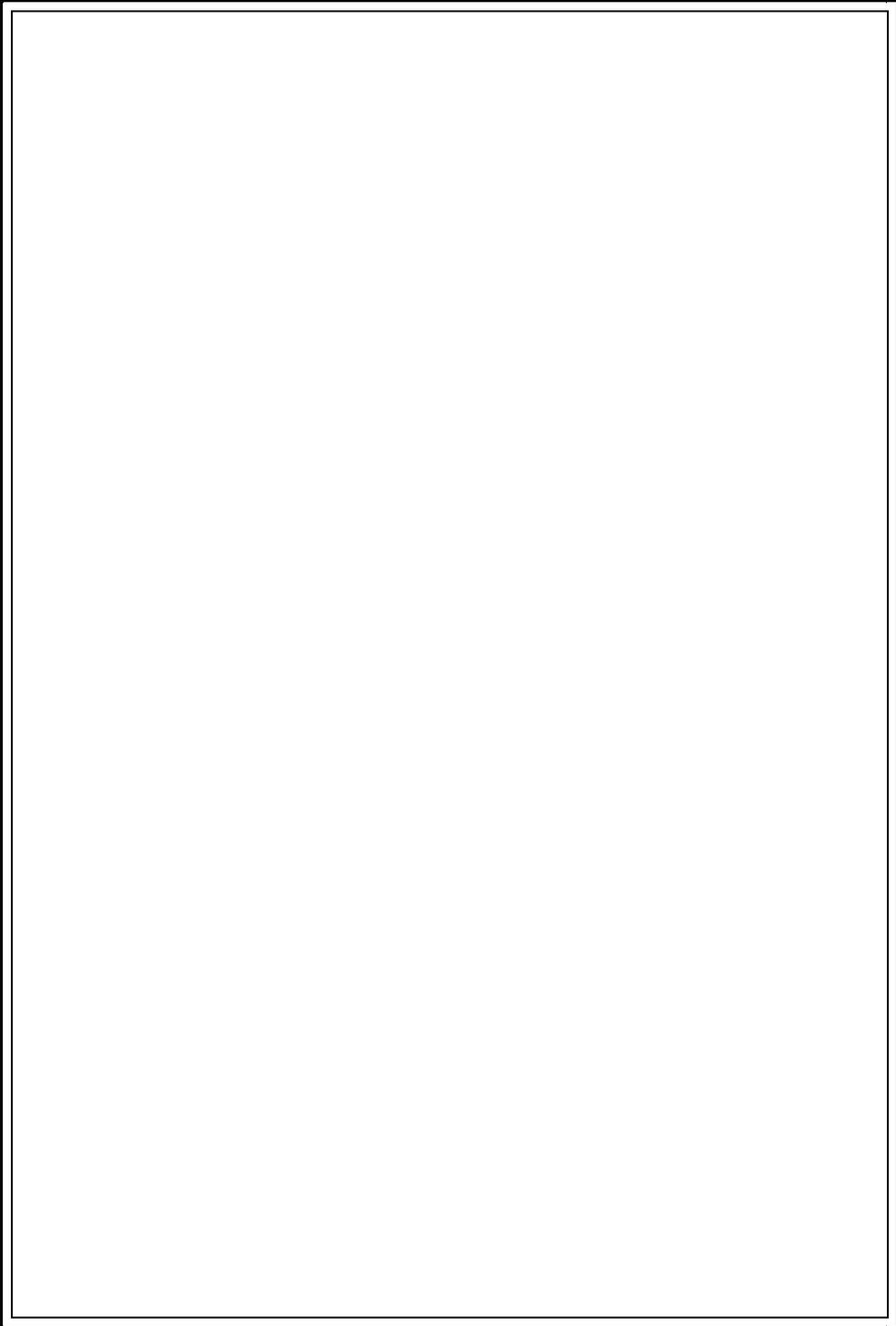


HOPE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES



**READINGS AND REFLECTIONS
FOR ADVENT 2020**



Introduction

Once more it is Advent, and we are waiting and preparing for the coming of the Saviour of the world.

We have called the booklet '**Hope in Uncertain Times**', but we might as well have said 'Hope in the time of a pandemic', for every aspect of our lives is coloured by awareness of the disease that is sweeping the planet. More than ever, we need to hear the promises of hope and peace as we read again the old stories.

We have put together some readings, reflections, poems, prayers and images and hope that they will provide you with opportunities to meet God during the next weeks.

If you would like some additional resources, you might like to try this course <https://www.lightsforchrist.uk/lightinthedarkness>

We can also recommend '*The meaning is in the waiting*' by Paula Gooder, which is quoted on 3rd December.

Many thanks to all who helped with this booklet.

Rachel Hall, Eveline Johnstone, Gillian Kirk, Mike Peat.



Lord of the dark, we wait for some sign of your coming.
It is indeed dark at this time
and all signs of your light,
your glory, your hope are gone,
or hidden - I cannot tell.
All is dark.

Yet I call you 'Lord of the dark',
believing in what I cannot see,
believing though I cannot see,
believing that, deep though this darkness is,
you are its Lord, believing
it will pass, believing that
its passing will be at your word.

Lord of the dark, we long for the light.
Not for the full light of summer noonday,
but the misted, slant light of winter dawn;
the light that brings hope.

Lord of the dark;
your darkness remains;
give us the hope that hope will come.

Lord of the dark:
give us hope of hope.

Stephen Cherry

Sunday 29th November

Abraham and Sarah



Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' (Genesis 21:1-3, 6)

Monday 30th November

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!



Reading: *The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. (Genesis 12:1-5)*

Reflection: Unknown journey; exile

Abraham was called by God to leave everything that was familiar and secure, to go on a long and very uncertain journey. Already an old man, perhaps he felt he didn't have the strength for this huge challenge? What did this mean for him, why should he trust it was the right thing to do?

