

A Resource for Advent



THE CHURCH UNION



The Society
under the patronage of Saint Wilfrid and Saint Hilda

Introduction

One of the great bishops and thinkers of the early days of the Church, St Augustine of Hippo (354-430), described the Christian life as being like a journey. When we are joined to Jesus in faith and love we journey within his body, the Church, on an adventure that carries us onwards, until we finally see God face to face. In one of his sermons he writes that although our journey in this world is characterised by times of sadness and of struggle, still we are to be a people marked by joyful hope. He uses the image of song to suggest the encouragement we can bring to each other when we are passing through trials, and as a reminder of the glimpses of our heavenly destination that we are granted here.

“Sing as travellers sing on a journey in order to help them keep on walking. Lighten your toil by singing and never be idle. Sing and keep on walking. And what do I mean by walking? I mean press on from good to better in this life... Sing up – and keep on walking!”
(*St Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 256*)

In the rhythm of the Church Year we find ourselves within the story of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it is in this framework that we are carried onwards to glory with him. As we move from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany and onwards we begin to sing again that joyful story through which we are saved for ever in Christ, and we journey forwards conscious of the grief and challenges of the moment but propelled beyond them.

This Advent and Christmastide we find ourselves passing through some particularly difficult terrain. The restrictions that we find ourselves living under may mean our celebrations are more subdued than usual; family gatherings may be smaller; some of us will be conscious of the loss of those dear to us, and of the strains and stresses we are bearing at work and home. So we invite you to use these resources to help you to “sing up – and keeping up walking” in company with fellow Christians from across our parishes. We might not be able to ‘sing up’ with our mouths this year, but we can make our souls sing; and we can let them sing not as some sort of exercise of ‘whistling in the dark’, but because we’re filled with a real hope because of what these days are proclaiming to us – God is with us, and we’re walking into the future with him.

How to use this booklet

The material in this booklet falls into four sections; one section for each of the four weeks of Advent. A further resource will be available to help us pray through Christmastide.

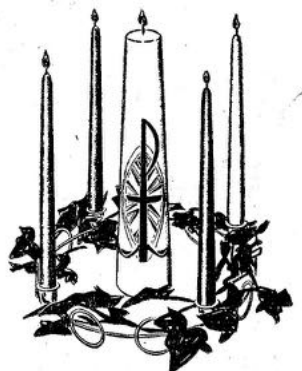
In this booklet you'll find a reflection to use each day during Advent. For each day there will be a portion of Scripture, a short reflection and a prayer. You might like to use it to accompany the lighting of an Advent Candle or Wreath, or with opening a door on the Advent Calendar in your home, as you take a moment to prayerfully reflect on the journey this season takes us on.

To accompany each section there will be a video released each week, available online via The Society YouTube Channel or on the Church Union and The Society Facebook pages (details of these are on the back cover of this booklet). Each video begins with a devotional reflection led by the Bishop of Lewes, the Rt Revd Will Hazlewood, and includes seasonal music sung by the choir of St Stephen's, Gloucester Road in London and then a talk from a priest of The Society. Each video will be released at 5:30pm each Saturday evening starting on Saturday 28th November, but will be available for you to watch at any time. The booklet can be used by itself without the videos, but the videos do explore these themes in more depth.

The Advent Wreath

Many churches display an Advent Wreath, which has four candles in a ring around a central white candle. The first candle is lit on the First Sunday of Advent, additional ones are lit, one on each Sunday, and the central white candle is lit on Christmas Day. Perhaps you might like to create one for your own home to accompany these devotions.

Each of the candles reminds us of those who prepared for the coming of Christ. The first is lit to recall the Patriarchs, our fathers in the faith; the second for the Prophets, and gives us an opportunity to reflect on the way that the birth of the Messiah was foretold; the third is for St John the Baptist, the great fore-runner; and the fourth is for the Blessed Virgin Mary, the God-bearer. These four themes frame the course of this booklet.



Week One: The Patriarchs

Before reading the daily reflection:

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After reading the daily reflection:

Almighty God,
as your kingdom dawns,
turn us from the darkness of sin to the light of holiness,
that we may be ready to meet you
in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.



