

Sunday 20th December – Advent 4

Led by Sue Nelms, LLM

Opening words

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel;
you open and no one can shut;
you shut and no one can open:
Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house,
those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. *cf Isaiah 22.22; 42.7*

**Lord Jesus, light of the world,
blessed is Gabriel, who brought good news;
blessed is Mary, your mother and ours.
Bless your Church preparing for Christmas;
and bless us your children, who long for your coming. Amen.**

Opening words and lighting of the Advent candles

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, merciful and gentle:
to you be praise and glory forever.
Your light has shone in our darkened world
through the child-bearing of blessed Mary;
grant that we who have seen your glory
may daily be renewed in your image
and prepared like her for the coming of your Son,
who is the Lord and Saviour of all.
Blessed be God for ever.

Hymn – The angel Gabriel from heaven came

1 The Angel Gabriel
from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow,
his eyes as flame;
'All hail', said he,
'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!

2 'For known a blessed mother thou shalt
be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy son shall be Immanuel,
by seers foretold;
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!

3 Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God',
she said,
'My soul shall laud and magnify
his holy name':
most highly favoured lady.
Gloria!

4 Of her, Immanuel, the Christ, was born
in Bethlehem,
all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world
will ever say,
'Most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!

Meditation on Mary's response

My joy is overflowing,
That to keep it from spilling out would be impossible.
This honour that God has given to me makes
My praise leap from my body and
My heart dance, spinning and twirling with God's.
And my swelling belly will magnify, will make bigger and visible that
Invisible image of God,
Who will become so important that people won't help
But be drawn into their fullest and truest selves.
I know that I am loved. I know that I am seen.
I know that I am noticed,
Along with all those who walk about unseen,
But all are seen and welcomed by our God.
No one goes forgotten or unnoticed by God.
Even in my smallness, even in my lowliness
Across all of time and space my blessing rings out.
The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory,
And that glory resides inside of me as I carry the light of the world,
Our saviour, in my heart and womb.
I am unafraid in my fearfulness
Knowing that you are good and full of grace.
No sin, no pain, no foolishness can hide me from your loving gaze.
I will sing the lyrics of God's abundance,
And I will teach the church to sing along with me,
Proclaiming these subversive words
And challenging all to sing evening after evening, day after day,
Because we need to lift up each other
to gaze upon God's glorious face.
And never did I think that God's promise could ever, would ever
Be fulfilled by a baby born of a woman, born under the law.
A baby cradled in hope for all the world,
A walking, talking, breathing sign of mercy and grace,
And though we sometimes try to live as if we don't need God,
We know now that God has remembered us
And started a new hope, a new light, a new heaven and a new earth.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God our Saviour,
for the Mighty One has done great things for us,
and holy is God's name. Amen.

Confession

When the Lord comes,
he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness,
and will disclose the purposes of the heart.
Therefore in the light of Christ let us confess our sins. *cf 1 Corinthians 4.5*

Heavenly Father,
you exalted those who were humble and meek:
give us humble and contrite hearts.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus,
you grew towards birth in the Virgin's womb:
be planted also in our hearts and lives.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit,
you overshadowed Mary,
that she might become the God-bearer:
fill us with your heavenly gifts.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God,
who in Jesus Christ has given us
a kingdom that cannot be destroyed,
forgive us our sins,
open our eyes to God's truth,
strengthen us to do God's will
and give us the joy of his kingdom,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Readings - Read by John Barker

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

⁷ Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ² the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' ³ Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.'

⁴ But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: ⁵ Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶ I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷ Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' ⁸ Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹ and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵ The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸ Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection: Rev David Newton

On first reading, these two passages (that are set for us in the lead up to Christmas) are full of the joys and hopes of the season. We hear of a Kingdom that will last forever and a people being planted in their own land where none shall afflict them. We hear of the one who has found favour with the Lord and of miraculous pregnancies. We hear of Mary's faithfulness and obedience when she says, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'.

How lovely, how rousing, how inspiring.

Yet, if we dig a little deeper there are some rather significant difficulties that these passages throw up for us if we might allow them the space to do so.

First, we are faced with the difficulty that (at face value at least) the promises we read of in 2 Samuel 7 did not come to fruition. We are so used to reading this passage through Christian lenses that we miss the more obvious reading...

David's throne was not established forever; the people did not live undisturbed. As soon as David's Son Solomon died the Kingdom was torn in two as brothers fought for power. And it was not many generations after that until the Northern Kingdom was swept up into the Assyrian Empire. A few generations after that the people of Judea were exiled to Babylon. The history from that point until the time of Jesus remained one of either assimilation or oppression under mighty empires – Greek and then Roman.

But then, centuries later, Mary hears this same promise re-ignited; her Son is to be given this ancient throne, and – she is told – his Kingdom will never end. As Christians we hear these words of Nathan the prophet to David as being given new life 8 or 9 centuries later!

The spark of hope for this everlasting kingdom has not gone out. The promise remains....

However, this everlasting kingdom is not what Mary – let alone her compatriots – were expecting. The promise remains, the hope is reignited, God's faithfulness is proved true.... And yet... the only crown this King will wear is a crown of thorns, the only 'Kingdom' that he can speak of is a small group of eccentrics, misfits, zealots and sinners who follow him around. And this king promises no undisturbed sleep, no place to 'plant oneself' free from strife. Instead, this strange king promises quite the opposite: nowhere to lay one's head. He promises that finding life is only possible in giving it away.

