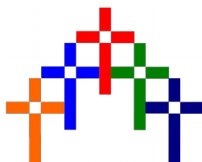


From Judgement to Glory



Readings, Reflections & Prayers for Advent

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Five Crosses

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Foreword

Advent is a wonderful season. In it our thoughts turn to the Second Coming of Christ and to the Day of Judgement. It is a joyful season as we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation of our Lord. The traditional Advent themes lead us from Judgement to Glory.

This booklet of daily readings, reflections and prayers is offered to help with your preparation to celebrate Christmas. If you don't find that it helps, don't use it.

How you use it is up to you. You might like to dip into it when you have a moment, or you might like to set aside a time each day to spend with it. You might find it helpful to read through the readings and the reflection and then read the passage a second time and spend a little while reflecting on it yourself. Finish with the prayer (they are not particularly related to the reading for the day so could easily be used on their own or in a different context altogether).

The biblical texts are included. They are all taken from the New Revised Standard Version but if you prefer some other version use that instead.

Fr Peter Down

Advent Sunday - 29th November

Daily Reading

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

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.'

Isaiah 40.1-5

Reflect

Isaiah is a prophet full of hope. To be sure he criticises the people when that is necessary but his message, especially in Second Isaiah (from chapter 39), is fundamentally one of hope. It is never more clearly stated than here. Following a period of punishment (exile) the people will be comforted and ultimately restored. All that is required is for the people to make ready a welcome, to clear the way for him to come to them. As we begin our observance of Advent – the season where we await eagerly the coming of the Lord – we are reminded that John the Baptist used these verses as the basis of his message, *prepare the way of the Lord*. John's message is the same as that of Isaiah. We must make ourselves ready for the Lord to come to us. We can do this by

acknowledging and repenting of our sins, recognising our need of forgiveness and seeking to amend our life to follow the commandments and will of God.

Pray

In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in unity,
that our praise and worship
might echo in these walls
and also through our lives.
In this Advent of expectation
draw us together in mission,
that the hope within
might be the song we sing.

Monday - 30th November

Daily Reading

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.

Isaiah 52:7-10

Reflect

Isaiah, as he looks forward to the Lord's deliverance, speaks here of the joy that the messenger who heralds the coming peace will bring. It is as if the mere message is enough. But how much greater the joy will be when the Lord acts for his people! The whole world will see the saving work of God. It is little wonder that Christians, from the very earliest times, looked to Isaiah to express their belief that the coming of Jesus was a fulfilment of God's promises. Those first Christians saw fulfilled in Jesus what had never truly been fulfilled in the history of the Jewish nation. But the vision is greater, for Jesus's coming is not just about the deliverance of God's chosen people, but about the salvation of all humankind.

Pray

God of hope, who brought love into this world,
be the love that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
be the peace that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
be the joy that dwells between us.

God of hope, the rock we stand upon,
be the centre, the focus of our lives
always, and particularly this Advent time.

Tuesday - 1st December

Daily Reading

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.

Isaiah 40.9-11

Reflect

The news that the Lord God is coming needs to be proclaimed from the mountaintops. Isaiah uses images of power and strength, but also images of gentleness and pastoral caring. The Lord is both a mighty warrior and a gentle shepherd. These images, and the way they are presented together, call to mind David, who in the Jewish mind is the king who reveals the sort of king that God is as well as being himself the perfect human king. He both fights for his people and cares for and nurtures them. These images are also present in expressions of Christian longing for the coming of Jesus. We see them in the description in the gospels of Jesus as the Son of David and in the Advent hope. He will come to deliver his people, overthrowing the powers of evil, but he will also bring them to a place of peace, plenty and beauty. The Advent hope contains both of these aspects.

Pray

Forgive us, Lord,
We are a wandering people
Who kneel before you now;
A people who bring prayers
And requests to your feet
When we have need of you,
And nowhere else to turn,
Then go our own way
When times are good
And life is easy.
Forgive us and draw us close,
Teach us your way
That we might follow,
Help us to walk in your company
And know your presence
From the moment we awake
Until we lay our heads to rest.

Wednesday - 2nd December

Daily Reading

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.' The Lord God said to the serpent,

'Because you have done this,
 cursed are you among all animals
 and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
 and you will strike his heel.'

Genesis 3:8-15

Reflect

One of the major themes of Advent is the coming of Christ as Judge. In the story of the Fall the first consequence of the disobedience of the man and woman is the fear of judgement. After eating the fruit they hide for fear of what God will say about their disobedience. They fear the consequences of their actions. It is often said that people behave differently when they do not fear the consequences. Judgement

concentrates the mind. The other consequence is the divisions that the Fall creates between the man and the woman, within the created order and between God and his creation. It can be too easy to say that the death and resurrection of Jesus heals those divisions. To do so is to underestimate the significance of sin in our world, and to underplay the consequence of our sin. Jesus will come as a merciful judge – but that does not mean that we should not be afraid of judgement. Our actions do have consequences

Pray

You are the Father who welcomes home
The prodigal who has wandered far.
You are the Father who prepares a meal
When others would simply ignore.
You are the Father whose love extends
Beyond our thoughts or minds.
You are the Father who knows our hearts
And yet loves us as we are.
You are the Father whose word we trust
In whose presence we have no fear.
You are the Father whose tender touch
Makes a wounded spirit whole.
You are the Father whose only Son
Was born that he might die.
You are the Father whose gracious love
We celebrate this day.

Thursday - 3rd December

Daily Reading

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15:1-6

Reflect

[This a tricky passage and, depending on which translation you read, may be slightly different from this version, although the general meaning is not altered.]

It is with Abraham (here still Abram) that the story of Israel begins. Against all expectation God tells Abram that he is to be the father of a great nation – his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky. The story is a story of promise and hope, and a story of failures and new beginnings. The ultimate new beginning is heralded by the coming of Jesus. Time and again God has renewed his relationship with his people, and now in Jesus he renews that relationship. Abraham's faith in God is praised and it is through our response of faith that we will be saved because of what Jesus's coming achieves for us.

Pray

Creator and Redeemer,
You did not plant the seed of this earth
Into the universe as if by chance.
It was your hand that placed it here,
Your plan to grow it here.
You did not populate this earth
With a people made in your image
Purely by chance.
It was your hand that placed us here,
Your breath that keeps us here.
You did not come as a tiny child
To walk this earth as if by chance.
It was your Love that brought you here,
Your Grace that saved us here,
Our Creator and Redeemer

Friday - 4th December

Daily Reading

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' Then the Lord replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

Deuteronomy 18:15-19

Reflect

In the Old Testament the people require an intermediary between them and God. God promises to send prophets in order that the people may know the will of God. With this provision comes a promise of judgement: *who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable*. With the coming of Jesus this relationship is for ever changed. No longer do we need an intermediary. Because of what God in Christ has achieved we are enabled to come into God's presence. But this season of Advent reminds us that the judgement remains.

Pray

Father God, when we consider your servant Mary, what we see is a humility and obedience that is so often lacking in our own lives. As we hear your Word again, and consider the one through whose body you entered this world, remind us of the meaning of humility and grant us a confidence of faith that knows your promises to us are always fulfilled.

Saturday - 5th December

Daily Reading

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all
generations.

I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:

"I will establish your descendants for ever,
and build your throne for all generations." '

Psalm 89:1-4

Reflect

The promise which began with Abraham continues to David – and beyond. God is here praised for his faithfulness to his covenant. Although much of the Old Testament tells of the people of Israel's failure to remain faithful it is consistent in speaking of God's faithfulness. We are constantly reminded that God keeps his promises. This is seen most clearly in the sending of Jesus, the son of David, to save us.

Pray

Thank you Father, for your patience
With a rebellious people,
Loving you one moment,
Forgetting you the next.
Thank you for your endless love
Which does not give up,
But wants the best for us,
Despite our faults.
Thank you for your promise
To all who believe
And put their trust in you,
Everlasting life,
And in this Advent season.
May the Baptist's call
Resound in hearts and minds,
Drawing many to the living water
Where they might find forgiveness
And knowledge of your Salvation.

Sunday - 6th December

Daily Reading

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.

Isaiah 11:1-10

Reflect

Isaiah envisages a time when the wicked shall be wiped from the face of the earth and the original state of harmony in creation restored (Genesis 2.4-end). This vision resonated with the first Christians and passages such as this have traditionally been interpreted in the context of the coming of Christ, and especially the second coming. Christ will come as judge to judge the wicked and establish a time of peace for the righteous.

Pray

You challenge us this Advent time,
This season of preparation To put aside our pride,
And understand our need
For repentance,
Forgiveness
And mercy.
Less of self,
More of you.
Preparation for our journey
To the stable and beyond.
Purify our hearts,
Sanctify our lives,
That we might serve you
Faithfully this day and all days.

Monday - 7th December

Daily Reading

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he that shall build the temple of the Lord; he shall bear royal honour, and shall sit and rule on his throne. There shall be a priest by his throne, with peaceful understanding between the two of them.

Zechariah 6:12-13

Reflect

This passage is part of a series of visions which the prophet Zechariah has. The *Branch* referred to here is a Messianic figure. In this vision Zechariah sees that the religious and secular life of Israel will be made harmonious and, as a result, Israel will live in peace. This forms a key part of the Christian belief that Christ's return will herald a new age of peace and unity.

Pray

From the very beginning was,
Your Word
Which spoke this world into being;
Your Word
Which thunders from the skies;
Your Word
Which flows like mountain streams;
Your Word
Which whispers in morning breeze;
Your Word
Revealed through kings and prophets;
Your Word
Revealed through Angels' praise;
Your Word
Revealed in humble service;
Your Word
Revealed through a tiny child;
Your Word
Alive from the beginning of all things
And to eternity.

Tuesday - 8th December

Daily Reading

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

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

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the
Lord,

in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.

Micah 5:2-4

Reflect

This passage from Micah (familiar from Christmas carol services) again expresses the Jewish hope that the Messiah will bring deliverance and peace for the people. Micah claims that this will take place soon – in just the time it takes a woman in labour to give birth. The reference to labour suggests, though, that this will not take place without suffering. Jesus himself speaks in strikingly similar terms in Matthew 24.

Pray

For your word which endures,
We give you thanks.
For your promises to which we hold,
We give you thanks.
For such intimacy with you,
We give you thanks.
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies,
We give you thanks.
For family, friend and stranger,
We give you thanks.
For those who minister your grace,
We give you thanks.
For the hope that lives each Advent
of a love that has no end,
We give you thanks.

Wednesday - 9th December

Daily Reading

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.

Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

Malachi 3:1-6

Reflect

The prophet Malachi believes that the Messiah will come very soon. A messenger will come first to prepare the way for him. The messenger comes as a judge to purify the people. For Christians John the Baptist fits this image very well – he prepares the way for Jesus, his message is a call to repentance and he is not afraid to condemn those who are hypocrites or sinners.

Through our Old Testament readings we have seen how the people of Israel have looked for a Messiah to deliver them and that image has been adopted by Christians when they speak of Jesus who we believe to be the Messiah.

Pray

To you, O Lord, we bring our lives
Troubled, broken or at ease,
A sacrificial offering
For you to use.
Take away our selfishness
And teach us to love as you loved,
Take away our sense of pride
And show us the meaning of humility,
Take away our blindness
And show us the world through your eyes,
Take away our greed
And teach us how to give as you gave,
Show us your ways,
Teach us your paths,
That we might walk with you more closely,
Our hand in your hand,
Our feet in your footsteps,
From the baby in a stable
To eternity.

Thursday - 10th December

Daily Reading

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John 1:1-8

Reflect

John's gospel begins uniting the end of the story with the beginning. The Word – which was the creative power of God at the beginning – is the source of all life and is coming into the world. And then he picks up Malachi's theme of the messenger who comes to prepare the way for the light to come into the world. John stands in the tradition of the prophet's but heralds a new age that they could not even have dreamed of.

Pray

Father God, prepare our hearts not only for the celebration to come, but also for sharing that Good News with friends, family and work colleagues should opportunity arise. Grant us courage and a real willingness to talk about the love that came down to earth and walked among us

Friday - 11th December

Daily Reading

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

John 1:9-18

Reflect

John continues the prologue to his gospel as he tells how the Word (the creator) becomes flesh (part of creation). He identifies the rejection he endures as his own people fail to receive him. He speaks of a new creation of which new can all be a part when he speaks of being *born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God*. John points towards Jesus and John contrasts the new creation with the old – *the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*. John packs so much into these few verses. Although Jesus fulfils the prophecies of the old Testament, the Messiah

is not the one spoken of in the prophets – he's all that and much more!

Pray

God of majesty and power,
Who spoke and this world was,
Who breathed and this world lived,
Who counts the hairs upon our head,
Who sees our thoughts and reads our hearts,
Who loves us more than we deserve.
How can we not bring today
Our sacrifice of praise?
For in the child at Bethlehem
Lies the promise of intimacy
With a Saviour who would die even for me
And the promise of an eternity
In which to praise you more each day.
God of promise we praise your name.

Saturday - 12th December

Daily Reading

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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

Mark 1:1-3

Reflect

The opening of Mark's gospel seems much less radical than we saw in John, but he too makes claims for the Messiah, the Christ, that the Old Testament prophets could not in his first sentence when he speaks of *the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. The Messiah is more than a king or a deliverer, he is the *Son of God*. John's mission now is not simply to make the people ready for the Messiah but to make them ready for God coming among them. Mark and John both want us to understand that in Jesus God is doing a new thing that the prophets could not even imagine. Jesus changes the course of history.

Pray

We are not grains of sand upon the shore,
buffeted by sea and storm,
we are individuals loved by God,
more intimately than we could ever know.

Though from a distance
we seem insignificant and frail,
the creating breath that formed us
now lives in and sustains us.

Thank you, Saving God,
made known to us in Jesus Christ,
not only by his words,
but through his sacrificial life.

May our lives reflect
not only his love,
but your glory,
and the whole earth sing your praises.

