

Advent Devotional 2025



Wantage and Abingdon Methodist Circuit

Cover picture

Annunciation, c.1912

Eric Gill (1882-1940)

Watercolour on paper, 9 x 12 cm. Methodist Modern Art Collection, MCMAC: 052

NB: The picture was painted as a mirror image because it intended for projection through a mirrorscope, which reverses the image

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The text of the Annunciation and Mary's response is found in Luke 1:26-55.

The subject of our small watercolour is *Annunciation* which was painted around 1912/13, when Gill and his family lived on the High Street at Ditchling in a house called Sopers. It is a subject that has historically been popular with artists and Gill appears to have been influenced by Renaissance artists such as Jan Van Eyck and El Greco and possibly the later 19th century Pre-Raphaelite painter Rossetti. The Angel Gabriel wearing a multi-coloured robe looms over the Virgin Mary, who kneels before him in what appears to be an austere cell-like room with one tiny window. In scale the Angel Gabriel is depicted much larger than the figure of Mary. The poignant white lily he holds and the lilies in a vase on the table signify spiritual purity. Lillies are often found in Annunciation scenes and usually refer to Mary's virginity. Gabriel's message 'Ave Maria' 'Hail Mary' and Mary's reply 'Fiat mihi', 'Let it be unto me' are painted back to front, which is because the illustration was intended for projection through a mirrorscope, which reversed images as part of a light show.

From 1912 onwards Gill presented annual slide shows using a mirrorscope for his family and friends in the village at his home Sopers in Ditchling High Street or sometimes in his workshop, which he prepared for such entertainments. This was often at Christmas but not exclusively and each year went on into the New Year sometimes up until March. A number of other scenes from the Christmas story which Gill created survive as well as other topics such as the *Wild West* or small watercolours wishing everyone a *Happy New Year*. These were all used for entertainment for the children and villagers. The fact that this is a personal work, not intended for public display as such and that it shows the Virgin Mary in a cell-like room that resembles a bedroom with a simple bed, is particularly poignant given the knowledge the public now has of his abuse of his young daughters.

Commentary from A Guide to the Methodist Art Collection.

Acknowledgement

Our thanks go to the ministers and Local Preachers of the Wantage and Abingdon Circuit who contributed to this devotional, without whom it would not be possible.

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The **Methodist Church** 

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From the Manse

On behalf of the Wantage and Abingdon Methodist Circuit, I wish you all blessings this Advent season.

As we begin our preparations for the birth of Jesus, the whole world is deeply aware of the darkness and hopelessness our world faces due to on-going conflicts; yet our hope lies in Christ, who is coming to renew our world. "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11) Verse 5 of John's prologue – "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," assures us no end that God's saving activity in the world is ongoing: God has been active in the past, is active now, and will continue to act into the future.

Advent and Christmas come not to awaken nostalgia, but to awaken our hearts to the ways of God, calling us to conversion and setting us free to be agents of God in the world to which Christ, the light of the world came; the true light which enlightens everyone.

The Bible passages, reflections and prayers in this devotional, so thoughtfully and prayerfully put together, will enable us to walk in the light of Christ as we prepare the way for the Christ child who brings hope, love and peace.

I am most grateful to our faithful band of preachers for their help in getting this devotional published. I most warmly commend it to all, irrespective of where you are in your journey with God. It is my prayer that this devotional will further inspire us to be bringers of hope and peace and instruments of light and love during this Advent season and beyond.

Every blessing,

Georgina

Monday December 1st

ISAIAH 1:1-8

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

*Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the Lord has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.*

*Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the Lord,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!*

*Why do you seek further beatings?
Why do you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.
From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds;
they have not been drained, or bound up,
or softened with oil.*

*Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.
And daughter Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a shelter in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.*

REFLECTION

1st Isaiah doesn't begin with the call of the prophet but with a vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Sadly there are far too many places around the world where such desolation is a current reality and peaceful solutions to so many problems seem to be far beyond human power to influence.

I wonder - are there times when we as individuals turn away from God? Perhaps not intentionally; perhaps even without realising that we are doing so? When our lives are running smoothly we probably have a routine that includes time for formal worship as well as quiet times for personal prayer and Bible study. When that routine changes – because of the pressure of work; the needs of family members or our own illness – it's the quiet times that quickly get filled with what seem to be more urgent matters. Life's problems become our primary focus and we are in danger of abandoning our relationship with God because we have stopped listening - at the very times when we most need to find strength, guidance and inner peace.

Perhaps Advent might offer an opportunity to make a serious effort to revitalise our prayer life so that we can make space within our lives and our hearts for Christ to be born again in us this Christmas time.

PRAYER

Faithful God, You are always with us. Even when sorrow, fear or anxiety overwhelm us and we feel that we have lost contact with you; you do not abandon us. Continue to hold us in your love and give us your peace. Amen.