Sunday 29 November 2020 **The First Sunday of Advent**

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. *Hebrews 11.8*

When the author of the Letter to the Hebrews looks for examples of people who have been steadfast in their faith, he looks first at the Patriarchs, those characters in the Old Testament who first grasp the purpose and promise of God. At the very beginning of the Bible they show us that the creator God is also the covenant God, the God who makes promises with his people – and these are promises that can be trusted.

In particular he holds up the story of Abraham and Sarah, for God intervenes in their lives to show that, not only is he trustworthy, but that he creates life where there was none. The Patriarchs show us that God is faithful and to be trusted, and so they prepare us to understand his actions in Jesus. He is the one in whom all God's promises are met, and God had been preparing the way for that coming from the dawn of creation. Give thanks for those who have prepared the way for God in your life, those who first shared their faith with you, and those who've nurtured you in the ways of holiness.



Monday 30 November

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." *Genesis 12.1*

Abram is called to believe that God will give him a homeland, even though he is a nomad, with no fixed abode. Abram's journey begins with listening, and attentiveness to the word of God

which calls him to leave the familiar territory of his father's lands in order to be a sign to all people that the promise of God is to be trusted. Having listened he commits to an adventure that will change his very identity, and as Abraham he will become the father of a great multitude – the People of God.

In Advent we, like Abraham, listen to the word of God that will not let us be. It will ask us to make new steps in our pilgrimage, it will invite us to change. It may be that we have a similar sense of uncertainty in where we are being led, but God's promises can be trusted and we are always responding to the invitation to deepen our relationship with him and our fellow pilgrims on the way. How will you use this Advent to listen to God's call to you?



Tuesday 1 December

God said: "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you." *Genesis 17.5,6*

There's something paradoxical about the story of Abraham. God promises him that he will be the father of a great nation, but he himself does not always have the benefit of the visible signs of that blessing. He is indeed led to a new homeland, but when he arrives there he has to live as a foreigner; he's promised nations, but the only ground he actually ever owns is the ground in which he buries his wife Sarah. Abraham continually goes beyond appearances and trusts in God's presence, even when God's paths seem mysterious to him.

As we reflect together this Advent the future seems ever more mysterious to us. We wonder how the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will change things for us, and things that seemed secure have been shaken. Abraham calls us to live as people who are shaped by God's promises, to bring into the anxieties of the present the gift of faith. How can you be a sign to others that God is present with them, bringing life and salvation, and opening a future that will have no end.



Wednesday 2 December

The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." *Genesis 18.13,14*

One of the threads in the story of Abraham is the mounting sense of desperation that he and his wife Sarah are unable to have a child. Isaac is eventually born to them both, but his birth comes miraculously in their old age, and after her longing to conceive. Sarah is called to believe that God would give her a child even though she is past childbearing age, just as Abraham was called to

believe that God would give him a homeland even though he was a wandering nomad. The story of these Patriarchs is building up the picture of a God who can be trusted to bring life where there was none, and who brings hope out of hopelessness – a promise that we will see fulfilled in the miraculous childbearing of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

It is not unreasonable that Sarah ponders what God might be doing in her life, and if he is capable of performing what he has promised. Can God be trusted she wonders, or is his promise just another form of wishful thinking? Sarah's story is establishing a principle that will endure in humanity's relationship with God. He is always bringing creativity, fertility, life where the situation seems barren. She leads us forwards towards discovering the utter reliability of God. Is that something you trust in every aspect of your life?



Thursday 3 December

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” He said ... go out to the field and hunt game for me, and prepare for me delicious food... and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.” *Genesis 27.1,3,4*

In the very name of Isaac there is a reminder of his miraculous birth, for at its root is the word for laughter, reminding us of Sarah's incredulous laughter that was turned to a laugh of joy. Yet Isaac's story is a complex one: We see him taken to Mount Moriah where he is almost offered as a sacrifice to God, and we note he is not beyond dishonesty when circumstances become difficult. In chapter twenty-seven of Genesis he is contemplating the last stage of his life and the legacy that he will leave behind him. He is deceived by his son Jacob, and the blessing of the first-born goes to him, rather than to Esau who should have been the legitimate recipient.