Hope remains, the promise remains, God's faithfulness is proved true yes, but in ways no one expected.

As we limp on through these days, we cling to the same truths, even as they might be difficult to see, even as we have to re-think what they might mean.

As this year has not turned out as we had hoped or expected; as we ask the question why and wherefore; as we cry, 'where are you God'; or as we join in the Psalmists cry 'How Long O Lord', we are reminded that God's faithfulness remains.

In the waiting, we hold on to the hope of God's presence, here and now – becoming manifest in this moment of love, that moment of kindness and generosity. We hold on to the hope of God's presence into the future, as we think of what might come and what might grow out of all this.

The words of Nathan were not fulfilled as the people had hoped and yet that did not nullify the promises of God. Hope remained through the darker and quieter days, until an angel appeared to a young woman in Nazareth.

Which brings us onto our second reading and our second “difficulty” – the figure of Mary. Or perhaps I should say the difficulties around how Mary has been ‘read’ throughout Christian history.

Here is the model Christian, we might think, passive and obedient. ‘Be it to me according to your word’ she says in humble, submissive obedience to a “Father” god. The ways in which this line has shored up the foundations of patriarchy through the centuries – even up to our day - are not hard to imagine. And theological history is rife with examples of a “Marian” Theology which push in exactly this direction.

The problem stems from taking this single line of Mary’s in idealised isolation from the implied reality around it. We are presented with a cameo of Mary kneeling and passive before the divine Father. It’s not a great image. But broaden the canvas, play the film forwards and backwards, and a rather different picture emerges of a woman full of grit and determination. We do not know much of her, but what we do know shows her as anything but meek, passive and mild. She flees to Egypt with her son. She pushes him to turn water into wine. She endures the pain of witnessing her son’s crucifixion.

Mary might indeed be a good model of discipleship, but only if we ditch the cameo. We are not called to be passive before a patriarchal god. The true LORD calls us to be people of grit and determination.

Which brings us back to hope...

For it is only if we are sure that hope remains – that the way things are is not the way they have to be – that we have the resources we need to act in the face of darkness, or difficulty or oppression or injustice.

Because there is hope, because God’s promises remain, because God has proved faithful – even when we can’t see it - we are able to do more than simply resign ourselves to fate; we can do more than simply say ‘let it be’, and instead can be - like Mary - bearers of hope.

Our witness to such hope and to the promises of God might well come in small and seemingly insignificant moments and events: sending a card, picking up the phone, offering a kind word, offering forgiveness, sharing possessions and so forth.

But isn’t that just the point – the Hope for the World was found in a small seemingly insignificant babe lying in a manger. The Hope of the World was found in a dark corner. The Hope of the World was found amidst an oppressed people. Amen.

Affirmation of faith:

Let us declare our faith in God.

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,**

and fills us with his love.

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

cf Ephesians 3

Prayers of Intercession led by Clare Crang

Our intercessions this morning are based around a prayer by David Adam. The responses are in bold on your sheet.

Into our world of darkness,
Into our places of strife,
Into our troubles and weakness,

Come Lord
Come down, come in, come among us

We pray for our world, and bring to mind the prophet Nathan and the way he had both the confidence and humility to acknowledge to his King when he got his advice wrong. We pray for the same confidence and humility to acknowledge when we get things wrong... we pray for all people in this world and ask that you will bring us closer to each other, despite being apart... we pray for a change of heart in those who, rather than turning to you and learning from you, encourage and engage in conflict... we pray for those who are living through the most difficult times, those in areas of military conflict... those who are oppressed... refugees... the young boys kidnapped in Nigeria... And we pray for those in governments across the world as they decide how to keep us as safe as possible... and for those in our government as decisions are made on how to manage Brexit...

Into our joys and celebrations,
Into our homes and to our loved ones,
Into our work and our achievements,

Come Lord
Come down, come in, come among us

We remember Mary, who despite being deeply troubled by what the angel said to her, was reassured and able to respond in confidence to what was being asked of her. We ask that you will give us a similar spirit of confidence.

As we look towards the coming Christmas celebrations we pray that we, like Mary, will know your presence with us. That our communities and homes will be places of peace and goodwill... We pray that those who have been working so hard over the last year will be able to have some rest and relaxation and that those who need to continue to work will

still be able to find times of peace...We pray too, for our Queen who has given much to this country...

To those who are in need,
To those who are in sickness,
To those who are in despair,

Come Lord
Come down, come in, come among us

We pray that if there are any who have particularly needs that we can help with, you will bring them to our awareness...We pray for those we know who are ill... who are having treatments...those in hospital...those who have died and we remember still...

Good and gracious God, come;
come and abide with us,
come and guide us,
come and protect us,
this day and evermore.

Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Collect:
Eternal God,
as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,
so we wait for his coming in glory;
bring us through the birth pangs of this present age
to see, with her, our great salvation
in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:
**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

Blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon us,
scatter the darkness from before our path,
and make us ready to meet him when he comes in glory;

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen