation;
wield well your tools in the workshop of your world,
so that we who come rough-hewn to your work bench
may be fashioned to a truer beauty by your hand.
We ask it for your own name’s sake. Amen.*

[Traditional]

December 25th

Luke 2:1-20

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

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

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

Reflection

Just read it again. This is the greatest story ever told.

On Christmas Day this story is shared with Christians all over the world (even if the dates differ here and there). It is a story told in countless Nativity plays: a thought that brings back many a happy memory.

If you are able to get to church this morning you will be joining the heavenly host praising God and singing carols that have been written on your heart often since childhood. But let there be quiet moments too: when the shepherds realised that they could approach the Christ child.

Ponder things in your heart and treasure the moment.

Prayer

*Who is He in yonder stall
At whose feet the shepherds fall?
'Tis the Lord, O wondrous story!
'Tis the Lord, the King of glory;
At His feet, we humbly fall,
Crown Him, crown Him Lord of all!
Benjamin Russell Hanby*



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