Tuesday December 2nd

ISAIAH 1:9-13

*If the Lord of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.*

*Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.*

*When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.*

REFLECTION

Advent is a time of preparation both inside and outside. Too often we seem to spend too much time, money and energy preparing the physical apparatus of Christmas - the tree, the decorations, the food and drink, the parties. Do we spend as much time preparing our spirits? If Isaiah was writing today, maybe he would say:

Don't turn up to the carol services if you haven't sorted yourself out first. I don't want to see you in church unless you have made peace with your neighbours and your colleagues. Don't sing about Christmas and good will to all people, if you don't mean it. Don't pretend that Christmas is important to you and then ignore God the rest of the year for Christmas is only Christmas if it puts Christ front and centre.

PRAYER

Father God, forgive us when we are too busy with outside appearances and spend too little time aligning ourselves to you. Help us this Advent to centre our lives on you and on your love for all.

Wednesday December 3rd

ISAIAH 1:14-20

*Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.*

*Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

REFLECTION

Wow! And I thought I was doing alright. Isaiah starts this message with a rocket. Jesus will be saying the same thing later to the Pharisees, calling them Whited Sepulchres.

The Christian songwriter Paul Field has a song entitled "It's got to make a difference". It is not sufficient to get a cosy feeling on a Sunday morning. He wants faith that's going to make him good to someone else.

In our desire to do something beautiful for God are we forgetting something? And what's this about feasts and festivals – are not Advent and Christmas prime examples?

In Psalm 51 David remembers "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart."

It is the gambler who thinks he has a good hand who can lose a fortune. He would not bet on a pair of twos.

Isaiah invites his people to take stock. And where are we? He serves a God who can forgive. Sins that are blood crimson can become whiter than snow.

Jesus said it is not right to approach God harbouring a grudge against a brother (or sister). First make peace and then you can bring your gift.

St Paul told King Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Come now let us settle the matter. The invitation is there.

PRAYER

Father, we come to you in the certain knowledge that the door is always open and that you will be ready to meet us. We come in the midst of our joys and sorrows, with our victories and our defeats. We come knowing we shall be accepted. We come because you are the Lord. Amen.
500 Prayers For All Occasions by David C Cook (Kingsway Communications, 2009)

Thursday December 4th

ISAIAH 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

*In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

*O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!*

REFLECTION

Isaiah lived during a period of great upheaval in Israel's history; a time when the Assyrians stopped at nothing to achieve worldwide power. Isaiah, like his contemporary Micah, anticipate a time when weapons of personal and mass destruction can be abandoned and transformed into tools that bring and sustain life (Micah 4: 1-3). Isaiah 2 is a vivid reminder of God's sovereignty and the promised time of peace.

I am not alone in dreading watching the news - local, national, or global. Where can there be hope in what we see and hear? But we who are privileged to share God's word in times of suffering and war, can find encouragement and strength in Isaiah's prophecy. As believers, we are called to be peacemakers in our communities, reflecting the future peace of God's kingdom in our daily interactions. How can we live this out in our love for neighbour and God? How have you been an agent of peace in your own community? By God's grace, we can practice peace-within ourselves, among our families, in our congregations, in our neighbourhoods and world. "Blessed are the peacemakers!"

In verse 5, the focus shifts from nations to Jacob, with an introduction of the notion of 'light'. Light is life and truth, linked with the promise of salvation, and light also makes it possible to follow a path.

Our reading encourages us to examine our lives and calls for humility, obedience and reliance on God. Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.

"Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

PRAYER

*O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go.
O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace. Amen.
Based on the ancient Advent Antiphons
translated by John Mason Neale*

Friday December 5th

ISAIAH 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

REFLECTION

Isn't it amazing how often we recognise our own inadequacies and failings rather than the power of our all forgiving 'Lord Almighty' who has promised to supply our every need. It's only human, I suppose, to look at ourselves and see our flaws, while we look at others and see their value, we are after all people with unclean lips. So it's no wonder that our response to a call from God is so often, 'I'm not worthy' and yet.

We believe that God loves us so much he forgives all our human failings, washing away our sins and making us clean, worthy of his love. That through his birth and death, Jesus has touched our hearts and taken away our guilt; transforming our lives. And that God will provide everything we need for both our daily lives and our service.

So this advent I offer you both words of comfort and challenge.

Fear not, for you have been made clean through the Christ child and you are worthy of all God's gifts to you. Which means you are also worthy of every call he makes upon you and should you be willing, will find yourself fully equipped when you answer 'Here am I, send me,'

PRAYER

Father, your love came down in human form and touched our lives,

Washing away all our sins and making us clean in your eyes.

Help us to accept your forgiveness through the confession of our sins

And to trust in your promises of love and support.

That we too, without fear may answer your call and say 'Here I am Lord, send me.'

Amen.

Saturday December 6th

ISAIAH 7:1-14

In the days of Ahaz son of Jotham son of Uzziah, king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem, but could not mount an attack against it. When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. Then the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and your son Shear-jashub, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field, and say to him, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. Because Aram —with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; therefore thus says the Lord God:

It shall not stand,

and it shall not come to pass.

For the head of Aram is Damascus,

and the head of Damascus is Rezin.

(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered, no longer a people.)

The head of Ephraim is Samaria,

and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah.

If you do not stand firm in faith,

you shall not stand at all.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

REFLECTION

Throughout the Old testament there seems to be an ever repeating cycle with the people and rulers of Judah alternating between being faithful to and then turning from God. In this passage we meet Ahaz, who falls into the "Kings that rebelled" category. However, his fear is justified; Judah is facing attack from surrounding enemies and both the King and his people are terrified. In this moment of need however, God intervenes by sending Isaiah to give a message of hope- Do not fear or let your heart be troubled, the evil that is being plotted against you, it will not happen!

Sadly Ahaz is not convinced.

Still God persists- ask me for a sign to see if what I promise is true? His response, on face value seems pious stating he will not put God to the test; however his motivation for rejecting this offer is because he wants to take matters into his own hand and ask the Assyrians for help.

And still God doesn't give up- I will send a sign anyway God says- a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and his name will be Immanuel. A prophesy fulfilled, of course, all those years later.

We live in such troubling times, and we are sometimes overcome and fearful for the future; we turn to shallow and unreliable sources of strength- status and money; powerful leaders who ultimately are only concerned about themselves and their reputation, whilst forgetting we have a loving God, who knows all our worries and fears.

So as we take time to reflect on the truth of all God's promises this Advent season, may we allow our hearts to learn to believe and trust, and rely totally on Him alone, and then we can truly experience his desire for a deep and lasting peace for us all.

PRAYER

God, our Immanuel

As you come among us open our ears to hear your message to not be afraid.

Open our eyes to see those needing to hear this too.

And open our hearts to share your love in a meaningful way with those we meet this Advent season, especially those who need the truth of your Gospel message, shown in the life of Jesus.

Amen

Sunday December 7th

MATTHEW 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight." '*

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

REFLECTION

John the Baptist is a strange, wild, insistent, scary yet compelling advertisement for the Messiah. His message is uncompromising clear, 'Repent!' John signposts Jesus. He is open, honest and human. He knows that Christ is the very presence of God.

"Repent", means taking responsibility for our actions. Recognising when we have offered only limited love, acknowledging the mistakes that we have made and saying that we are sorry.

The message of John is so very hopeful in that he joyfully offers us an escape from sin and lack of love. The route is via repentance and forgiveness so that God may wash us clean and forgive. It is important to remember that once we repent, the past is gone and the future is glorious.

Advent is generally acknowledged to be a penitential season when we repent of our sins.

However, the run up to Christmas is a time full of immense anticipation, hope, thanks and love.

The contradiction of Advent is that it is about the coming of God in judgment yet appearing as a vulnerable baby in a manger.

Christ, eternal Sun of justice,

Christ, the rose of wisdom's seed, Come to bless with fire and fragrance hours of yearning, hurt, and need.

In the lonely, in the stranger,

In the outcast, hid from view;

child who comes to grace the manger, teach our hearts to welcome you.

Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus, come.

PRAYER

*As we prepare for Your coming and give You praise - We confess what we have done wrong.
What we have failed to do right.*

When we have hurt others and been hurt by them. Forgive us and lead us in better ways we pray.

Mary Louise Bringle (b.1953, USA)

*We ask this in the name of Your Son, our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ. The one who is coming
we await to make all things right.*

'I am making all things new,' says the Lord.

This is Christ's gracious word:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

God of all holiness, your promises stand unshaken through all generations

And you lift up all who are burdened and brought low: renew our hope in you,

as we wait for the coming in glory of Jesus Christ, our Judge and our Saviour,

who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen

Collect of day

Monday December 8th

ISAIAH 11:1-10

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

REFLECTION

There's a lot contained in this scripture, which it's easy to overlook. It's believed that this chapter was written in about 720 BC, when the Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and dispersed its people. Hope had been lost, and it was part of the overarching story of exile of God's people. Into this situation of despair and gloom, God; through prophets like Isaiah, speak truth and justice. Whatever the situation may look like, however dark life may seem, God has ultimate victory, and it's worth holding onto that promise of hope, new life, and restored dignity, through all the challenges we face.

It's a tough call to follow at times, particularly when we hear increasing stories of war, civil conflict, poverty, injustice, and political and social instability in our own communities. But I find it reassuring to know that we're not alone, that what's happening to us today has happened to God's people time and time again before, and that the King of Glory and of Peace, has ultimate victory. "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, and out of that shoot, a branch will bear fruit". When everything seems lost and cut off, there is still new life, growth, and opportunities that haven't existed before, all made possible through God's saving grace, love, and protection. However dark life may seem to get, God is still in control. Alleluia!

PRAYER

Father God, Heavenly King, we come to you as we are, with all our hurts, doubts, challenges, and joys, and we ask that you continue to hold us in the palm of Your hand. Show us your blessing over our lives when we need it most, and let us know that in all things, you work for good. Help us to be bringers of peace, life, and light to your hurting world, and strengthen us to stand strong through all that life presents us with, knowing that You have ultimate victory over everything. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Tuesday December 9th

ISAIAH 25:6-10

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death for ever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.
For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.*

REFLECTION

This could be described as Isaiah's prophecy of hope. The picture here is of a great festival banquet celebration by all nations in honour of the God of Israel. It is a picture of hope that all nations will come together. Moun Zion in Israel was to be the focus for this coming together. Isaiah sees Israel as a unifying power. How different is the picture today. Israel is the centre of conflict. Isaiah says "Here on this mountain, God will banish the pall of doom hanging over all peoples. The shadow of doom darkening all nations." (25:7 The Message)

PRAYER

Let us pray for peace and harmony in Israel and Palestine. For the acceptance of each others right to nationhood.

Wednesday December 10th

ISAIAH 26: 1-9

On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

We have a strong city;

he sets up victory

like walls and bulwarks.

Open the gates,

so that the righteous nation that keeps faith

may enter in.

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace —

in peace because they trust in you.

Trust in the Lord for ever,

for in the Lord God

you have an everlasting rock.

For he has brought low

the inhabitants of the height;

the lofty city he lays low.

He lays it low to the ground,

casts it to the dust.

The foot tramples it,

the feet of the poor,

the steps of the needy.

The way of the righteous is level;

O Just One, you make smooth the path of the righteous.

In the path of your judgements,

O Lord, we wait for you;

your name and your renown

are the soul's desire.

My soul yearns for you in the night,

my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.

For when your judgements are in the earth,

the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

REFLECTION

There are people who don't give God or Christianity a second thought all year round and yet at Christmastime engage with carol services and nativity plays. The Message version of this passage says: "Throw wide the gates so good and true people can enter."

Not everyone who enters our churches this Christmas will match that description, but nevertheless, let us give a warm welcome to all who do. Part of a warm welcome is providing a level path for those who are not used to our traditions. We are on public display at Christmas, so it is an opportunity for us to show what living according to God's standards looks like, without being judgemental. Through our love and our actions, may the splendour of God be revealed.

PRAYER

Father God, help us to be a welcoming community this Christmastime, showing love to all.

Thursday December 11th

ISAIAH 27:1-6

On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.

*On that day:
A pleasant vineyard, sing about it!
I, the Lord, am its keeper;
every moment I water it.
I guard it night and day
so that no one can harm it;
I have no wrath.
If it gives me thorns and briers,
I will march to battle against it.
I will burn it up.
Or else let it cling to me for protection,
let it make peace with me,
let it make peace with me.*

*In days to come Jacob shall take root,
Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots,
and fill the whole world with fruit.*

REFLECTION

What an emotional passage from Isaiah. That first verse is full of vengeance. The wrath of God against evil is writ large within that one verse. The awesome power of God cannot be missed. That description of the evil Leviathan, the gliding serpent, the monster of the sea, gives rise to such a powerful image. Do we have language that would give the world an understanding of evil in the world today? We probably wouldn't use the word 'Leviathan', but what word, or words, would we use?

In verse 1 we are told that God will 'punish with his sword'. It is assumed that this means that God will smite evil and banish evil 'in that day'. 'In that day' can be interpreted in a few ways. As we come up to Christmas with the focus very much upon Jesus, one way of interpreting 'in that day' is to refer to Jesus, God incarnate, using his gospel and death to destroy the power of death and evil. When we consider the evil that is in the world still today, maybe we could wonder what God is waiting for.

The mood changes hugely in verses 2 to 6. We have a completely different image of God. Here God protects, nourishes, and inspires. A wonderful image to hold on to. But... Sometimes it is all too easy to wonder where the protective, nourishing, inspiring God is in a world full of conflict, of hatred for 'the other', of those whose desire for power overrules any sense of compassion, of justice and of righteousness.

PRAYER

Loving God, we long for a world where love, compassion, justice and righteousness is everywhere. We long for peace. And yet, whenever we repeat the words Jesus taught his disciples and say, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", we are reminded that we are to be active in bringing about that which we desire. May we be shown how to live those words. Amen.

Friday December 12th

ISAIAH 30:19-26

Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.' Then you will defile your silver-covered idols and your gold-plated images. You will scatter them like filthy rags; you will say to them, 'Away with you!' He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

REFLECTION

I wonder what came to mind when you read this passage? I found a certain irony, thinking of the people of Gaza and the West Bank, and the reversal of roles from then (Isaiah, was active in Jerusalem approximately 740 to 700 BC) and now.

Rather than trust in Yahweh for its survival, Israel found itself in a political quagmire between powerful nations both north and south. God called prophets such as Isaiah to call the leaders to account and to reassure the people that all was not lost. So, in this part of Isaiah, in amongst the “woes”, this is a message of hope – that life may be bad now, but trust in God for all will be well, problems will be solved, if we follow God’s guidance.

The original Hebrew is unclear as to who “the Teacher” is; the most obvious conclusion, given the context of the passage, is that the people need to hear the voice of Yahweh, and follow, even though, in their thinking, God has caused or allowed their current misfortune.