This part of Isaac's story tells us that the real legacy any of us leaves behind is not to be counted in possessions or territory, but what we stamp in the hearts of others through the love that we share. Isaac leaves behind a model of relationship with God, a gift far more bountiful than fiscal worth. His life may have been a complicated one, but God was able to use it to share more of his purposes with the world. How can we use Advent as a time to think about whether the legacy we will leave behind is equal to the potential within us?



Friday 4 December

Jacob dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ... Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”

Genesis 28.12,16

Jacob is in a predicament. Having stolen the birth right intended for his brother he is in trouble, and has to flee for his life. As he takes his rest on an uncomfortable bed of rocks he is given this vision of heaven as a sign that, even though he is far from home and filled with natural anxiety, God is always present.

Perhaps that's where we find ourselves this Advent. We may not have engaged in double-dealing with our kin on a similar scale to Jacob, but we do find ourselves in a place of collective anxiety because of the real challenges the Covid-19 pandemic faces us with. "The night is dark, and I am far from home" as St John Henry Newman puts it. God makes a way to be present to Jacob, and God makes a greater way to be present to us in Jesus Christ. What are the ways that you are experiencing God's presence in your life today?

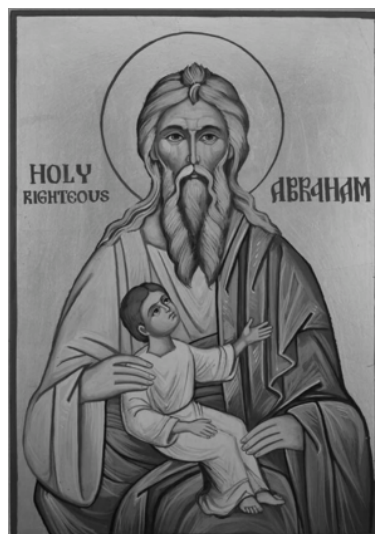


Saturday 5 December

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. *Genesis 32.22-24*

At first sight Jacob is not an obvious partner for God's promises; he's cheated his brother, and in the section of Genesis preceding these verses he's been involved in some more double-dealing against his father-in-law. At the ford of the Jabbok Jacob wrestles with a stranger, who we discover to be an angel. This contest is a symbol of God's struggle to get through to him, and to bring him back into a relationship with him. As the struggle at Jabbok ends the angel blesses Jacob, and gives him a new name and a new future – he is to be called Israel, the father of a nation.

We can sometimes describe the spiritual life as *struggle*: to pray, to be faithful, to understand where God is at times like this, to discern what he really wants us to do. Charles Wesley memorably describes this in one of his great hymns 'Come, O thou Traveller unknown' (worth looking up today if you have chance). Our struggle, like Jacob's, is met by the force of God's love which is always leading us on to the next stage of our relationship with him. What could that next stage be for you?



Week Two: The Prophets

Before reading the daily reflection:

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After reading the daily reflection:

God our Father,
you spoke through the prophets of old
of a Saviour who would bring peace.
Help us, as we prepare to celebrate his birth,
to share with those around us
the good news of your power and love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ,
the light who is coming into the world. Amen.



Sunday 6 December 2020 **The Second Sunday of Advent**

And Jesus said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and so enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. *Luke 24.25-27*

As the two disciples walk towards Emmaus on the day of resurrection they talk with Jesus about the long history of God’s people. He brings them to see that it’s not so much that the prophets are speaking of how they will be rescued *from* suffering, but that they will be rescued *through* suffering. Jesus’ assertion is that the Prophets are bearing witness to him, and that’s one of the reasons why they are such good companions for us through Advent.

The word “prophet” comes from a word which means “to speak forth”. They are charged with maintaining a sense of the presence and action of God, and speaking for him, even in times of national crisis and acute anxiety. Some of the prophets see Jerusalem violently destroyed and its people taken into exile, but they continue to hear God and see him at work. We will see this insight of the prophets magnified by Christ’s cross. The world may do its worst, but God’s purpose of love endures. How can you be a sign of that enduring love this week?



