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NATVS
EST



Cover picture

Philip Hagreeen

Six small prints on paper, mounted together 1923 to 1955

Methodist Modern Art Collection
No. HAG/2007

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Luke 1: 39-56 2: 1-16 Matthew 1: 16, 18-25, 2: 1-2, 11

These beautifully simple woodcuts illustrate the birth of Jesus and are supplemented with liturgical texts and a quotation (top left) from Psalm 8. There are various views of the holy family, one with the shepherds worshipping at the stable. At the top left is Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, the future mother of John the Baptist. Hagreeen was a member of the Guild of St. Joseph and St. Dominic, a community of Roman Catholic artists and craftspeople committed to high quality work and design, offered to the glory of God. The style chosen is part of a desire to recover traditional Christian craftsmanship using the designs of the early Middle Ages and ancient devotional practice.

Commentary based on [A Guide to the Methodist Art Collection](#).

Acknowledgement

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The **Methodist Church** 

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From the Manse...

It is my pleasure to commend to you our Advent Devotional for 2024.

Our grateful thanks go to all those contributors who have prayerfully pondered and reflected upon the lectionary passages for this season of advent and through their wise words help us to journey ever closer towards the stable in Bethlehem.

The Methodist Connexion's theme for Advent and Christmas this year is "*Hush the noise, join the love song this Christmas*". It is my prayer that as you use these Advent devotions you will be able to hush the noise of the world as you find times for meditation and silence.

From the noise of all that's happening on the world stage to the clamour for our attention from within our families, churches and communities there is much to distract us.

Noise accompanies all that is happening and taking place at this moment in time, it is as if we are surrounded by a wall of sound, an overwhelming cacophony of commotion.

We recall the words of the Psalmist - "Be still and know that I am God".

May we "Hush the noise" in this holy season and find time to be with God so that we might centre ourselves and be aware of his peace and presence even in the mist of all that is going on .

May God Bless us all

Love and God Bless

Keith

The Lord's anointed

1ST DECEMBER

Luke 21: 25-36

'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.'

'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

Reflection

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

The candle flame is a potent symbol of Advent hope. And of human life, particularly the life of a newly born child. Life and hope are conjoined twins, a single delicate and dependent flame, so easily snuffed out. It needs air, but not too much. Too little is suffocating. Too much is overpowering. And if it is snuffed out, it is snuffed out forever.

Jesus' words speak of human vulnerability and the fragility of our hopes. My upbringing led me to believe that we have an inbuilt moral compass, a mental pyramid of values, at whose pinnacle, consciously or not, we set the value of human life. Now I am not so sure. Have we grown uncaring or careless? Even States, entrusted with duties of care for millions, allow political and military ends to justify any means, from the suffocating confinement of political rivals to the indiscriminate bombing of innocent people. The door is slammed shut or left wide open, thoughtlessly or deliberately, and the flame flickers and dies.

Perhaps history tells us that nothing has changed. Things are bad but no worse than they have been. It doesn't matter. The anguish and perplexity of nations, the danger of roaring and tossing seas, and the terror of isolation in a universe which grows forever larger and colder are metaphors for mental and physical suffering that people endure today.

Prayer

The lighted candle is a potent symbol of hope, as delicate and dependent as the life of a newly born child. We pray that during Advent we may rediscover a will to guard the flame as though it were our very life; that the Lord's anointed will surprise and challenge us with his vulnerability; that his birth will fan the flame as a sign that God's kingdom is close; and that amidst the tragedies and upheavals of our age the love of a mother for her child may be the model for our evaluation of a stranger's worth

2ND DECEMBER

1 Samuel 3: 1-14

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' and he said, 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, 'Samuel!' Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call, my son; lie down again.' Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, 'Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' Then the Lord said to Samuel, 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever.'

Reflection

The call of Samuel is a well-known story and it can be hard for us to recognise new insights in a familiar passage. The idea that God would combine the innocence of youth with the experience of age to communicate with people has never surprised me. Children often make remarks that are more profound than they understand. I do however wonder at the ability of a child to hear the complex message recorded in those last few verses and relate it with accuracy. Samuel would also have needed a fair amount of courage to share such an uncomplimentary verdict with Eli. Perhaps Samuel would not have needed to be word perfect. Perhaps the fact that God's word had not come direct to Eli might have been enough for him to acknowledge that his sleepless hours were no longer entirely devoted to prayer and listening for God's voice but sometimes filled with worries about the behaviour of his sons. I have to wonder - if the word of the Lord was rare, was it because God had not spoken or because no one was really listening?

Prayer

God who speaks through the wonders of creation; through the innocence of children; the kindness of strangers and more; guide us to use all of our senses in listening for your word and give us courage to share what we have learned of your love for all people.

3RD DECEMBER

I Samuel 3v.15-21, 4v.1a

Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, 'Samuel, my son.' He said, 'Here I am.' Eli said, 'What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.' So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.'
As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.

Reflection

God has given the young Samuel a message to deliver to the priest Eli. It was an unpleasant message which Samuel did not want to deliver. The message was that God was about to punish Eli's family because his sons were behaving badly and he was not restraining them. No amount of sacrifice would make up for their wrong-doing. Though he was reluctant, Samuel was obedient to God and Eli and told Eli what God had said. As he grew up, his integrity led to his being an effective leader in Israel. Do we show similar obedience being prepared to do unpalatable things if we know it to be God's will?

Advent is a time when we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus at Christmas - preparing presents, greetings, food, special services and musical events. But it is also the time when we think of the second coming of Jesus, which is spoken of in many of the hymns in the Advent section of Singing the Faith. A feature of the second coming is judgment. As shown by the message given to Samuel to pass on to Eli, how we live matters. When we think of seeing God face to face, we shall probably feel unworthy. But Jesus, who reveals to us what God is like, welcomed sinners, so we know that we can rely on God's mercy.

Prayer

*Then cleansed be every breast from sin;
Make straight the way for God within,
And let us all our hearts prepare
For Christ to come and enter there. Amen*

4TH DECEMBER

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.'

Reflection

There are lots of details in the Bible, which are easy to overlook, as we focus on the bigger story. Here, the elders of Israel are asking once again for a king. They'd asked for a king before, and God, in His better judgment, gave them a prophet to lead them – a key transition between the era of the judges, and the new kingdom. This time, God heeds their repeated request, and grants them a king, which in turn, leads to trouble later. But, at this time and in this place, God grants them this wish.

At this time, and in this place, because Ramah was Samuel's hometown. It was where Samuel was conceived, grew up, and had his family home. It was where he was dedicated, held court for Israel, and built an altar to the Lord. It was where Saul, the first king, comes from, and where it's where David flees to on one of the occasions that he runs from Saul. It's also where the Israelites were taken to, before being exiled to Babylon. It's a place where pivotal events in the Bible's overarching story happens.

I love all the small, seemingly insignificant details in the Bible. They're there for a reason, but they're easy to skim past and overlook. I wonder how many small details in our lives we also skim past and overlook, but which are key to our own stories.

Prayer

*Oh, Great Spirit,
For as long as the moon shall rise,
For as long as the rivers shall flow,
For as long as the sun shall shine,
For as long as the grass shall grow,
Let us know peace.*

Amen.

(A Prayer from the Cheyenne Tribe of the Great Plains)

5TH DECEMBER

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.'

Reflection

What does a society need to function? We rely on so many others. At harvest time we remembered those who grow and supply our food. Doctors and others look after our health needs. The skills of artists, writers, entertainers and even preachers stimulate our minds and spirits. Scientists and inventors contribute knowledge and ingenuity. Samuel lists some of those in his day. So why is that contentious?

This passage likens a king to a plundering robber and there have been far too many bad kings in all nations who failed to consider the welfare of the people. Power corrupts...

The people did not want a ruler: they wanted a hero who would win battles. They were prepared to trust in princes. And what does the psalmist say about them? Mortal men who cannot save. So what makes a good king? Jesus spoke about an entirely different kingdom. He was greater than David: he was and is The Good Shepherd. And what does he require of us but to Act Justly, Love Mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Let Jesus rule in your heart.

Prayer

*We pray for those called to be leaders of nations, their servants and their ministers.
We pray that the world may be governed with wisdom and in a way that is fair to all.
Amen.*

6TH DECEMBER

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!'

Reflection

When Samuel, Judge of Israel, grew old, he appointed his sons to succeed him, but they were dishonest and unjust, so the elders of Israel asked Samuel for a king, like the surrounding nations. He prayed about it, and the Lord's answer was to listen to the people, but to warn them that a king would rule them harshly. They refused to listen and demanded a king.