When lives are shattered, and all appears lost, hope, even a faint hope of better times, is all that we can cling on to. When all appears dark, a faint light can appear when we hear a still, small voice, saying “follow me, this is the way”.

When all is busy-ness, when the world seems obsessed with possessions, when that which we knew and held dear is in danger of crumbling away, see need to see the Teacher, in the form of the child in the manger.

PRAYER

*Merciful Father,
You hear the cries of Your people and do not turn away.
When we call upon You, You are gracious;
when we stumble and weep, You draw near to comfort.
Teach us, Lord, to wait on You with quiet hearts—
to trust that Your mercy is never delayed, only ripening in perfect time.*

*You are our Teacher who does not hide;
when we wander to the right or the left,
let our ears hear Your gentle voice behind us saying,
“This is the way; walk in it.”
Give us hearts that delight in obedience,
and eyes that see the idols we must cast away.*

*Lord of light and healing,
shine upon us as the sun sevenfold.
Restore what was broken,
bind up the wounds of Your people,
and make the barren places fruitful again.
Let Your compassion water the earth of our souls
until joy springs up where sorrow once lived.*

*May Your people dwell in peace,
guided by Your word, fed by Your grace,
and healed by the brightness of Your presence.
Through Christ, our Redeemer and Light of the world, we pray.*

Amen

Saturday December 13th

ISAIAH 35:1-10

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

REFLECTION

A time of devout and expectant delight. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

The crocus is not a native species of flower in England, though it does gladden our parks and woodland among other blossoms of spring. The orchid meets the eye with similar colours and is a native species. To encourage the growth of wild orchids, their meadow habitat is mown in late summer or early autumn. Tall grasses must be cut to give the orchid light and space to take root in the soil. Similarly, for the prophet, God's vengeance will cut down Israel's enemies to enable God's people to rediscover their roots and grow again in the land of Judah.

"Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."

I cannot preach about a God of vengeance who cuts some people down for the deliverance of others. But I can preach about a God who cuts me down to size so that I might grow in the love of God and my neighbour. I welcome God's recompense and salvation if it brings me, with all who look forward to the birth of Christ, to eat in the Lord's presence at his table.

Advent has been described as a period of devout and expectant delight. So it is, but as in Lent, only if we wait with heads bowed in preparation. Only if we are ready to acknowledge our unworthiness and cultivate that delight within us. Do we want God to cut down the entanglements that darken the inner space where devotion and expectancy may take root and blossom into hope?

PRAYER

We pray that spring will bring the colourful delight of the orchid and other wildflowers. We pray that the Advent promise will sow in our hearts the seed of a devout and expectant delight. Amen

Sunday December 14th

MATTHEW 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."*

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

REFLECTION

At first reading this seems a bit strange- is this really the John of chapter 3 who not only Baptised Jesus, acknowledging him to be "the one who is to come after me", but witnessed the Heavens parting and the Spirit descend on Jesus like a Dove, and God's own voice saying "this is my Son"; and yet is now questioning if He really is the Messiah?

But for John, faithful believer though he was, time had passed and here he was in prison, alone, disheartened and abused. He had had time to ponder what he had seen on that day, and maybe now he was beginning to question whether he had actually seen the Messiah. After all, like all the Jewish community he too was expecting a person coming in power and might, and now he had heard of a man going about preaching and proclaiming his message- not overturning Roman authorities, or removing unjust rulers like Herod.

And how does Jesus respond to this question from John's disciples? Well he isn't cross or indignant, he just tells them to share what they are seeing and hearing- and a passing shot- blessed is anyone who takes no offence in me; in other words I may not be the Messiah you were expecting, but I'm definitely him!

So as we go further into Advent, may God enable us to challenge worldly values, with those that reflect his Heavenly kingdom. We may not live to see his Kingdom come on Earth during our lifetime, but may our faith be strengthened in the face of persecution and disappointments - knowing that in God's time His Kingdom will indeed come on earth.

PRAYER

Christ Jesus, Messiah,

You have come to turn our Worldly values on their head, To right the wrongs of justice by loving actions and words, and not by swords and armies; to give voices to the voiceless and hope to all who are in need.

May we be your eyes, ears, hands and voice this Advent,

In Your name and for your sake,

Amen.

Monday December 15th

MALACHI 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

REFLECTION

Over 400 years before Christ, the prophet Malachi focuses on the preparation and purification for the coming of the Messiah. He addresses a weak, desperate, corrupt and complacent nation where worship is empty and priests are ineffective. The population waits, wonders and doubts. Malachi brings God back into proper focus.

Malachi reminds us all of God's presence, justice, fairness, faithfulness, and love. He clearly promises that God will come, but not necessarily as expected or requested. He calls for repentance, obedience, and purer lives. He invites us all to look ahead, beyond where we are to where God wants to take us.

Malachi calls for renewal and readiness. He promises God's messenger to prepare the Way for the Lord. This involves repentance, purification, and judgment. God may work like a wash scrubbing dirty clothes, or a refiner melting down our impurities. This prophet recognizes that true restoration involves true transformation.

Advent tells us that God does not leave things as they are. He comes to us through the Christ of the stable, cross, tomb and sky. He enters our hearts and our lives. He never ever leaves us and he will return.

Many Christians take this passage to be a reference to John the Baptist. He didn't mince his words! He truly prepared the way. As we anticipate Advent are we genuinely prepared to welcome the Messiah of the nativity, the cross and the resurrection. To refine our hearts, to transform our lives and to welcome Christ's return?

PRAYER

Creator God,

Thy will be done. Thy kingdom come.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting."

O Lord, in whom is our hope,

remove far from us, we pray thee,

empty hopes and presumptuous confidence.

Make our hearts so right with thy most holy and loving heart,

that hoping in thee we may do good;

until that day when faith and hope

shall be abolished by sight and possession,

and love shall be all in all.

Amen. Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Tuesday December 16th

MALACHI 4:1-6

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

REFLECTION

Malachi 'the messenger' writes at the time of unrest among the people. The temple had been rebuilt but they were not worshipping God as they ought. They were giving God second best. They seem to have got their priorities wrong and evil doers were prospering. There was a blurring between good and evil.

The script takes the form of a question and answer conversation with God (in which the people are very argumentative). God promises to send Eligah before the day of judgement. Jesus declares that John the Baptist fulfils this role. Matt.17v 11-13.

John becomes the link between the Old Testament and the New – the one who brings 'the message' of Jesus.

PRAYER

Lord in this waiting time of Advent help us to get our priorities right, to put you at the centre of our lives. Let us remember the true meaning of Christmas and not be distracted by peripheral attractions Amen.

Wednesday December 17th

ISAIAH 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

REFLECTION

Feet are not something that we usually think of as beautiful. We might notice that someone has a beautiful smile or beautiful eyes because we tend to look at faces first. If we glance down and notice anything about a person's feet it is likely to be whether they are wearing elegant shoes or sturdy boots.

Clearly it is the message of salvation that is beautiful, but if the messenger does not run with it, it will not be shared. If the messenger's feet become hot, tired and painfully blistered as a result of this endeavour, those celebrating the good news are unlikely to notice.

The message of God's love and care is shared with us today by those who are willing to risk hands and feet becoming battered in the process of reaching out to help; to offer comfort and support. A small amount of help at key moments in our lives can make a huge difference. We are grateful – and usually try to express our thanks but are not always aware of the real cost to the one who shows that love in action.

There are so many gentle souls who routinely do generous, thoughtful things to help others. We don't always appreciate what a beautiful blessing those who act quietly and without fuss, bring to our community through their kindness.

PRAYER

God of love, may you be at the heart of all that we seek to do as your people. Inspired by your spirit may we carry with us the light of your presence and share your love with all whom we meet. Amen

Thursday December 18th

TITUS 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

REFLECTION

Paul is writing to his companion Titus suggesting how he should instruct the community of Christians among whom he is living and working. These Christians are expecting that God as revealed in Jesus will soon appear. Paul says Titus' message to them must be that their behaviour before that event matters. They must "renounce godless ways and worldly desires and live lives of temperance, honesty and godliness" (v.12)

A week before Christmas, I doubt whether we shall be expecting Christ to suddenly appear as a grown man, but we shall have been bombarded by the media to overindulge in food and drink. This passage reminds us that there is something more important than this. There is nothing wrong with ensuring that we can provide good food for ourselves and our family and give appropriate presents to others, but we must remember that we do these things because we are celebrating God's coming to the earth in Christ. He not only gave up his divinity to share our humanity, but was prepared to die if that was the consequence of being human. We celebrate this in our Christmas worship. We are called to be like him and so to serve not just ourselves and our families but others who may be in need. What this implies for each of us we can know by asking God's spirit to show us.

Hymn STF 205 It came upon a midnight clear

PRAYER

Loving God, we pray that you will be with us as we prepare to enjoy Christmas. May we be patient and kind to others. Help us to make time to celebrate your coming in love to share our life and to make room for your spirit to work in us. Amen

Friday December 19th

ISAIAH 40:3-11

A voice cries out:

*'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'*

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.*

*The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.*

*The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;*

*lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;*

*say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'*

*See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,*

*and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

REFLECTION

Isaiah, chapter 40 opens on a new world of consolation. Comfort, comfort my people. Some translations highlight the change of tone by presenting the prophet's words as two books rather than just one: a book of judgment and a book of comfort (indeed some scholars claim that they are the work of separate prophets). There comes a time when God's urgent calls for spiritual constancy and righteous conduct must give way to a word of comfort. The demands of a judgmental and vengeful God, who imposes standards of faithfulness, justice, and mercy, are tempered by consolation. We hear it here, like a magnificent change of key, minor to major, in the opening words of the book of comfort:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ...

The judgment of the Holy One of Israel (an expression for God found throughout Isaiah) is like a rugged wilderness. An envoy must smooth the path for the peacemaker:

3 A voice cries:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ...

John the Baptist takes the part of the prophet. The rugged voice of austerity calls for judgment and repentance, but also for preparation. For John is the envoy who makes straight Isaiah's highway for one in whom God's judgment is fused with God's compassion. Jesus too makes demands on the moral conduct of disciples, onlookers and opponents, but for him judgment and discipline must be tempered with forgiveness. Indeed, in his moving story of the prodigal son, forgiveness prevails over judgment and brings reconciliation.

Advent is a good time to celebrate the fusion in our lives, through the work of Christ, of judgment and comfort. One without the other sets world affairs swinging dangerously out of kilter, like a child's swing pushed carelessly on one side only, unbalanced without two steady hands.

PRAYER

Lord God, as we reflect during Advent on the promise of Jesus' birth remind us to focus too on his crucifixion, for his cross is the supreme sign of the fusion made so lovingly of your judgment and your mercy. Amen

Saturday December 20th

LUKE 1:57-66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

REFLECTION

We have a new addition to our family this year and it is a new name for us. Some families pass names from one generation to another. Next door to us both father and son were called John. Elizabeth and Zechariah remembered the day in the temple when the angel declared that old Elizabeth would have a son to be called John. That left Zechariah speechless: because he thought it impossible. It was like the moment in the Old Testament when God told Ezekiel that his tongue would stick to the roof of his mouth and he would be unable to speak "But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth." As Ecclesiastes said "there is time to be silent and a time to speak." (Note which comes first!).

Now it was time to speak. His name is John; Praise God! An awe inspiring moment. God surprises us from time to time. What inspires you with awe?

The text asks, "What then is this child going to be?" The gospels tell us that he was the one who would prepare the way for the one who is to come. The one who would say, "Behold the Lamb of God!"

PRAYER

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we thank you for men and women who have been like John the Baptist for us; for those who have prepared the way for others to hear you speak, to know you are real and to make ready to welcome you into their lives; for those who have been ready to stand and be counted, to suffer loss and rejection rather than deny the truth of Christ.. Amen.

500 Prayers For All Occasions by David C Cook
(Kingsway Communications, 2009)

Sunday December 21st

MATTHEW 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

REFLECTION

I often think it must have been really hard for Joseph. We know he was a God-fearing Jew from the tribe of Judah, the line from which many of the kings of Israel descend, including King David. He was a pious man, who followed the rules, a righteous, upstanding man, and one whom God chose to act through. I imagine, from what we read in today's scripture, that he was taught from a young age how to behave, speak, and act, with probably a strong moral fibre. He was a man of his word, but also kind and compassionate. He was betrothed to Mary (again, based on the culture of the time, this may well have been an arranged marriage, overseen by Mary's father and a local priest). He knew what was right, but was also gracious and generous in spirit.

When he finds out that Mary is already pregnant, he was probably wondering what had happened, as she would have been God-fearing, upright, and law-abiding too. He wanted her to avoid unnecessary scandal and shame. He may well have had a crisis of faith at that time. And so we read that he was going to divorce Mary quietly, as he wouldn't have wanted to have lost his piety by marrying her, but he wanted to do it quietly. He could have acted in a very different way. But before this happens, God, in His wisdom and power, intervenes. He gives Joseph a dream – not a vision, or a powerful word from the Heavens, not an angel, or something equally miraculous. But a dream, a quiet, understated, subtle act. Something that may well have been easily overlooked (how often do we remember our dreams?), but which this man of God notices, recognises, and responds to.

It makes me wonder how much we're attentive to the gentle action of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. 'Noticing' is one of the 12 'stations' of the Methodist Way of Life for a reason. It's ranked alongside 'prayer', 'worship', and 'flourishing'. It can be earth-shattering, and life-changing, as it was for Joseph, but it can also be a lot more subtle too. So as we approach the season of Christmastide, I encourage us to pause, reflect, and notice the little things emerging in our lives this week. What is God saying to you through them?

PRAYER

Holy God, Heavenly King, help us to notice you and your gentle prompting in our lives. Let us take time to be still, to see the 'little things', and to have the discernment and confidence to respond to them. Thank you that you act in quiet whispers as well as the more miraculous, and help us to see You in everything. Amen.

Monday December 22nd

PROVERBS 8:22-31

*The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.*

REFLECTION

This insightful passage sees that before everything, before anything, God possessed a Wisdom above and beyond our comprehension. And this Wisdom has been involved from the beginning in everything God says or does.

When we speak it is an expression of ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, our learnings and understandings and ultimately it is an expression of who we are or claim to be.

In the same way when God spoke everything into being it was an expression of himself.

Therefore, all that is created is an expression of who God is. And God is rightly able to look at all his creation and declare that it is very good.

Any word that comes forth from him then, will accomplish all that he sends it to do.

Jesus is described at the beginning of John's gospel as the word. He is an expression of God. And he accomplished everything that God sent him to do.