Monday 7 December

From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. *Jeremiah 7.25*

The message that the prophets “speak forth” from God is at times one of comfort and consolation, and at other times one of judgement and warning, but is always a part of the concern of God for his people. The prophets are sent *persistently* to draw Israel’s attention back to their covenant relationship with God, a word that appears nine times in the book of Jeremiah alone to describe how God often sends them. In fact, the word we have translated as *persistently* here, *shakam* in Hebrew, is a word used for the relentless burden of labour at the start of the day – the image here is of God getting up early in the day to dispatch the prophets on their mission of mercy to his people.

Their ministry is part of God’s saving action of his people, and they prepare us to receive Jesus by showing us that we are made for friendship with God, and that our lives have an ultimate purpose and destiny. Take some time today to delight in the loving attention that God gives to you, for he is using this Advent season of grace to persistently draw you to his heart of love.



Tuesday 8 December

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

“Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” *Isaiah 7.13,14*

The steadfast message of the prophet Isaiah is that God is preparing the way to send his Messiah, and that in him all the promises that God makes will be fulfilled. Like all the prophets before and after him Isaiah speaks to a people schooled in hardship, calling them to cling to God’s promises, and to wait in confidence for the consolation of Israel.

We’re recalling today that God’s preparing the way to send his Messiah reached a climax in the holy life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which proclaims Mary as radically holy – every aspect of her being was ready for the Son of God to grow with her. God’s promises made through Isaiah are fulfilled as he prepares the way for Jesus in her. As you go to Mass today be conscious that you are asking him to prepare the way for Jesus in your life, that he may powerfully and faithfully grow in you.



Wednesday 9 December

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. *Isaiah 40.1,2*

The role of Jerusalem is highly significant for the prophets, as we see here in this verse from Isaiah. It is the city which King David made his capital, and to which he brought the Ark of the Covenant, the visible symbol of God's presence with his people. Jerusalem was called to be a faithful city, but again and again it is condemned for sinful conduct. Yet its restoration following the destructive exile is promised by Isaiah. The comfort that God will bring is the comfort of forgiveness and rehabilitation. "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem" is what the Hebrew means here – it is not the conduct of Jerusalem's sinful inhabitants that will have the last word in its story, but the merciful compassion of God.

Part of God's Advent comforting of us is the experience of knowing ourselves to be forgiven and restored. This is a season when many seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and, like exiles, through that sacrament we are restored to our 'right selves' and brought home to the heart of God. How will you make that journey in the next few days?



Thursday 10 December

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. *Isaiah 43.1,2*

One of the key things to hold in our minds as we read Isaiah is that it comes from a time of national catastrophe. The exile was crushing and horrifying not simply in the way that war always is for prisoners and refugees, but because it called into question their identity as a chosen people. Isaiah has proclaimed that God will lead them home – it'll be quite a journey, across rivers and difficult terrain, but the promise is that they will return home in God's strength, not their own. Again and again the message, not just of Isaiah and the prophets but of the whole of Scripture is, "don't be afraid, God is with you."

Let that message sink deep into your bones today. For many of us the journey is hard at the moment; we're fearful of jobs, of sickness, of being apart from loved ones. Maybe take a bit of time to read all of Isaiah 43 and remember you are not travelling alone or in your own strength.



Friday 11 December

O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all the day long. *Jeremiah 20.7,8*

The vocation of the prophets is not a straightforward one. We might imagine that there's a certain glory in being a spokesperson for God, but Jeremiah has a much more realistic view of his calling. His message has not been an easy one to tell, for he has warned of the destruction of Jerusalem, and has been proclaiming judgement and the need for repentance. "Don't shoot the messenger" we say if we tell difficult news, but Jeremiah (and many of the prophets) experience marginalization, unpopularity, rejection, misunderstanding and loneliness. He rails against God for giving him this task, "you have deceived me" he says, though he remains steadfast. The prophets are the sign that we cannot mould God to suit ourselves, and his word is challenging and uncomfortable.

Even in this experience God is preparing the way for his Messiah, and there's a pointer here to what Jesus himself will face. He is met by hostility and rejection, and always chooses the will of the Father. Does your faith in God sometimes isolate you from others? How do you feel about that?



Saturday 12 December

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a sound, a thin silence. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

1 Kings 19.11-13

This experience of God comes to the prophet Elijah in a period of profound loneliness. He has defeated the prophets of the pagan god Baal, and is fleeing for his life from the reprisals of the wicked Queen Jezebel. Elijah is hiding away in a cave, a fugitive who has lost his peace, when God reveals himself to him in a humble sign. It is not in the thunder of wind or flame, but with that gentle breeze that God comes forward to meet a tired man, who thinks that he has failed on all fronts. God brings calm and peace to his soul, and so renewed and strengthened Elijah goes on to complete his prophetic calling.

Perhaps the past few months have found some of us feeling, like Elijah, useless and alone, threatened and frightened. Many of us have struggled to pray, and our minds and hearts have been filled with anxiety. Elijah teaches us to be still, to allow God to speak to our hearts in the

silence so that we may be carried by him. In her beautiful Advent book *The Coming of God* Maria Boulding says that “Prayer is an exposure to the reality of God.” Do you allow yourself space to be quiet and still so that you can be touched by the God who is love?



Week Three: St John the Baptist

Before reading the daily reflection:

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After reading the daily reflection:

God for whom we watch and wait,
you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way of your Son:
give us courage to speak the truth,
to hunger for justice,
and to suffer for the cause of right,
with Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Sunday 13 December 2020 **The Third Sunday of Advent**

Now while Zechariah was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense... And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing at the right side of the altar of incense. *Luke 1.8,9,11*

The story of St John the Baptist has deep Old Testament roots. It begins in the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah enters sacred space at the hour of the evening sacrifice, and the fragrant rising of the incense is a symbol of prayer. Time and place are holy, and at this moment where the worship of God's people on earth is joined with the worship of heaven a new step is taken in the preparations God is making for Jesus. Zechariah receives the message of the new covenant God is making. The son that he and Elizabeth his wife will have is to usher in a new era for the people of God. Time and eternity meet in Zechariah's dutiful offering of worship in a powerful new way.

The awesomeness of this particular offering of worship by Zechariah holds true for us. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist time and eternity are meeting, it is a moment of encounter with the living God who is calling and sending us. Spend a moment today reflecting on the role that sacred space and sacred time has in your life, and ask God to help you never to take them for granted.



Monday 14 December

The time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. *Luke 1.57,58*

Zechariah's response to the angel is at first incredulity. He asks for a sign that what is promised can be true, and that he and Elizabeth will indeed to parents in their old age. As the story continues we see him being struck dumb – he's only able to speak after Elizabeth gives birth in order to name their child 'John', and we see something of their uncontained joy in having a child. But the joy of Elizabeth and Zechariah and their neighbours is but an echo of the joy that we have been building towards in our reflections on the Patriarchs and Prophets: this is part of God's great fulfilment of his promises and purposes, for, as the Advent carol puts it "Love the Lord is on his way".

In many of our churches yesterday was kept as Gaudete (joy) Sunday. You might have noticed rose vestments or seen the rose coloured candle lit on the Advent wreath – a break from penitential purple as a reminder that the spirit of joy surges through our veins when we think of the Baptist. How will you keep that spirit alive inside you?



Tuesday 15 December

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. *Luke 1.39-41*

The relationship between Elizabeth and Mary and between their sons is one which has long fascinated artists. There are quite a few pictures of the two boys playing together, as their mothers look on – sometime St Anne, whom tradition names as the mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary is there too. Those tranquil domestic scenes imagined by artists have their origin in this incident in the early lives of St John the Baptist and Jesus: their mothers meet, and the baby John the Baptist leaps for joy, acknowledging Jesus' supremacy: Jesus is the Lord, John is the herald.