Some have described the months of lockdown and Covid restrictions as a type of exile: a loss of a familiar way of life, being physically separated from loved ones, from our church community, missing the activities and interests that kept us connected and make life worthwhile. At the same time, we have faced fears and anxieties about our own health, and that of our loved ones: jobs, educational experiences and opportunities have been lost, plans for the future put on hold.

What has changed the most for you? What did you find the hardest to deal with?

What has helped you along this difficult journey?

What have you learnt about yourself and your relationship with God?

Space to be quiet

Prayer

Breathe on us O God
as we live in these strange times

We pray for your peace
passing all understanding

We pray for your vision
to see beyond our own four walls

We pray for your creativity
to find ways to reach out to others

We pray for your strength
to be the people you call us to be

Breathe on us O God
that we may breathe in your life
and exhale your love

Rachel Poolman

Closing words:

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.

Tuesday 1st December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!



Reading: *After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’ But Abram said, ‘Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.’ (Genesis 15:1-3)*

God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’ Abraham fell face down; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’ (Genesis 17:15-17)

Reflection: Believing God’s promises

Abraham was told by God that blessings would come in the future: a new land, a longed-for son and even more than that, a nation of descendants who would change the world forever. Abraham and Sarah were promised a child of their own although they were old and thought this impossible.

Abraham could not see when or how this promise would unfold. He had to believe, trust God, and learn to rely on Him.

How have your experiences of the last few months affected your trust in God?

What have been the areas of uncertainty where you have most had to rely on Him?

Are there things you would consider ‘impossible’ to change in your life?

Space to be quiet

Prayer

God of all creation
who inhabits every season,
grant us your peace
When we are frightened
Gift us the knowledge of your presence

When we are ill
gift us the cradle of your love
When we are overwhelmed.
gift us your vision and perspective
Gift us compassion for those who struggle
Gift us wisdom
to know how to love our neighbour
Gift us integrity
in our words and in our actions
Sustain us
Teach us
use us
As we walk through this season
With the One who will never have to self-distance.

Rachel Poolman

Closing words:

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.

Wednesday 2nd December

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...'

One phrase, part of a verse from maybe the best loved, most quoted, and most often sung psalm. One that I have known all my life.

When my daughter was given a cancer diagnosis in June 2019 and started nine months of intensive treatment, we as a family were stumbling. You are never prepared. Emotionally we felt we were in the dark, it was a time of emotional chaos, fear and above all uncertainty in which we could not see where we were going or what lay ahead.

So this verse describing the 'valley of the shadow of death' suddenly became extremely meaningful. I'd like to say it brought comfort but I'm not sure in the midst of our distress it was comfort in the sense of 'feeling better'. Where this psalm helped so deeply was in the sense of not having to feel alone. The simple words... 'For thou art with me...'

It gave us words to describe the experience we were going through, that reflected the fear, the feeling of darkness and uncertainty, of not

wanting to succumb to overwhelming anxiety, depression, or chaos. Thank goodness for this beloved psalm whose familiar words were conveniently ingrained in my memory and could be recalled at a moment's notice when needed.

This 'valley' is part of our human condition, and it is experienced in so many different ways, by individuals, families and communities. We experience fear, trauma, loss, grief, depression. We are hanging on by a thread. There is the feeling that fear, that evil, will overwhelm us, that we will be alone.

But we are NOT alone.

Maybe this verse describes the place our whole nation has been in through the Coronavirus epidemic? We can feel this darkness collectively sometimes.

It might be helpful to take some time to re-read and reflect on this very familiar and much-loved psalm and see it through fresh eyes. Are there ways in which it has spoken to your own experiences?



Thursday 3rd December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!



Reading: *The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree.*

'Where is your wife Sarah?' they asked him. 'There, in the tent,' he said. Then one of them said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.' (Genesis 18:1-4, 9-10)

Reflection: Waiting: in God's time

After ten years of waiting Abraham and Sarah decided that God needed some help with his plan to make them parents and so they agreed that Abraham would sleep with Sarah's servant Hagar. Hagar gave birth to a son and they named him Ishmael. So Abraham became a father at 86 years of age, but God insisted that, while He would bless Ishmael, Sarah herself was going to have a son. Thirteen more years of waiting passed; Abraham was now 99 and Sarah was 89 years of age. One day Abraham and Sarah were visited by some heavenly guests and as the guests waited for their meal, they told Abraham that one year from that time Sarah was going to give birth to a son. When Sarah, who was in the tent preparing their meal, heard this she couldn't help but laugh as she thought to herself, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure" (Genesis 18:12)?

Paula Gooder writes: “Abraham and Sarah become symbols for us not only of faith but also of waiting: of waiting as an essential part of our journey with God, of waiting being vital for the proper unfolding of God’s plan, and of waiting being as important as that for which we wait. God summons us to go out, but does not always tell us where to, or why...for that we must wait, but we can, sometimes, discover a meaning.” (*The Meaning is in the Waiting, P Gooder, p.51*)

Sarah and Abraham’s story is a story of waiting. They are given promises about the future, yet they had to wait a long time. They even thought they should intervene to force God’s hand. In their waiting there are doubts, questions and even disbelieving laughter.

The experience of living through a pandemic has been a time of waiting. Along with so much anxiety, there has been the frustration of lives ‘on hold’, students waiting to start university, single people waiting to start new relationships, older people waiting to see their grandchildren again or fulfil unrealized dreams and ambitions. We have realized that time is precious. Our lives are suspended while we await clarity, a return of some sort of normality in which we can make plans again.

Have there been times you felt God needed a ‘helping hand’ from you to resolve a difficult situation?

What are the things you are waiting for in your own life?

How do we sustain faith when we cannot see the outcome to a painful situation?

Space to be quiet

A Poem

This is the time to be
slow,
Lie low to the wall
Until the bitter weather
passes.