This word is trustworthy and true.

As we approach Christmas, let us truly put all our trust in him

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, come to my heart this Christmas time and confirm in me your truth and your trustworthiness.

And help me understand that whatever promises God has made have been fulfilled in Christ Jesus. In Christ they are yes and amen.

Tuesday December 23rd

HEBREWS 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

REFLECTION

Instead of the usual greeting, and sometimes prayer, Hebrews begins with the rich theology of the themes of the letter, describing who Jesus is. These verses are one sentence in Greek! It goes on to urge these early Christians not to drift away from the truth. It is a timely reminder to us all, despite its setting in a very different culture to ours.

It was written anonymously sometime 60 - 70 A.D. (some suggest after 70 A.D.) to an established group of Jewish Christians with a background of a sacrificial system of worship, in the wider Roman Empire. It shows how Jesus fulfilled and superceded that system, making it obsolete, and renewed God's promises in a New Covenant through His sacrificial death.

The vulnerable baby born in a stable, whom we celebrate at Christmastime, was Jesus, God's unique revelation of Himself, fulfilling God's Word in the Scriptures. God spoke through Creation, the Law and the Prophets, and through His Son, Jesus, the Messiah.

Jesus is the reflection, the outshining of God's glory, and the exact imprint of God's being, like that of a seal on wax.

Jesus is the One present at Creation, and sustaining all Creation.

Jesus's death paid the price of human sin.

Jesus now reigns eternally in glory, the heir of all things.

Jesus is superior to prophets, priests, and angels, including those who appeared to Mary, Joseph and humble shepherds.

We read the similar theme of the Supremacy of Jesus in the Christmas Gospel (John 1. 1-14) and in Paul's letter to the Colossians (1. 15-20).

It is our privilege and joy to gaze again on Jesus, to look, and listen to His Word, and be "lost in wonder, love and praise".

PRAYER

Lord God, we praise and thank you for speaking through your written Word, and through your Son, Jesus, our Redeemer, risen and glorified. May our faith and love grow stronger as we hear and contemplate again the amazing truth of your Word and who Jesus is, and may our lives reflect your love and bring honour and glory to you, in Jesus's name, Amen.

Wednesday December 24th

ISAIAH 9:2,6-7

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

REFLECTION

These verses are written in a past tense, as though they had already happened, but this is a device often used by prophets. Isaiah is saying what he expects to happen in the future. The Israelites have suffered from the Assyrians which had seemed like darkness, but he promises that light will come (v.2). It will take the form of a child's birth. He will grow up to be a "wonderful counsellor" – showing wisdom. "Mighty hero" – man of great power. "Eternal Father" – one whose fatherly love is never exhausted. "Prince of peace" – not just the absence of war, but harmony, contentment, prosperity. They are promised a kingdom where justice and righteousness prevail. What a wonderful hope for people terrorised by Assyria! Christians reading these words many centuries later saw them as foretelling the birth of Jesus Christ as Handel did in his "Messiah". When we think of the life of Jesus whose birth we are about to celebrate, we see that he had the attributes that fulfil this prophesy and so can rejoice at his birth.

Hymn 202 Hark the herald angels sing

PRAYER

Like the people of Israel to whom Isaiah is speaking, we know that we are not truly free. We may be free from the darkness of foreign domination, but we are not full of light because we are not free from sin. And so we pray that this Christmas we may realise again that, though we have not deserved it, God has come to us in Jesus, and that we can receive the blessings of his God-given power. Amen

Thursday December 25th

LUKE 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

REFLECTION

Reading this story on Christmas Day itself helps us to see it all again: young Mary travelling slowly, heavy with child, to find herself giving birth in a stable and the shepherds hurrying eagerly, to see a promised Saviour. Like them, we see the Son of God in the child in the manger and our hearts are lifted and our spirits renewed. But a vital aspect of that day is what happened next.

When they had seen Jesus, “the shepherds spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child” and “the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.”

Perhaps that was inevitable – no-one could have shared in such an experience without wanting to express the sheer wonder of it. But sustaining it wouldn't be so easy – they still had to get back to caring for their sheep and all the usual problems of daily life. Christmas can be like that for us – a wonderful experience when we really feel close to God. But wonderful experiences can quickly fade – and we face another year with all the doubts and problems of the last. Today, we can take a moment to remember that when the joys of the Christmas season have passed into memory – God is still with us. So, we too must return into our own world glorifying and praising God for what we have heard and seen this Christmas and, like those shepherds, spreading the word about Jesus.

It seems right today, that Mary should have the last word ... “but Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart”. May we do that too, and, from the little that we know about Mary, like her allow our pondering to turn into active faith as we move towards a new year.

PRAYER

Loving Lord, thank you for entering our world.

*In the activities of this Christmas Day – and in every day that follows -
may we be as eager and full of praise and testimony as those shepherds.
may we be as trusting, brave and thoughtful as young Mary.*

Be with us as we walk towards whatever the new year holds.

Walk with us, Jesus.

Amen.