God revealed to Samuel that he would meet Saul and he was to anoint him to be the leader and deliverer of His people. They met. Saul protested initially but, in private, Samuel anointed Saul. God changed Saul's heart and the Spirit came on him in power.

Our reading tells of Samuel calling the people together, and how Saul was chosen, using the traditional, lengthy method of casting lots to discover the will of God. Publicly, Saul was acclaimed as King. Later, following the military defeat of the Ammonites, Saul was reaffirmed as King.

Despite the questions we may have about the accuracy of historical details, we see God giving freedom of choice, yet, as Sovereign, working out His over-arching purposes, in great and small events, through very different people. We see God as all-knowing, and communicating with and through His people.

Christians see Jesus as God's ultimate King, on whom the Holy Spirit came at His Baptism, whose greatness was glimpsed at His Transfiguration; God's Son, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, the Messiah/Christ/the Anointed One.

Christian believers and followers are "anointed", indwelt by the Holy Spirit, empowered for God's service.

In our uncertain times, we have the assurance that we can communicate with our Creator God, and that He is in control. Our part is to allow Him to be "King" in our lives, to be open, listening, discerning and obedient. He has chosen us and will equip us.

Prayer

*"The task Thy wisdom has assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfil.
In all my works Thy presence find,
And prove Thy good and perfect will".*

(Singing the Faith 550 v.2)

7TH DECEMBER

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.

Reflection

There is a song by Steven L. Fry from 1974 which begins "Lift up your heads to the coming King..."

The 'coming King' is authenticated by God's favour and anointing. The words Messiah and Christ simply mean anointed. In this sense both Saul and David qualify as 'Messiahs'. Both will save Israel. There are other similarities; both, like Gideon are the least of the least.

When Israel requested a king they were given Saul who is truly impressive but fatally flawed. He does not keep God's commands. (1 Sam 13:13)

So In the midst of his reign, at the height of his temporal power, there is another King anointed who is approved by God. One who is a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

Other kings, after the model of the kings around them became oppressors and usurped God's role with no regard to his commands. Effectively they became Gods unto themselves. David revered God as the true King.

The world at large recognises what is most impressive; what can be seen or proven, the dominant, the strong. Ultimately this leads to oppression and slavery (as Samuel describes in 1 Sam 8: 11-18.)

God recognises the heart devoted to him. This is the true model of kingship.

Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one sits on the throne of David. A life devoted to God, he came in weakness and humility, the least of the least. Not in order to impress and oppress but to offer himself as a sacrifice, to give himself for us.

Prayer

Jesus, the chosen and anointed king, we submit to your kingship.

Help us to come to you this Advent trusting only in your unfailing love.

Help us to know and understand what it is to love and be loved in this way.

Messenger of the Covenant

8TH DECEMBER

Luke 3: 1-6

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." '

Reflection

The character of John the Baptist has always intrigued me. We are given quite a good description of him; living in the desert, wearing clothes of camel hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey (Mark 1v6). Luke however gives us specific points of reference as to the timing of God's word coming to John. John is the conduit through whom the message of God's new covenant will be revealed. The Messiah is coming. Immanently. Be prepared. Repent. Be baptised. His words are fierce, demanding, stark.

The people flocked to the river Jordon to be baptised. He made it quite clear that he was not the Messiah but the one who would prepare the way.

It is John who points out Jesus to his followers 'Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 3 v 29). How prepared are we for the coming of Jesus into our lives? Can we clear our lives of the debris that clutters our thoughts and attention. Can we focus upon the one who came as a vulnerable child into a situation such as ours – the one who is God's promised Messiah?

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, you keep your promise to us. You do not forsake us. Help us to reach out to grasp your hand as we follow in the footsteps of Christ, that we may keep our promise to serve you day by day. Amen

9TH DECEMBER

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

I have often watched films about family life, where a son or daughter has gone 'off the rails'; a rebellious young person often from a rich family who is expected to follow in their parent's footsteps into a particular profession, or to take over the family business. King Charles is now in a job for which he has trained all his life, and it was expected of him; Edward VIII chose not to follow in his father's footsteps, I wonder if Charles ever considered he had a choice? Edward was exiled for making what many considered to be the wrong choice, losing all his privileges. As we grow up into being working adults, we make choices, we can change our minds, changing our study path and careers to do something that we consider better and more rewarding. God has given us so much, with expectations, predestined to become to be part of his plan. How do we feel about that, do we have a choice? Do we enter into this covenant freely? If we choose not to follow, to go our own path, we don't lose out on the promises of God. Unlike our human journey, where we might lose everything if we make the wrong choice, God will welcome us back at anytime and still bless us, so if you have doubts, thinking you want to try something else, God allows us to do that because He knows that His love is greater than any other and waits for us to re-discover that for ourselves.