Try, as best you can,
not to let
The wire brush of
doubt
Scrape from your heart
All sense of yourself
And your hesitant light.



If you remain generous,
Time will come good;
And you will find your feet
Again on fresh pastures of promise,
Where the air will be kind
And blushed with beginning.

John O'Donohue

Closing words:

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.

Friday 4th December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!



Reading: *Then the Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." (Genesis 18:10-14)*

Reflection: Living in hope

A year later God's promise to Abraham and Sarah was fulfilled and they had a baby boy named Isaac. We read, *Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (Genesis 21:1-5)*

Advent waiting is a time of hope, of light coming into darkness, 2020 has been a year like no other and living through the uncertainty of a pandemic has been painful in different ways for different people. But has it also been in some ways a collective and communal experience? This Advent, how do we acknowledge the suffering that has taken place, while holding space for hope and joy at the same

time, being honest about how hard things are but also being aware of the transformative power of love and connection which the coming of Christ brings?

Has there been a sense in which along with separation and isolation you have felt a sense of community with others facing the same challenges?

Does all 'being in the same boat' bring a sense of comfort or hope?

Have the experiences of the past year changed the way you feel about Advent?

Space to be quiet

A Walk

My eyes already touch the sunny hill.
going far beyond the road I have begun,
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
it has an inner light, even from a distance-

and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which, hardly sensing it,
we already are; a gesture waves us on
answering our own wave...
but what we feel is the wind in our faces.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Closing words:

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.

Saturday 5th December

A prayer

When your promises seem empty, when faith has grown tired and old, dazzle us with your darkness and light, illuminate the Way of faith and hope. Restore us through your love and when our work is done, gather us to yourself and grant us peace.

Rachel Mann



Sunday 6th December

Jeremiah



*Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction.
So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day
long.*

*But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will
stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly
disgraced; their dishonour will never be forgotten.*

Sing to the LORD! Give praise to the LORD!

He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.

(Jeremiah 20: 8, 11, 13)

Painting by Rembrandt van Rijn

Monday 7th December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

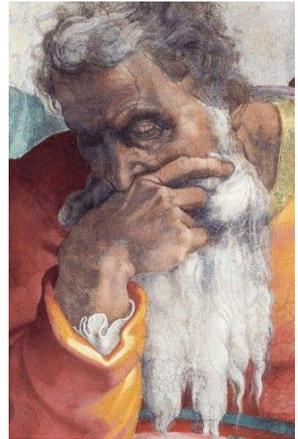
Reading: (The Lord says) *'To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so that they cannot hear.*

From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practise deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace.'

This is what the LORD says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'(Jeremiah 6: 10, 13-14, 16)

Reflection: Jeremiah had a tough job. God wanted him to tell people the truth, that they were following wrong ways and that they were heading towards disaster. No-one wanted to listen, not the ordinary people, nor the priests, nor the kings. Everyone was far too busy trying to make a profit and only looking out for themselves. Jeremiah, prompted by God, kept telling them the nation would be destroyed and they would be taken into exile but the people said 'No, everything is fine', when clearly it was not fine. Jeremiah constantly begged the people, whom he loved, to open their eyes and change their ways, but they did not listen. The end was inevitable. The kingdom was invaded, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the people went to exile in Babylon.

It is not hard to see parallels with our own time. We are in the middle of a pandemic which is unlike anything we have experienced before. I have been asked if this is God's way of punishing us. Well, I don't know what is in God's mind, but he does make some things clear. We get the



same message over and over – put an end to oppression and injustice, feed the hungry, care for the vulnerable. It's all pretty obvious.

So we can see that we have not been following his ways. We too have been greedy and self-centred. We have failed to protect the vulnerable people in our own society, let alone in other places across the world. We have forgotten our calling to care for the earth and to be good stewards. What do we expect will happen when we allow inequality to grow? What will be the result of destroying habitats and polluting the rivers and oceans? It does not take rocket science to realise that none of this is going to end well. And it has not. We have a pandemic, raging wildfires and melting icesheets. The world is in pain. We have to accept responsibility for our part in causing that pain. Perhaps this is a good time to pause and reflect and to ask what can be different in the future.

The destruction of the temple and the exile were not the end for the people of Judah, though it may have seemed like it at the time. They learned to walk once again in God's ways, and they were restored to their land. We too have to live through this time of uncertainty and change. We too have to cope with the feeling that everything is out of control. We too are at a crossroads. Can we stand there and look for the good way? Can we walk in it, for then we shall find rest for our souls.

In the midst of the uncertainty, it will be good to recall that God never gives up on us. No matter what sort of mess we have got ourselves in, there is always a way back to God. He is always waiting for us to turn to him and to be restored once again as his children.

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.

Tuesday 8th December

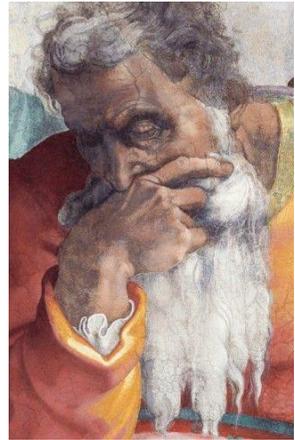
Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: *This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*

For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:4-5, 7, 11-13)

Reflection: During the past few years Bristol has welcomed hundreds of refugees, especially from Syria. Because of the war, they have left their homes, livelihoods and families. When I talk to them, I learn that they feel safe here and they are glad of opportunities for education and work. Basically, however, what they really want is to go home. A local family was thrilled to find a Syrian takeaway restaurant and told me how good the food was. They have even found a source of Syrian bread - obviously far superior to English bread! For them, life here, though easier in many ways, is exile from so much that they know and love. All the things that made up their lives are gone – the food, the bread, the sun, the trees and flowers, the houses and shops, the feast days and holidays. Yet, with great courage and determination, they are slowly building new lives here in an alien land and even beginning to feel at home here.