It's good to remember the family of St John the Baptist and Jesus as they meet: though much lies ahead for their babies, in that moment they are surrounded by love. As we remember them we remember our own family too: Perhaps you're not able to gather this Christmas in the large group you are used to; perhaps you are feeling sad that there are family members you can't see; or perhaps your experience of family life is difficult, with memories of hurt or failure. Ask Our Lady and Elizabeth to help you with those feelings, and to allow you to share something of their warmth and love.



Wednesday 16 December

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" *Matthew 3.1-3*

The landscape of the Judean wilderness is a stark one, things stand out against the vast expanse of the sky: a rock here, scrub there – a perspective that throws the features of the terrain into sharp focus. The landscape of the wilderness matches the preaching of St John the Baptist. His message is to repent, a call to his hearers to examine the perspectives in which they are living, and to reach for a newer and better one. ‘Everything that we’ve been waiting for is about to come’, he’s saying, ‘but that is going to demand a change in your behaviour, and a reordering of your priorities, so get yourself ready and make straight the way of the Lord.’

To put our lives in their proper perspective is the call of Advent. How have you been seeing things in their starkness over the past few months? The pandemic has recalled us to the things that are *really* important in our lives; we’ve seen who it is that we’ve really depended on in the crisis – the care workers, shelf-stackers, refuse collectors and so on; and we’ve seen the toll on those members of our society who are materially poor. Have you noticed? As we chart a course to rebuild society we need to hold on to this larger vision and renewed perspective.



Thursday 17 December

And John preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. *Mark 1.7,8*

How do we find our identity? That’s a question that seems to be haunting many in Western society in all sorts of ways. We talk about ‘self-identifying’, and it can sometimes feel as if identity is something to be chosen like a product from a supermarket self. St John the Baptist finds his identity in faithfully pointing to Jesus Christ. Great things are about to unfold, and his vocation is to faithfully prepare the ground.

The wonder and purpose that fills John’s life is the potential of every human life, for he finds it in relation to the Lord to whom he points. We find our deepest identity in answering God’s call. We become who we are meant to be by responding to the God who calls us to life, and the stories of our lives are made up of those choices to refuse or accept that gift. What can you do to point to Jesus?



Friday 18 December

Soldiers also asked John, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

Luke 3.14

St John the Baptist is an uncompromising figure. No one is spared from being told the truth about themselves, from the crowds that come out to hear him and be baptised, to officials like the soldiers here, and even King Herod in his palace is under his attention. He ‘speaks the truth to power’ we might say, because his point is that you can’t pretend to God’s ‘chosen’ if your behaviour is out of step with his purposes. God’s justice is worked out in the behaviour of his followers.

The Venerable Fulton Sheen was once asked how to become a *popular* preacher. He replied that to be popular you simply needed to avoid preaching against the sins people really commit, but the call is to be an *authentic* preacher and that means challenging everyone. That’s preaching in the spirit of St John the Baptist. It begins with addressing ourselves, but it’s not afraid to turn its attention against whatever is sham, unjust and unrighteous. What do you think he’d want us to turn our voices to condemn today?

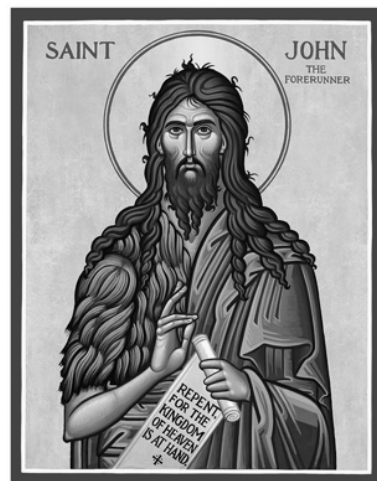


Saturday 19 December

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” *Matthew 11.2,3*

Inevitably the uncompromising preaching of St John the Baptist, not least his condemnations of the ruling elite, lands him in trouble and he is imprisoned. While he is there uncertainty seem to have crept into his mind, and the question he sends his disciples to Jesus with “shall we look for another?” is the question of a searching people. God is revealing himself in Jesus, but he seems unpredictable and mysterious. John wants confirmation that his hope has not been delusional, and in the return message from Jesus that confirmation comes.