Prayer

(from MHB694)

Lord, nothing from your arms of love shall your own people sever; Our helper never will remove, our God will fail us never.

*Your people, Lord, have dwelt with you: Our dwelling-place you still will be for ever and for ever.
Amen*

10TH DECEMBER

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.

Reflection

If you wanted to compare different cities, what criteria would you choose to measure them against? Size? Wealth? Beauty? Successful industry and commerce? A vibrant ethnically mixed culture – or some other yardstick? At the time of Zechariah's prophecy (~520 BC) the priority was probably safety and security. Work on rebuilding the temple and the city was underway and a walled city that could be defended against invading troops would have been desirable.

These days what remains of city walls tend to be part of a tourist attraction or appear as an interesting archaeological find when an area is being redeveloped. Weapons now exist that could destroy a city in spite of its walls but even then, city walls could be breached and the population decimated or enslaved.

Zechariah's vision is one of a secure future for Jerusalem which does not depend on strong walls but on God's presence. Perhaps it is only when communities have learned to accept their neighbours as equally valued children of God and are willing to reach out with loving kindness and share the available resources, that they can hope to live together in peace.

Prayer

We pray for those forced to run from their homes in fear to escape the violence of nature or the violence of war. Give us the courage to be generous in providing aid and a place of safe refuge and to be prepared to speak for peace.

11TH DECEMBER

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.

Reflection

Zechariah's prophecy is about the return of exiles to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and restore the Temple and to restore that which had been lost.

He paints an idyllic picture of Jerusalem, "Old men and old women will come back to Jerusalem, sit on benches on the streets and spin tales, move around safely with their canes – a good city to grow old in. And boys and girls will fill the public parks, laughing and playing – a good city to grow up in." (The Message, v.4-5).

Isidore Epstein in his book "Judaism" paints a similar idyllic picture of post-war Israel, as one million Jewish immigrants establish the nation of Israel. He writes, "There many, indeed, who profoundly believe that after a period of adjustment, consolidation, and peace the Jewish people will recover their ancient land and those creative spiritual energies which marked the grand epochs in their earlier history."

Today the picture is far from idyllic. Jerusalem is at the centre of upheaval and conflict in the Middle East. The hope of restoration, of cultural, religious and national harmony for the area is of vital importance.

The Psalmist reminds us to, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122)

Prayer

*O God of hope, your prophets spoke
of days when wars would cease:
when, taught to see each person's worth,
and faithful stewards of the earth,
we all would live in peace.*

(Basil Bridge, Singing the Faith 708)

12TH DECEMBER

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.'

Reflection

Language is a source of pride especially for small nations. It is central to culture and enables thoughts and ideas to be shared and passed on. But it can also be a barrier preventing understanding. The origin of the name Barbarian was a description of strange speech: "bar... bar." Language can be good or bad. In spiritual terms good language is edifying, bad language destructive.

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

Some problems are global: peace under the shadow of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons; climate change from whatever cause, pandemic disease, human rights. How else can the UN Sustainable Development goals be achieved unless the nations work together? These include: No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health & Well-being, Quality Education, Gender Equality and 12 others.

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

Prayer

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

13TH DECEMBER

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

Who is this messenger whom Malachi mentions?

Many Christians consider this passage as referring to John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus of Nazareth. In order to reinforce this view, the Early Church placed Malachi at the end of what would become known as the Old Testament, and Matthew's account of the Gospel, with all its quotes from the prophets and the appearance of John the Baptist, first in the New Testament. This was to emphasise a link between the 'old' and the 'new'. It also helped create the theme of an imminent Messiah at the close of the Old Testament, even though Malachi was written around 500 years before John and Jesus arrived on the scene.

There are other possibilities. It is conceivable that Malachi himself is designated the messenger, preparing the way for God's triumphant entry to the Temple. Another, more likely explanation is found later in the chapter, verse 23, Elijah is to return before this awesome, fearful day.