Jeremiah's people would have understood this experience very well. They too had no choice when they went into exile as they struggled to make sense of what had happened to them. It mirrors our experience too. We did not choose a pandemic or a lockdown. We hate the uncertainty of not knowing when it will end. We feel adrift and out of control as our lives are regulated by rules and restrictions. We may feel that we have lost everything that made up our lives. We cry out 'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?' (Psalm 13:1)

Has God forgotten us? As soon as we ask the question, we know the answer. God does not forget us. Wherever we are and whatever trouble we are facing, he is with us, alongside us in all of it. God is faithful to his people as he has been from the beginning. He was with the despairing exiles in Babylon, encouraging them to look to the future. There was no promise of an instant release, more a prompting to make the most of the time in exile so that they or their children and grandchildren would be ready for the eventual return. God brought the people through the exile and restored them to their homes and their land. The same God will bring us through this time and will be with us as we rebuild lives and relationships.

How can we use this time of waiting so that we are ready? Ready for whatever the future brings? Ready to welcome the Christ-child once more into our world?

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.

Wednesday 9th December

Psalm 42

As the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for you, O God.

I thirst for God, the living God. When can I go and stand before him?

Day and night I have only tears for food, while my enemies continually taunt me, saying, "Where is this God of yours?"

My heart is breaking as I remember how it used to be: I walked among the crowds of worshipers, leading a great procession to the house of God, singing for joy and giving thanks amid the sound of a great celebration!

Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad?

I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again— my Saviour and my God!

Now I am deeply discouraged, but I will remember you - even from distant Mount Hermon, the source of the Jordan, from the land of Mount Mizar. I hear the tumult of the raging seas as your waves and surging tides sweep over me. But each day the LORD pours his unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing his songs, praying to God who gives me life.

"O God my rock," I cry, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I wander around in grief, oppressed by my enemies?" Their taunts break my bones.

They scoff, "Where is this God of yours?"

Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad?

I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again— my Saviour and my God!

You may want to spend some time with these words.

Which part of the psalm speaks to you today?

Listen for God's voice in the silence. Let him draw near to you.



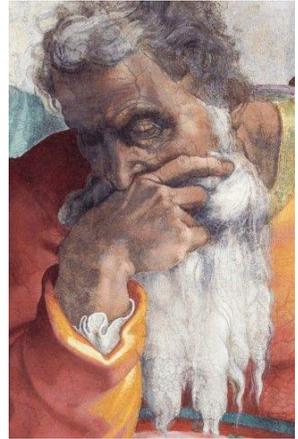
Thursday 10th December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: *“The day is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the LORD.*

“But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,” says the LORD. “I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbours, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already,” says the LORD. “And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)



Reflection: During the lockdown I have found I can only watch certain kinds of programmes on TV. Some I would normally enjoy are far too serious or gloomy. Recently I came across all the travel programmes presented by Michael Palin. They fit the bill beautifully – interesting places to see, new things to learn and a generally positive outlook. One little episode caught my attention. On his way across the Sahara, Michael met a family who had lost everything. They had been farmers, but drought had forced them off their land. They were living in the middle of the desert in a shelter made of old oil drums and plastic sheeting. Truly, they were in exile, yet they were happy and welcoming. This puzzled Michael considerably and he asked how they could be so happy when they had lost so much. The answer was that

whatever God sends makes them happy. Whatever God sends, they would find things to make them happy. It's an amazing declaration of faith. It reminds me of Paul who had learned who to be content with whatever he had, because *'I can do everything through the one who gives me strength.'* I'm not sure I can quite see Paul laughing about it the way the people in the desert did, but he certainly had troubles as grave as they did. It is the trust that is the same - God is with us in the good times and the bad. Whatever God sends, he holds and keeps us through it. He has made a covenant with us – he is our God and we are his people. Nothing can change that, for he is a faithful God and never leaves us.

I would have liked to know more about what was making the people in the Sahara happy, but we did not get any details. Maybe they had learned to be thankful for small mercies and to notice the ways in which God was blessing them day by day.

As we wait, perhaps we have more time to stop and notice all the things God gives us each day, all the little things that make up the fabric of our lives. You might like to spend some time now, bringing to mind some of the good things that God has given you over the past day or week.

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.

Friday 11th December

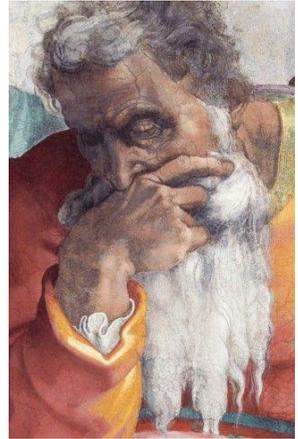
Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: *“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will fulfil the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.*

“In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In

those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Saviour.”
(Jeremiah 33:14-16)



Reflection: Jeremiah has a bit of a reputation as a prophet of doom. Indeed, he spends a lot of time in his long ministry warning the people about the consequences of their actions. These are not empty warnings but come true in the most graphic way. Not only do many of them end up in exile but Jerusalem, the holy city is destroyed, and the temple, the place where God most palpably dwells, is utterly cast down. It is a catastrophe. How can they see a future for themselves and their children? Has God abandoned them completely? Will life ever seem remotely normal again? However, Jeremiah loved his people and he loved God, so he was able to speak truth to them continually. How he must have loved speaking the words of promise, words that promised a new covenant with the people, words that promised a new king and a new Jerusalem where God’s ways would be followed.

During Advent, we are accustomed to hearing Isaiah's words promising a Saviour, Wonderful Counsellor, a Prince of Peace, but here Jeremiah is proclaiming the same message. God must have really wanted the people to hear it so he kept on sending it. The promise is for us too. This is what we are waiting for – the birth of the child who will change everything, who will share our lives and show us how to live, who will take all the pain and sorrow of the world on his shoulders and bring new life and certain hope to the whole of creation.

