

At Home Service 20th December 2020

Welcome to our service this morning on the fourth Sunday of Advent. There are different interpretations of each candle in an Advent wreath. If you have a wreath or a candle in your home, could we take a moment of quietness as we light the appropriate candle, thinking today of the Mary candle.

Light candle

As we think of the special part that Mary had in this wonderful gift that God gave, we think also of the part the shepherds played in the pre-Christmas story. God sent the Angels to the shepherds on that lonely hillside, with this startling message. That message God has been giving his people ever since. Our first carol brings that message again.

Singing the Faith 213 O little town of Bethlehem – Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)

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| 1 | O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight. | 2 | O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to all the earth!
For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love. |
| 3 | How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still
the dear Christ enters in. | 4 | O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in;
be born in us today!
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Immanuel! |

Prayers

Our most wonderful God, we come with thanksgiving in our hearts, amid the stress and worry of the times we are in. We are aware that many do not feel like praising and thanking, yet we know Lord that you are with us in good times and bad. So, Lord, accept our praise and joy that once again you have brought us safely to the time of Advent. We have not been able to join together as we would normally do, but in you we are one in heart and mind. We thank you for our families and our friends, for our neighbours. We think of those who are alone, with our Church families we ask your blessing on them and thank you for each one.

Forgive us Lord our sins, sometimes sins of omission. Sometimes we forget that so many are suffering, forget to say the word of encouragement. So we pray, knowing that if we repent of our wrongdoings you are ready with gracious forgiveness.

Micah 5.2-5a

The LORD says to his people:

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1.26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then 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.

Singing the Faith 212 O come all ye faithful

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| 1 | O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
come and behold him,
born the King of angels:
<i>O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!</i> | 2 | True God of true God,
Light of Light eternal,
lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father,
begotten, not created: |
| 3 | See how the shepherds,
summoned to his cradle,
leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
we too will thither
bend our joyful footsteps: | 4 | Lo, star-led chieftains,
Magi, Christ adoring,
offer him incense, gold, and myrrh;
we to the Christ-child
bring our hearts' oblations: |
| 5 | Sing, choirs of angels,
sing in exultation,
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above:
'Glory to God
in the highest:' | | |

Latin, 18th century, possibly by John Francis Wade (c. 1711–1786) and others

We continue by reading the Magnificat, Mary's song whilst visiting Elizabeth:
My soul praises the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour; for he has been mindful of the state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their innermost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. Amen.

Reflection

Advent, nearly Christmas, normally a time of surprises and joy. Unfortunately, Christmas will not be the normal that we know and enjoy, for so many. Yet, nothing can suppress the joy of us as we know the real meaning of Christmas.

So many places in the Old Testament, where it is prophesied of a coming Messiah, the obvious theme is humility.

Mary, a young peasant girl. The people of her day would have assumed that the characteristics of her life would make her seem unsuitable for any major task for God. But God does not work like that. He chose Mary for one of the most important acts of obedience he has demanded from anyone. What must have been the feelings of Mary? Shock? Disbelief? Surprise? She did ask 'How can this be?'

God's favour does not automatically bring success or fame. Often it is reproach. His blessing on Mary, the honour of being the mother of the Messiah, would lead to much pain. Many who knew her would probably ridicule her. Her betrothed, Joseph, obviously was bewildered and came close to leaving her. Her son would be rejected and crucified.

The words of Simeon later in the Temple at the dedication of Jesus, were words that Mary would remember in time. Simeon said 'This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your very soul'. Some translations say, 'Mary took these words and pondered them in her heart'.

The most humble of beginnings. God is full of surprises.

When the coming of the Messiah was prophesied what did the people expect? A King? Born in a stable? Not really. I'd like to share with you an extract from a book by Michael Card, 'He was born to die, so I could be born to new life'. 'The sound of the first Christmas, the clip, clop of the donkey as Mary and Joseph enter the streets of Bethlehem. The rustling of the straw as they made their bed for the night. The music of Angels over the lonely hills, the cooing of a baby. The sounds of that night are full of joy. Even the Angels' announcement of Jesus' arrival roll out like hymns of grace.

Immanuel, Saviour, a Light to the gentiles, Son of the Most High. The notion of violence is nowhere to be found. You and I would like to keep it that way. Who wants to ruin a story of such beauty and hope with even a hint of pain, certainly Mary and Joseph didn't'.

So this Christmas, because of the pandemic causing misery and loneliness and suffering to many, we have been wondering what sort of Christmas will it be? We need to remember these words, 'be joyful, keep the faith, do the little things'. Praying for each other, families, friends and neighbours, and our Church families. I was in hospital several years ago and a friend sent me a poem – author unknown.

God sometimes shuts the door and shuts us in
That he may speak through grief and pain
And softly heart to heart above the din
May tell some precious thoughts to us again
God sometimes shuts the door and keeps us still
That our feverish haste and deep unrest
beneath his gentle touch, may quiet,
till he whispers what our weary hearts love best.

God sometimes shuts the door and though shut in,
If tis his hand, shall we not wait and see
If worries lies without and toil and sin
God's word may wait within for you and me.

So we trust and pray that each one will find a blessing this Christmas. God born a babe, human yet divine. He understands all our fears, our struggles and is with us in all our joys. Wonderful counsellor, mighty God and Saviour of us all.

Singing the Faith 217 Silent night

Silent night, holy night: sleeps the world; hid from sight, Mary and Joseph in stable bare watch o'er the child belovèd and fair sleeping in heavenly rest.	Silent night, holy night: shepherds first saw the light, heard resounding clear and long, far and near, the angel-song: 'Christ the Redeemer is here!'	Silent night, holy night: Son of God, O how bright love is smiling from your face! Strikes for us now the hour of grace, Jesus, Lord at your birth.
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Joseph Mohr (1792–1848) translated by Stopford Augustus Brooke (1832–1916)

Prayers of Intercession

Lord we are so aware of the very troubled world around us this Christmas time. We lift to you all children everywhere. Those whose lives have been turned upside down because of illness, those whose families are in sorrow because of the loss of loved ones. We pray for those children who suffer because of broken homes. Young lives torn apart by stress and anxiety. Just surround them Lord with your love and protection. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for our government. Guide them in all decisions, for the good and safety of all people. Leadership is not easy. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for our church leadership, for those who have done their utmost to enable people to worship. We thank you for them. Lord we pray for ourselves, that we may be a light and witness to others. That our prayers may lift others out of darkness into your light. We ask these prayers in the precious name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Singing the Faith 214 Once in Royal David's City

1	Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed: Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child.	2	He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all, and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall; with the needy, poor and lowly lived on earth our Saviour holy.
3	And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love, for that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above; and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.	4	Not in that poor lowly stable, with the oxen standing by, we shall see him; but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high; there his children gather round bright like stars, with glory crowned.

Cecil Frances Alexander (1818–1895)

May the God of Peace be with you this Christmas time
May the Presence of Jesus be with you this Christmas time
May the Blessing of the Holy Spirit be with you this Christmas time. Amen
And a Happy Christmas to you all