The ministry of Jesus astonished those who believed in him; so much so that they had difficulty explaining just what had taken place. Therefore, they found themselves drawing on known texts and teaching, borrowing themes that would somehow enable them and others to formulate some comprehension of the impact Jesus had on their world. That model of explanation and communication passed down through the generations.

Whoever Malachi actually had in mind is in a sense inconsequential. What matters most is that through faith we come to recognise that Jesus is the fulfilment of such longing, the hopes and dreams of the ancients, and indeed of those even in our own time and world.

Prayer

All creation prepares us for an awareness of Your Presence.

Music lifts the soul to a place where You abide.

Poetry and verse readies our minds for You.

Our hearts beat in rhythm with all who long for You.

You will come, for sure You will come, our lives and universe will be filled by You.

14TH DECEMBER

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.

Reflection

As parents, we used to joke that we should have a tape recorder that would have all those repetitive instructions for our children, 'Don't.....', 'Stop.....', 'How many times have I told you.....' etc. etc. Did they listen, I think so, but I do believe there is such a thing as selective hearing, if we don't like what we hear we pretend we didn't!

God must have felt that impatience through the Old Testament times, (and perhaps all through history...), constantly having to send messengers to remind his people of his instructions, decrees and laws. 'Remember the law of my servant Moses.....I will send the prophet Elijah.....'

Do we have selective hearing when it comes to listening to what God tells us? Perhaps we hear instructions and guidance that we don't particular want to follow, too challenging. We have made a covenant, promises not to pick and choose, but to be obedient even when it costs us. Are we the arrogant, the evildoers, or do we revere the name of the Lord?

Prayer

The Methodist Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. Amen

The promised Land

15TH DECEMBER

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.

Reflection

Each advent we are called to reevaluate our lives and prepare our hearts for Jesus as we celebrate again God in person born as a baby in Bethlehem. These are the themes that John the Baptist proclaims in the wilderness. 400 years after Malachi closes the Old Testament, a prophet declares that God is active in our world, that the Kingdom of God is near, that the rescuer is here and that each person then and now must reevaluate their lives, turn back to God and prepare their hearts for the Son of God, God incarnate. The Kingdom of God, the Promised Land, is not geographical, but rather it exists in the hearts of those who proclaim Jesus as King. Our journey starts in Bethlehem as we follow the Christ-child, it must pass through Gethsemane and Golgotha as well as another garden with an empty tomb, but one day we will arrive in the eternal promised land with our Lord.

If it feels like God has been silent in your lives recently, if the journey has been rocky and lonely, just as it felt like in the 400 years between Malachi and John, then this is God's messenger standing on the rooftops shouting: "Wake up, God is here!" May we all hear his message and open our hearts to our saviour.

Prayer

Father God, we thank you for John the Baptist, your prophet who calls each one of us to wake up and prepare for Jesus. May we at this Christmastime open our hearts afresh to your Word made man as we prepare to celebrate his birth once more. Amen.

16TH DECEMBER

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.

Reflection

If you have decided to read Matthew's gospel and as you begin are confronted with a long list of names, are you tempted to skip to v.18? I know this is my reaction. But for Christians at the end of the first century AD the situation was different. Jewish Christians reading it, or more likely, hearing it read, would react differently. The Jews saw Abraham as the originator of their race, so the fact that the genealogy went right back to Abraham was important. In many places, the early church contained both Jews and Gentiles and the Gentiles would be keen to understand the Jew, Jesus, to whom they now owe allegiance.

Jesus is referred to quite often in the gospels as the son of David, and David, an important king, features in the genealogy. Christians believed Jesus to be the Messiah – the one God had sent to establish his reign on earth. David was therefore an appropriate ancestor. This was a welcome thought for a people longing to be released from unwelcome Roman rule. The genealogy also shows that God had been at work through all the generations. He had guided them through many difficult circumstances such as rescuing them from captivity in Babylon. The readers would be reminded of a God who really cares and whose greatest act of caring was in sending Jesus as Messiah.

Does the genealogy also have a meaning for us? It emphasises Jesus kingship for the Jewish Christians. It reminds us that we should follow the rule and guidance of God. It showed these Christians that God had cared for them, reminding us of his care for us.

When we look at the names in the list we find that they are not all people we would count as "good". Jacob (v.2) was a cheat who stole his brother's birthright. Rahab (v.5) was a harlot. God did not always use good people. He can use us though we are imperfect. Not all the people in the list were Jews. Ruth (v.5) was from heathen Moab. God does not confine his action to any one culture. Verses 1-17 are more than just a list. They can remind us that God is always at work on our behalf. Though we may feel unworthy, he can use us to fulfil his purposes.