Can we wait, not just with patience, but with expectation?

For we know that the one who is coming is indeed the Saviour of the world.

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.

Saturday 12th December

A Poem

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

Malcolm Guite



Sunday 13th December



In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah.

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. (Luke 1:5, 11-13)

'The angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah' by Alexander Andreyevich Ivanov

Monday 14th December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: *“In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. ...*



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. ... 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.” (Luke 1: 5, 8-9, 11-13. Read verses 5-17)

Reflection: As soon as we are introduced to Zechariah, we are told what role he has in society. Zechariah is a priest, with a crucial role in temple worship and responsibility for instructing people in understanding the scriptures. His was a highly honoured role, and we are told he has the righteous discipline to match it.

But priesthood was not something Zechariah chose for himself; it was a role he inherited because of the family he was born into. Similarly, what brought Zechariah into Jerusalem on this occasion was not his choices but his place on a rota: his section was on duty. As if to underline the point, Zechariah is chosen “by lot” to enter the inner sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple (the equivalent of having his name pulled from a hat). Factors outside of his own choosing bring Zechariah into the extraordinary story of God’s coming in Jesus. In this case, long-standing customs for deciding how priestly tasks were done manoeuvred Zechariah into a place where he encountered the angel whose announcement changed his life.

In the very different era of the twentieth century, another priest (of the Roman Catholic kind) found himself moved into a place where he found deep spiritual insight, a situation he would never have chosen for himself were it not asked of him. When Henri Nouwen moved into the L'Arche Daybreak Community in North America, he was asked to oversee the morning routine of Adam, a young man with profound disabilities. To begin with, Henri felt far out of his comfort zone, ill-equipped and out of control. Gradually though, not only did Henri gain confidence in caring for Adam, but he discovered a valuable friendship he would not hitherto have imagined enjoying. As with Zechariah, a given routine set the stage for a heavenly encounter: "My daily two hours with Adam were transforming me. In being present to him I was hearing an inner voice of love beyond all the activities of care. Those two hours were pure gift, a time of contemplation, during which we, together, were touching something of God. With Adam I knew a sacred presence and I 'saw' the face of God." (from Henri Nouwen, *Adam: God's Beloved*)

One obvious impact of the Coronavirus has been a sense of losing control. For the sake of getting the infection rate "under control," our movements and choices have been significantly limited. Shifts between national and regional lockdowns, and between numbered tiers, have made our lives unpredictable. We feel constrained and swept along by the turbulent force of this virulent disease. But none of this prevents God from meeting us, speaking to us and calling us to play our part in bringing to birth a new creation where "mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Rev. 21: 4). Indeed Baptists, amongst others, have been asking what God might be saying to us in the midst of this pandemic (for some reflections on this question, go to www.baptist.org.uk/Group/Group.aspx?ID=349796)

What do you think God might be saying to you at this time?

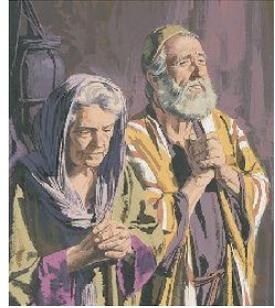
Closing words:

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.

Tuesday 15th December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!



Reading: *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.

Reflection: It is sometimes said that silence can speak volumes. Here we find Zechariah, a priest whose duties include explaining scripture to his community, forced into silence. Yet it is this silence, the fact that Zechariah is literally dumbstruck, that becomes the means by which those outside the temple realise that he has seen a vision. I find that strangely reassuring at the moment. Ever since the lockdown in March, I have felt frustrated that normal opportunities to be “effective” in ministry have been taken away by the social distancing measures we need to endure. I am used to relying on being physically present in conversations, to develop new relationships and to help others gain a sense of belonging in community. Online alternatives, useful as they are, feel more muted by comparison.

Zechariah loses the power of speech, and yet others can still detect that something of God has been revealed to him. Even though I still feel frustrated, this story gives me hope that I can share signs of God's loving action in the world with others, even through the boxed version of me that appears on their screens in a Zoom meeting!

Do you feel that rules to limit the spread of Coronavirus bring new challenges to building relationships? Express what you feel to God, being honest about your positive and negative reactions. Ask for patience and insight as you seek new ways to bring a sense of God's presence to others. If it helps, try writing down your thoughts in the form of a Psalm.

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.



Wednesday 16th December

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.

May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

After reading this Psalm, read Zechariah's words in Luke 1: 68-79.

'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.'

Make a note of any similar words and images in both the Psalm and the Gospel passage. The Psalmist and Zechariah will have imagined experiences from their own different times as they used these. Try using them yourself as you pray today, noticing which of your own experiences they bring to mind.



Thursday 17th December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: Read Luke 1: 39-56

“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 leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’” (Luke 1: 41-45)



Reflection: According to one of the most quoted sayings of the poet William Yeats, “education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” During her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, Mary speaks words that have burned brightly in the history of the church. *Luke 1: 46-55*, now known as the Magnificat, is a wonderful expression of faith in the transforming power of God’s love. It has inspired and encouraged those who have felt downtrodden in various ways down the years. It is sung to many different musical settings in regular acts of evening worship (Evensong) at all times of the year, not just around Christmas.

But like any fiery beacon, something ignites Mary’s renowned speech: a spark touches the dried kindling. Elizabeth is the flint that sparks this flame of confident faith expressed by Mary. Elizabeth does not try to “fill a pail” by giving Mary a lesson on scriptural precedents for surprising pregnancies, helpful as that may be at other times. Rather, it seems that Elizabeth senses that what this bewildered and fearful teenager really needs, in that moment, is someone to take it as read that Mary is blessed and equipped to fulfil God’s purposes. Elizabeth channels the Holy Spirit by showing confidence in God’s choice of Mary as the one who will bear our saviour, and the fire is lit!