When we find ourselves asking why some trial has come our way, or wondering what God’s purpose could be in a trying situation St John the Baptist is a good companion for us. We don’t need to have all the answers to every challenge to faith, we simply have to do what he did – see the transforming difference that Jesus makes, and faithfully point to him. How have times of doubt in your life led you to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is?



Week Four: The Blessed Virgin Mary

Before reading the daily reflection:

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After reading the daily reflection:

Heavenly Father,
who chose the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of the promised Saviour:
fill us your servants with your grace,
that in all things we may embrace your holy will
and with her rejoice in your salvation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Sunday 20 December 2020 **The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. *Luke 1.26,27*

Elizabeth has been pregnant for six months when Gabriel is dispatched again from God's presence to bring news of another birth. He's sent to Nazareth, a rather out of the way place, and to the simple dwelling in which Mary is living. What's clear from the opening verses of the meeting of angel and girl is that she has plans: Mary is engaged, and plans are advanced for her – the formalities of the betrothal have taken place, though Joseph has yet to complete the marriage by taking her to his home. Perhaps Mary had clear expectations of what her life would look like with Joseph, and it's difficult for us to understand the depth and cost of her calling.

But maybe we can understand something about plans and expectations that have to be set aside because of a dramatic change in our circumstances. We've all experienced something of that recently, but on a deeper level our own plans can be turned upside down: A new job comes our way and new possibilities open up; a new relationship alters our lives; an illness sets us on a different course. We often find unexpected blessings in these times, and that like Mary we can go on trusting God. Looking back, can you think of times in your life when your plans changed, and can you see how God was with you in those times?



Monday 21 December

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O highly favoured one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God."

Luke 1.28-30

When Gabriel greets Mary the first thing that he does is assure her of God's presence in her life. Perhaps he realises that she is experiencing something of the natural human anxiety of being confronted by a dramatic change we can't fully comprehend. He calls her "favoured", or "gifted one" is another way of translating the Greek word that's used. She is gifted because God's long preparation for the sending of his Christ has found a focus in her body, and the Lord is with her, just as in the Old Testament he is described as being 'with' his holy city, Jerusalem. This greeting assures Mary that she is the recipient of God's loving care, and that it is his love which is drawing her into playing a key part in his saving purposes for humanity.

"The Lord is with you." The angel's role in the story of the annunciation to Our Lady points us towards the vocation of each one of us. Firstly, to realise that because of Mary's child bearing those words are addressed to each of us. The Lord is with us, and we need to receive that greeting with every fibre of our being, for nothing can part us from him. Secondly, having received that message in our hearts we are to share it with others. We can be the messengers who assure others that God is with them, present in their lives – a proclamation made by our words and actions. Who do you know who needs to receive that good news today? Tell them.



Tuesday 22 December

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."
And the angel departed from her. *Luke 1.38*

Mary isn't simply a passive recipient of what God is asking of her. Her free 'yes' is the sign of her active participation in the fulfilling of God's promises. We see her at the annunciation not only as the mother of the Lord, but as the first of his disciples, accepting God's word and allowing it to work in her life.

It's interesting to ponder the maternal influence that Mary had on Jesus. As he grew up in her home and she taught him to pray Is it stretching our imaginations too far to suggest that there is an echo of her "let it be to me" in the prayer that he was to commend as the model of all prayer "thy will be done"? She is certainly our companion as we pray those words, encouraging us to respond to the gift of God in the same way that she did. Doing God's will doesn't come automatically, but she shows us that the more space we make for him in our lives the freer and the happier we become. As you pray the Lord's Prayer today give a bit more attention to the phrase "thy will be done". What could that be asking of you?

Wednesday 23 December

And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and returned to her home. *Luke 1.56*

The Blessed Virgin Mary and St Elizabeth have rejoiced together at what God is doing in their lives. They have given each other consolation and strength, and experienced the responses of their children in one in their wombs. Then Mary goes back home to patiently wait for the pregnancy to take its course. Her body changed, tiny hands and feet pushing, and all the while knowing that this was God within her, exposed to all the risks that pregnancy carries with it. These months in which the eternal Word of God was hidden in Mary's body have long captured the imagination of poets: 'For in that womb contained was, Heaven and earth in little space' says one, 'Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb' another. The small space of Mary's womb contains something vast – the fullness of the God who created the universe.

In so many ways our faith shows us the capacity of the small to convey the immensity of God, and that each one of us can, in a sense, be a God-bearer. "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" says the opening of St John's Gospel (1.16). The fullness of God's own life, poured into us, filling our lives. We're made powerfully aware of that when we have received Holy Communion – there's something awesome about our having the body and blood of Christ in our bodies. That moment shows us something of the role of our bodies and lives in conveying God's presence to the world. How are you preparing to receive Holy Communion at Christmas?



Thursday 24 December

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed. *Luke 2.4,5*

It's a scene recreated by many a nativity play: Mary and Joseph and usually a donkey, travelling from door to door in order to secure accommodation in Bethlehem, and it's a good scene for us to recall on Christmas Eve. We might think of Joseph anxiously trying to provide for his little family, and of the discomfort of Mary making a journey so late in her pregnancy. In the opening of St John's Gospel there's a reflection on this experience of Mary and Joseph's struggle to find shelter, "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." (1.11)

There's a point to be made here about how Jesus waits to be let in to our lives. He comes, not with force or might, but, as in the search of pregnant Mary for shelter, simply waiting for us to give him room. It's customary during Mass to strike your chest during the Penitential Rite, at the words "through my fault, through my fault, through my own most grievous fault." That action is a sign of humble contrition, but it's also a reminder of the Lord who stands at the door of our hearts, waiting to be let in. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3.20) Are you ready to open the door of your heart to him?

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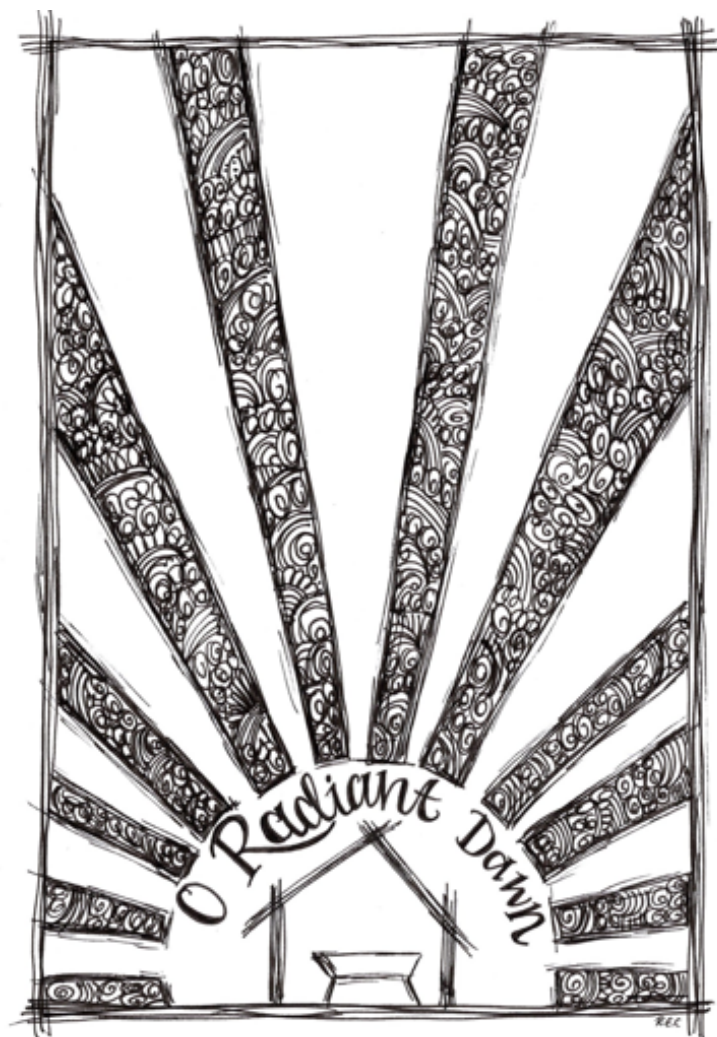
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