We look forward to celebrating what he did for us at the first Christmas – the sending of Jesus, the Messiah.

Prayer

Father God, who sent Jesus to establish your kingdom on earth, help us to accept His rule and live in that kingdom. Amen

17TH DECEMBER

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,

Reflection

It's interesting looking at how culture changes over time. What was once considered taboo, becomes acceptable in contemporary culture. Or what's considered unforgivable, is viewed very differently in other places and cultures. In ancient Israelite society, two of the most vulnerable groups were widows and orphans, because they had no husband or father to protect, look after, or provide for them. Women had to be particularly careful, to avoid ending up in a situation like that. So Mary's becoming pregnant outside of wedlock, could have had disastrous consequences on her and Jesus' lives. And Joseph, being a righteous, religious, and rule-abiding Jew, would have done the right thing in that culture by quietly divorcing her. But God used a dream to change the course of history, and the rest we know.

Nowadays, there are lots of single-parent families, and marriage is becoming increasingly scarce, at least in the UK. Women work, and our government, on the whole, provides a safety net for many vulnerable groups. And yet we still see people struggling, families going home, children below the poverty line, different groups of people ostracised and overlooked, and hear tragic stories of how hard life can be, even in our own country, our own towns, our own streets.

Sometimes, it's easy to take the higher ground. Sometimes, it's harder to sit in the dust with folk who are struggling, reaching out a hand of friendship and help to those in desperate need.

Sometimes, it's almost impossible to know where to start. Sometimes, people are so good at masking pain and challenge, that we can't see it.

So, this advent, I challenge us all to look into the eyes of our friends and family, to see the face of the stranger, to accept help when we need it, and to share the load when we can. Be more like Joseph, stepping out in faith, potentially into a more difficult place, to be that life giver to another.

Prayer

Grandfather, Sacred one, teach us love, compassion, and honour, that we may heal the earth and heal each other. (A prayer from the Ojibwe people of the subarctic)

18TH DECEMBER

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 realized 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

Of the four Gospels, only Luke begins with the story of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth – a story of hope, which underscores the faithfulness of a God who works in both expected and unexpected ways. By beginning his gospel in this way, Luke prepares his readers for the story of Jesus' birth and notifies us that the advent of the Messiah would also involve several surprises.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's barrenness calls to mind the stories of Sarah, Hannah and the mother of Samson, who were all recipients of the fulfilment of God's faithful promise of children. Even though Zechariah had been praying for a child (v 13), his response to the angel Gabriel demonstrates that he was not expecting the news at all. Had Zechariah given up? Was he still trusting that God would deliver in his own way and at his appointed time? Despite Zechariah's scepticism, they would have a son who was to be named John which in Hebrew means, "God is gracious". Luke, through this fulfilment, reinforces the message that we can expect God to be faithful to his people and true to his word.

There are times in our lives, and in our lives together as God's people, when we are faced with problems that make us feel that there is no hope for the future. Like Zechariah, we are sometimes filled with doubt. But in the Bible, we are reminded and reassured that God works in unexpected ways to accomplish his purposes in us. God turns our despair to hope. Like Elizabeth, he shows us his favour and he is faithful.

May we journey through Advent with renewed hope knowing that he who has called us is faithful.

Prayer

Gracious God, you turn despair to hope, doubt to faith and sorrow to laughter. As we look forward to the coming of our Saviour, birth new life in the barren places of our lives, our communities, our churches and our world. Amen.

19TH DECEMBER

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.*

Reflection

Divine promise is endless perseverance. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The birth of a child should be an occasion for rejoicing, for new life is a sign of grace and promise and restoration. The birth of a son in the line of David is a pledge of new government and fresh prospects for Israel. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest. But the joy of birth is shattered today in Beirut, in Gaza, in Khartoum, in places where even unborn life is under threat from war and the promise of motherhood turns to ashes. A voice is heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more. Why doesn't God give up?

I'd like to buy a plant To show my love for you But I know you wouldn't water it So whatever shall I do?

If a child were a plant there are places where it would grow unwatered, promise few flowers, and survive on fragile hopes. But God doesn't give up. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third... he sent other servants to them... the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

Divine promise is endless perseverance. We can kill the son, but the promise is secure, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

Prayer

One day we might get it. The penny might drop. In the meanwhile, we are spoiled with signs and wonders and the promise of new life. God's grace and perseverance are the grounds of Advent hope.

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned*

20TH DECEMBER

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

As this passage often appears at some point in an advent liturgy, it's easy to assume that it refers only to the coming of Jesus. Yet the gifts of the Spirit recounted here relate to the practical task of exercising power, administering justice and ruling over an imperfect community. They represent qualities which we long to see in all those involved in government and justice in every age and place. The prophet moves on to speak of a renewal of the entire natural order. It's a shift which moves the theme from an idealistic but not entirely impossible expectation, to a poetic picture of perfect peace which provides a symbolic, if unrealistic, vision of the world. You don't have to have watched many nature programmes to know that while hungry predators are unlikely to live peacefully alongside their prey, other factors also come into play. Lions from different prides rarely lie down peacefully together; they are competing for territory and that would happen even if they were no longer carnivores. Yet it is true that many of our ecological problems are caused by the absence of the virtues described in the first part of this passage. The prophet is right that there will be no "new day" until the will of the creator is respected and obeyed. That will require wisdom and understanding, honesty and fairness in judgement, care for the poor and weak, and a readiness to respect and care for the natural world and the creatures in it.

Prayer

Lord, grant us the gift of your spirit to guide our judgements so that we might show wisdom in responding to the needs of friends and strangers and be as willing to share your love as to receive its blessings.

21ST DECEMBER

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

Believing in the seemingly impossible!

Imagine searching for new employment, so many jobs seem out of reach because we don't feel we have the skills to even apply, so we don't bother. We might instead go for a job that is easier, doesn't challenge us too much, feeling confident and secure.

Then imagine facing a challenge that we didn't consider possible for us, there is something wonderful about learning a new skill.

Sometimes we need to be told by others that we are more capable than we think.

In this passage, we see the transformation in Mary, to a deeper faith, a realisation that God knows her better than she knows herself.

How much would she remember of the words of Isaiah and other prophets, who foretold these events? Being reassured by the angel would only have been part of the story and she simply trusted that God's plan would be perfect. Later this would be confirmed when she met with Elizabeth.

Could we be as trusting in such circumstances?

From personal experience, I know how amazing it is to be used by God, even more so when achieve something that we can only do in His strength.

Prayer

The Magnificat - "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; My spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him."

Lord God, help me to have a faith which produces a response like Mary's; to believe that I can do anything you ask of me, for you know me better than I know myself.

Amen

Heaven to Earth

22ND DECEMBER

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

In the season of Advent and Christmas, many people will be welcoming family and friends into their homes to spend precious time together, and at church we will undoubtedly be welcoming friends old and new as we share our buildings and services with others in our communities. Today's reading is a beautiful account of two relatives coming together for what is known liturgically as the Visitation, which features two women, who through the extraordinary power of God's grace, will both bear sons.

Mary makes what was thought to be a three day journey on foot, from Galilee to Judea, through difficult terrain, to see her cousin Elizabeth who was miraculously, in her sixth month of pregnancy.

For Mary, this is much more than just a physical journey; it is one that embodies her firm belief in the Angel's message, and demonstrates a living, transformative faith, which manifests itself in action and love for others. (We are told that Mary remained with Elizabeth for three months, and what a help she must have been to a mother to be, of advanced maternal age).

Elizabeth is Mary's senior in every way. She is much older and is a married to Zachariah, a priest in the temple, and the couple are both recorded as being righteous before God. Mary on the other hand is very young, is unmarried and is placed by God in a socially precarious situation; saying "Yes" to carrying and birthing the Word into the world, has compromised her reputation and perhaps has even invited death by stoning.

At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and joyfully, but humbly, welcomes her young cousin into her home, acknowledging Mary's state of blessedness as the mother of the Lord.

We can almost see them lock onto each other's radiant gaze, and in that moment there is complete recognition that God's promise is being fulfilled, and has become "enfleshed" within them both.

Through Elizabeth the ancient prophecy of the herald or messenger who will "prepare the way for the coming of the Lord," will be fulfilled, and through Mary, the fulfilment of the long promised Messiah who will save his people, is being brought to birth. It is a moment where there is deep recognition, that heaven really has come to earth! Theirs is a faith that is both animated and responsive; a faith that both welcomes, and rejoices.