In recent times, the nation has been inspired by the dedication of a now 100 year old veteran, who raised money for the NHS in the first lockdown by walking around his garden, quietly confident that his age was no barrier to his ability to serve. In November, Captain Sir Tom Moore launched another campaign, encouraging others to walk to raise money for those made lonely and fearful by the second lockdown. Who knows what fires you might light in these difficult times, not through extensive knowledge of how to thrive in a pandemic, nor through the elegance of your explanations, but through sharing your confidence in a God known for making good use of all sorts of people and situations.

As you pray, ask for a sense of confidence in God, and for opportunities to demonstrate how that makes a difference in your life.

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.

Friday 18th December

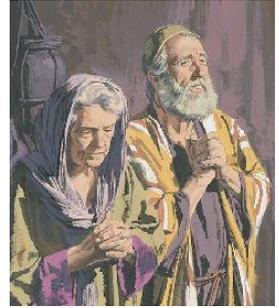
Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: Read Mark 1: 1 - 8

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1: 2 – 4)



Reflection: *The Search for Spock* is still my favourite Star Trek film, although the recent reboot films are hot on its heels! This is a sequel that assumes the viewer knows the story that precedes it. Early scenes picture Admiral James T Kirk (as he now is) grieving the death of his Vulcan friend Spock and lingering uneasily over his decision to launch Spock's funeral casket into space at the end of the previous film. A challenging conversation with Spock's father reveals that Kirk was right to be worried. Through it, Kirk discovers that he has unwittingly betrayed Vulcan custom by sending Spock's body away from his *Katra* (his "essence" or "soul") rather than bringing both to the planet Vulcan, Spock's homeland. It becomes apparent that Spock had surreptitiously transferred his *katra* into another member of Kirk's crew, Dr Leonard McCoy, just before he died. So begins a daring mission to reunite Spock's body and *katra*. This mission sees Kirk and his crew steal their ship - the *Enterprise* - from Starfleet headquarters, and literally turn it around to travel back and restore what was lost.

This is not meant to be science or spirituality, but just an aid to tell a story about friendship enhanced by a perilous quest. Notice how Kirk's meeting with Spock's father, disturbing though it was, enabled Kirk to discover a vital new insight that the father was uniquely equipped to share. As a result, a path becomes clear to Kirk, causing him to turn his ship and journey in a different direction. In an importance sense, Kirk "repents," because "repentance" means turning round in order to go in the right direction, even if that puts you at odds with the expectations of other authority figures (as it did for Kirk and his crew).

John's ministry called people to repent and to be baptized into a different way of thinking about the Messiah they were to prepare for, to follow a path that offers new life (spoiler alert for the Star Trek film!). John's ministry asked uncomfortable and searching questions. He challenged people used to thinking that God's Messiah was more about leading a successful rebellion against Roman rule than the quality of their own lives. He disturbed those who assumed that repentance was for "outsiders" more than for people born into the holy nation. The American preacher Thomas Long once delivered a sermon on John the Baptist entitled "Checkpoint John," likening his ministry (in some respects) to the unnerving experience of being interrogated at Checkpoint Charlie when crossing Berlin during the Cold War.

It has been suggested that the Coronavirus pandemic, for all that it is causing widespread hurt and enduring problems, has nevertheless provoked us to take a hard but helpful look at what we should really value. By imposing a new situation, it invites us to ask searching questions about the relationships that matter, the workers that deserve to be cherished, the way money should be spent, and the possibilities of a more thoughtful attitude to the environment that hosts our lives. It would be dangerously misleading to compare John the Baptist to the Coronavirus outbreak, and I don't intend to do that. But in Monday's reflection, it seemed reasonable to ask what God might be saying to us in the midst of this pandemic.

Today, I want to suggest this could also be the occasion for asking afresh what we want to turn *away from* in our lives, and what it might mean now for us to turn *towards* a way that more faithfully prepares for the saviour who is with us now and will come in glory. Spend some time asking yourself these questions today.

Reflection

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.



Saturday 19th December

Blackbird in Fulham

A John the Baptist bird which comes before
The light, chooses an aerial
Toothed like a garden rake, puts a prong at each shoulder,
Opens its beak and becomes a thurifer
Blessing dark above dank holes between the houses,
Sleek patios or rag-and-weed-choked messes.

Too aboriginal to notice these,
Its concentration is on resonance
Which excavates in sleepers memories
Long overgrown or expensively paved-over,
Of innocence un-mawkish, love robust.
Its sole belief, that light will come at last.

The point is proved and, casual, it flies elsewhere
To sing more distantly, as though its tune
Is left behind imprinted on the air,
Still legible, though this the second carbon.
And puzzled wakers lie and listen hard
To something moving in their minds' backyard.

P J Kavanagh (from Collected Poems, Carcanet 1992)

One thing that pandemic restrictions do not deny us is the chance to be attentive to nature. In this poem, the poet calls the blackbird a “John the Baptist bird,” perhaps because it is conspicuous in the dawn chorus that heralds a new day. What features of nature are like heralds for you, reminding you of the active presence of God in creation?

Sunday 20th December



The angel went to Mary and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. (Luke 1:27-31)

Monday 21st December

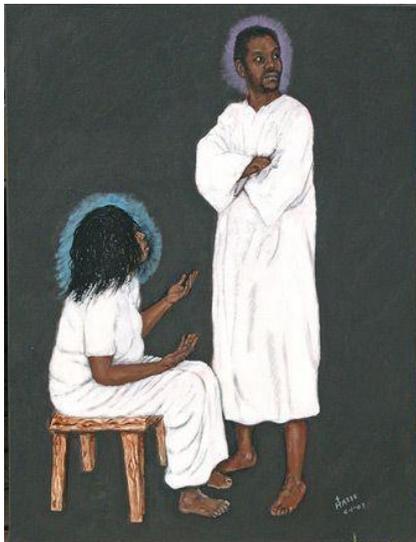
Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: *An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins". (Matthew 1:20-21 but read 18-25)*

Reflection: Joseph

Joseph - traditionally thought to be an older man, a carpenter by trade, a respectable man, a righteous man according to Matthew's gospel, someone who was brought up in the Jewish faith, born into the royal line of David, honouring the traditions. An arranged marriage would have meant him and Mary living apart for a year, marrying after that time if she was not pregnant, thus signifying her virtue; the contract would then be fulfilled and they would be married. This was what Joseph was expecting and then most likely a simple life as a craftsman with a wife and children following on. And then the bombshell from Mary that she was pregnant, and, unbelievably not by another man. Adrian Snell in his musical 'The Virgin' puts Joseph's reaction like this: "What do you mean a baby? Have you gone completely wild? I haven't even touched you and you're going to have a child? You know how much I trusted

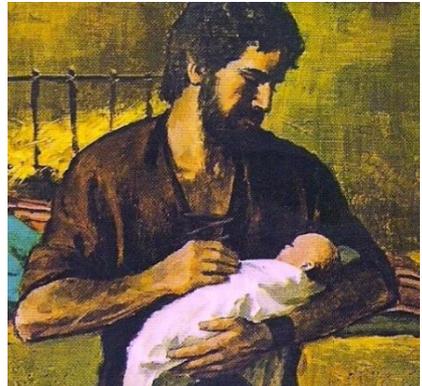


you, this is what I get for loving you. An angel? Sure, it was an angel, it happens all the time!" Ever a man of honour, he decided to divorce Mary quietly but then the dream - the dream where, as we read, an angel explained things to him. The bald statement that we have in our bibles in verse 24 - that when he woke up he did just as the angel had commanded him and took Mary to be his wife, is just that - a statement of fact, relating nothing of the torment he must have felt. The fear, uncertainty, disappointment, shame.....and yet. He did take Mary as his wife and cared for Jesus as his son. What a man he was to keep on hoping and believing in the promises of God amidst such turmoil in his life.

'It's stupid, but I hadn't thought he'd be so light. I can fit him in the palms of my hands. If I couldn't see him, I'd barely believe he was there.

My son. That's what Mary says I should call him. My son.

And from the moment he appeared, as he screamed in his tiny voice, I knew he was.



What's happened is too big for me. For my world. Mary talks of God and miracles. Mary says this little one will save us all.

He's already done that for me.

I should have turned my back and let Mary go when she told me she was pregnant. No one would have blamed me. They'd have said it was what she deserved. She'd have fallen so far.

I'm still not sure what I believe. But I believe in Mary. And I believe in this child.

He is so helpless. He is so beautiful. Is this what it's like to hold God in your hands?'

From 'A Star-filled Grace' by Rachel Mann

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.



Tuesday 22nd December

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: *...and Mary said, "My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour".(Luke 1:46)*

"My heart rejoices in the Lord, my horn (symbolising strength) is lifted high". (1 Samuel 2:1)

I suggest you read all of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel chapter 2 and all of Mary's song in Luke chapter 1

Reflection: Mary and Hannah



If you are in any way familiar with these passages, it's hard to read one of these magnificent songs of praise without thinking of the other. Both are rejoicing at the gift of an unexpected child - Hannah because she had been barren up until this point and Mary because she had been chosen by God to bear the Messiah. Both children to be born are sons who will be born to serve God and, in both their cases, their work as Mothers were to raise their children as those who would be

prepared to play their part in that way and to serve God. Both Hannah and Mary played a huge role in God's plan to liberate His people. They both found joy in surrendering to God's will - and how scary that must have been for both of them. I would venture to say especially Mary, given that she was a virgin and the social mores of the day would have cast her as unclean and an outcast in society, fit only for stoning as a whore. If we read Mary's song it is easy to conjecture that she knew

Hannah's song (as she would have done) and almost subconsciously echoed those sentiments in her own outpouring of praise.

Compare for instance these verses: *No one is holy like the Lord, for there is none besides you. Nor is there any rock like our God (1 Samuel 2:2) For he who is mighty has done great things for me and Holy is his name. (Luke 1: 49) or He will guard the feet of his saints (1 Samuel 2:9a) And his mercy is on them who fear him from generation to generation (Luke 1:50)* There are many more similarities that you will notice if you read through them both, but there are also differences in each woman's story behind their songs. Hannah came from a place of shame through her sterility whereas Mary came from a place of virginity and purity. Hannah prayed and prayed for a son to relieve her of her barrenness (1 Samuel 1: 10-11), whereas Mary in no way sought a child and actually, because she conceived brought shame upon her family and those she loved - a reversal of Hannah's fortune. The name of Hannah's son Samuel means 'Name of God' or 'God has heard'. Jesus, or Immanuel means 'God with us'.

Samuel was a priest who made sacrifices on behalf of the people (1 Samuel 7:9). Mary was told by the angel who announced to her that she would bear God's son, that she would ' Give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1: 21) That in itself is a fulfilment of the prophecy given by Isaiah that 'The Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means God with us) (Isaiah 7: 14).

There isn't space here to say more of the links that are to be found; perhaps it would be something that you could explore further this Christmas?? What amazing women they were.

Space to be quiet

Not wanting to lay him down
in the wood and cloth. Not yet.

Just one heartbeat more pressing the
smooth
skin, the pulse
of warmth she gave him to her
breast.
One last time.

Before she sets him where others
may come,

squeeze his toes, touch the curled-up
possibilities of his hands.

Before he becomes one more body

Before the world crashes in

Rachel Mann

Closing words:

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, o give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.



Wednesday 23rd December



Painted in 1886, by George Frederic Watts and assistants, this is one of a series of allegorical paintings he did, originally intended for a decorative scheme. Traditionally, the concept of Hope is often portrayed as an anchor, but he was aiming for a different, more original approach. Hope

sits on top of the globe, blindfolded and playing a lyre, which has all broken strings except one. She is bending her head down towards the instrument to catch the last note, much as a piano tuner bends his or her head to a tuning fork. The soft brushwork and mist surrounding the globe adds to the overall sense of melancholy. Watt's own one-year old daughter had died recently, and it may be that the painting reflects some of his own sense of loss, sadness and desolation at that event. He sold the original and then he and his assistants, with whom he closely worked, painted another which was gifted to the South Kensington Museum. As small reprints gained in popularity and distribution, it became popular for a time, although by the 1920's his

popularity was waning and the Tate gallery in London took down all his paintings. Still- both the painting itself and the theme of hope became influential, inspiring amongst others Martin Luther King's sermon of 1959 'Shattered dreams' and Jeremiah Wright's in 1990's Chicago. Barack Obama was in that congregation and was moved and inspired to make it the theme of his keynote Democratic Convention speech.: 'The audacity of hope'.

At the time of painting it was not at all well received by both art critics and Christian thinkers of the era. I beg to differ; If you look very closely (you may not be able to see it in this reproduction) there is a single star in the otherwise blank background and that one string on the instrument left. For me, it is an incredibly moving and powerful portrayal of how, when all else seems completely lost, there is still that tiny glimmer of hope that we can cling on to; that all is not lost and that although we may be 'hanging on by a thread', nevertheless, that thread is there and gives us something to hold on to. I only recently discovered Watt's paintings, and this has made me want to know and see more. I shall print this one out and stick it on my fridge to remind me that, in all the turmoil and uncertainty of these days, our hope is in God and his promises to us.

Roger E Van Harn puts it like this: "Because Advent is a season to rehearse the promises of God, Advent is a season for hope. Hope empowers. Hope sets in motion familiar sub-themes in the Advent season: prepare, anticipate, wait, and watch. None of these can be practised apart from hope, and none of these is passive when it is linked to hope. Each is a spiritual discipline through which the hope rooted in promise is practised."

Amen. Come, thou long-expected Jesus.

Thursday 24th December Christmas Eve

Opening words:

Wait for the Lord, his day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!

Reading: *While Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:6-7)*

Reflection: New life

For those of us who have experienced pregnancy, either as a woman or an expectant father, it is such an exciting time - terrifying, yes, scary and daunting, most certainly, uncomfortable (for the woman) - at the very least, but all of that is worth it because those feelings are shot through with the hope and sense of expectancy that the birth of a child brings, especially when it is your first. As the birth date draws nearer, we make plans for how our lives will change, what challenges it will bring, maybe we decorate a room for the baby, are gifted with clothes and toys and seemingly endless equipment (in our Western culture)

and are confident in the knowledge of our wonderful, free health care system which will look after both parents and child, pretty sure that, come what may, our physical, medical and emotional needs will be met and supported - ours and our baby's.



So imagine now in this ongoing time of COVID and all the uncertainty that brings, what different emotions and difficulties expectant parents

now face; whose sense of anticipation and excitement at the birth of their child is shot through with fear and trepidation especially for the woman.

In Kabul at the time of writing, many women, living under the shadow of COVID 19 prefer to give birth at home. Masha, who was expecting her baby in two weeks said: “Fearing to get infected by coronavirus, I avoided having an ultrasound test for my pregnancy” . Waiting for years to become a mother, Mahsa is now pregnant. Her excitement to become a mother, however, appears to be eclipsed by a feeling of anxiety. “I am not sure whether this situation has affected my baby’s mental and physical health. I cannot stop thinking about delivery day and the possibility of getting infected by the virus,” she says. “I don’t know what to do. Three and half months of quarantine have exhausted me,’ says Mahnaz, who is seven months pregnant. She has avoided getting an ultrasound mainly because of health concerns and the low quality of health service in the country. Kerry Weber, a pregnant American journalist living in the USA wrote: “I missed that time when all of my waiting was tinged with a kind of hopeful anticipation of the new life being formed within me. So, for now, I make my way in darkness and try to trust. I try to pay attention to my child kicking within me, as she prepares to enter a world unfathomably changed, though she will know no other. And I wait in joyful hope for the coming of a world in which, arm to arm, all of us are together once more, still uncertain of what the world might bring but hopeful that new life is being formed within it.” And, on this Christmas Eve, we wait too.

Space to be quiet

Closing words:

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.

Friday 25th December Christmas Day



Opening words: *'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'*

Reading: *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'* (Luke 2:8-12)

Reflection: Immanuel, God is with us

As I write this we are in the middle of a second wave (or a continuation of the first) of Coronavirus and waiting with the possibility of a further lockdown being imposed. We do not know what Christmas will look like, but it will not look like last year, or the year before that. Many of our traditional ways of 'doing' Christmas will not be able to happen. There will most likely, as you read this today, be a very different feel to

the day. That is hard. There is no denying it. There is no denying the pain and hurt, anxiety, depression, physical and financial hardship this virus has had, not just on us but on peoples across the globe. Like a ripple in a pond after a stone has been thrown in, the effects will be far-reaching, and we have only a little idea of exactly what they may be. But there is hope. There is the hope that science and medicine will find ways to limit or stop the spread. There is the hope that humankind will learn to be kinder to each other. There is the hope that we will be brought up short by it and recognise that we cannot go on living in the way that we have. There is the hope that we will take seriously the threat to our planet and treat it with the respect it deserves, as the great gift from God that it is to us. And there is hope in Jesus Christ, our Immanuel so....

Shout for joy
the whole earth,
and everything within.
Rejoice!
For Light has come
into the world

The mountains sing,
the seas resound
to the praise of your
name.
Salvation
once promised is here
on earth

The angels' song
rings in the air,
a child has been born.
Hallelujah!
The Saviour of the world is here

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