Prayer

Lord, we know that through the power of your Holy Spirit, we are both the messengers and vessels of your Word. Help us to become more animated and responsive in our faith and to be welcoming and joyful, that those we encounter through this season and beyond, may truly know that heaven really has come to earth and that hearts may be gladdened and healed. Amen

23RD DECEMBER

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.*

Reflection

At the time of writing, I am two-thirds through the "Couch to 5K" fitness programme a partnership between the BBC and the NHS to help get people up and running. This is however, just the first step in my preparation for running a charity half marathon in London next April.

So far so good, my cardiovascular functions and breathing are fine. But it will be interesting to see how my knees cope with all the pounding on the pavements – hence sticking to a carefully set out training programme and whilst I would certainly not describe my feet as beautiful, it is encouraging that they are not yet complaining.

In this passage the prophet is not commenting on the appearance of the messenger's feet, but rather what they symbolise and what they represent. For it is the coming of that swift and sure-footed messenger that is beautiful, the runner who can be seen on far distant mountains coming ever closer bringing with them the long-awaited and expected good news of hope and peace.

This Advent, may we take heart from those who carry with them the beauty of the good news of God's hope and peace.

Prayer

*Faithful God, bless your messengers we pray and as they come among us once more keep them safe even as we ask that you would open our eyes, ears and hearts to the message they bring.
Amen.*

24TH DECEMBER

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.

Reflection

Prophetic words seem to operate on many levels. This passage speaks to king Ahaz of Judah in order to strengthen and encourage him. He quite rightly fears being destroyed by an alliance between mighty Assyria and Judah's sister kingdom of Israel (Ephraim). He sees the threat, but God sees the future and graciously helps him to see beyond the threat to God himself. His promise is that within approximately two years (the time it takes from conception to weaning) the threat will disappear. Not only that but the inclusion of the name Immanuel (God with us) confirms God's promise to Moses that his presence will go with them. (Exodus 33:16) "what else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people..." They have not been forgotten.

Matthew's gospel sees in this prophecy a foreshadowing of the birth of Jesus; Immanuel (God with us), you have not been forgotten.

When we look around there is much for us to fear and be dismayed and discouraged by but we take heart. In Jesus God assures us we have His presence with us. We have not been forgotten!

Prayer

Dear Lord as we approach the celebration of your birth let us remember your presence with us. We rejoice in the knowledge that you haven't forgotten any of your promises and that you will keep them at the appropriate time.

"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God." (2 Cor 1:20)

Amen!

25TH DECEMBER

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

The waiting is over; Christmas Day in our calendar, the Mass or Eucharist of Christ, marking the Nativity of Jesus, has arrived! However many times we have heard or read the story of Jesus's birth, we can be struck afresh by the sheer wonder of it all; a vulnerable baby, born in a place reserved for animals, to a young, peasant girl, displaced by the order for a census by the ruling, foreign Emperor; the Creator who breathed life into all and who sustains all life, coming, by choice, amongst humanity, fully divine, fully human; the Sovereign of all in human form; Heaven coming to Earth; the coming of the sinless One, who would suffer and die the death of a criminal to be the Saviour of the world, to bring true peace; a historic, hugely significant event written with great simplicity. Dr. Luke's account includes how lowly shepherds, unable to keep the details of the ceremonial law because of their work, were the first to hear (from an angel!) about the One who would fulfil the Law, and the prophecies of a Messiah. They experienced the glory of God and "a multitude of the heavenly host praising God", saying: "Glory to God in Heaven... Peace on Earth..." They were directed to the "City of David", Bethlehem, and given the sign of a baby, wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger, an animal feeding-trough. Their fears allayed, and believing the angel's message, some of them hurried down to the town and found the Baby, Mary, his mother, and Joseph, of the family of David, now her husband. It was exactly as the angel had said. Having seen for themselves, they spread the good news of great joy to others, and returned to their shepherding duties full of praise. Mary, we are told, treasured these happenings and pondered them in her heart. I imagine Joseph did too, as he worked at his carpenter's bench. May we re-visit the scene in all its simplicity and profundity. May we treasure the truth, ponder deeply, and spread the Word. "O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord".

Prayer

*God of love, we thank you for the truth of your word and what your coming in Jesus means to us. We pray for your direction in spreading the Good News and being a part of your working in the world in our day, for your glory.
In the Name of Jesus. Amen.*