Sunday - 13th December

Daily Reading

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

Luke 1:5-13

Reflect

Luke approaches explaining who Jesus is in a very different way from John or Mark. He uses a lengthy birth narrative, much of which is given over to the birth of John. Indeed, if you did not know the story of Jesus's birth and you read the first chapter of Luke's gospel it is unlikely you would think that the story was going to focus on Jesus. The story would appear to be all about John. John is of crucial importance for Luke. For Luke John forms the bridge between the Old Testament and the New. The true nature of Jesus's Messiahship will be revealed more gradually through Luke's story telling. John prepares the reader for a gradual revelation of who Jesus truly is.

Pray

In this season of expectation
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah,
Into the bustle of our lives
and the hard to find moments of solitude.
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah,
Into our homes and situations
along with friends and families.
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah,
Into our hearts, and those often hidden parts of our lives.
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah,
For beneath the surface of your story
is an inescapable fact:
You entered this world
as vulnerable as any one of us
in order to nail that vulnerability to the cross.
Our fears, our insecurities and our sins,
all that can separate us from God,
exchanged by your Grace for Love.
We cannot comprehend the reasoning,
only marvel that Salvation comes to us
through a baby born in a stable,
and reaches out to a world in need.
In this season of anticipation
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah

Monday - 14th December

Daily Reading

‘You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’

Luke 1:14-17

Reflect

The angel continues to address Zechariah and Luke continues to tell us about the birth of John. He is to be dedicated to the Lord from birth. His ministry is to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. When Luke says that John will go before the Lord God with the *spirit and power of Elijah* he is making clear that John will be the greatest of all the prophets preparing the people for a new age.

Pray

Creator God, you who love us more than we can know,
Who chose us from the very beginning to be family,

We praise your holy name.

Jesus Christ, Son of God, Word become flesh,
Who dwelt among us and was sacrificed for us,

We praise your holy name.

Holy Spirit, present and power in our lives

From the moment that we first believed,

We praise your holy name.

Tuesday - 15th December

Daily Reading

Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Luke 1:18-25

Reflect

John's birth is miraculous as is shown by the vision of Gabriel and by the age of Elizabeth and Zechariah. The barrenness of Elizabeth recalls other births from the Old Testament such as Isaac and Samuel. Like them John is a child of promise and God has called him from before his birth.

Pray

Father God, your servant John the Baptist came with a challenging message; calling for repentance and lives to be transformed. Those who heard were filled with expectation, waiting for Messiah, and yet ultimately failing to notice his arrival in that humble stable.

This Advent season, may we be filled with expectation, as we celebrate the greatest gift of all; your Son, Jesus Christ.

Wednesday - 16th December

Daily Reading

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Luke 1:39-45

Reflect

With this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth Luke begins to put the birth of John into context. Luke has so far given the impression that it is John's birth that is remarkable, but he starts to hint here that the birth of Jesus will be even more remarkable. This passage immediately follows the story of the angel's announcement to Mary that she will have a child. The miracle of John's birth is immediately overwhelmed by the birth of Jesus. Elizabeth and John, in the womb, rejoice to hear Mary's greeting.

Pray

God of hope
be with us in our Advent journey
to the stable and beyond,
be with us in our meeting
and in our travelling together,
be with us in our worship
and our praying together,
be with us in our Advent journey
to the stable and beyond,
our God of hope.

Thursday - 17th December

Daily Reading

And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his
servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

Luke 1:46-56

Reflect

The song of Mary (*Magnificat*) emphasizes how significant the birth of Jesus will be. The song (reminiscent of the song of Hannah, 1 Samuel 21-10) is a song of trust. Mary sings, not of what God will do but of what he has already done – simply because of the promise of the sending of Jesus. The world is already changed. The rich and powerful are undone the poor and weak lifted up.

Pray

Rejoice in the Lord always,
Shout out his name,
For God is with us,
Our God is with us,
The God of our salvation
In whom alone we trust.
Rejoice in the Lord always,
Shout out his name,
For God is our Father,
He draws us home
By streams of living water
Where we shall thirst no more.
Rejoice in the Lord always,
Shout out his name,
He knows our thoughts,
Understands our hearts
And enables us to become
The people we were meant to be.

Friday - 18th December

Daily Reading

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.

Luke 1:57-66

Reflect

After the build up that Luke has given it the birth of John is undramatic. The surprise is all around the choice of name. Elizabeth and Zechariah are adamant that he should be named John. Perhaps this is symbolic of the way that in all of this God is doing a new thing. The name, of course, like the child himself, is God given, meaning *the Lord is gracious*.

Pray

This Advent-time
we remember Mary and Joseph,
giving thanks for their faithfulness,
courage and obedience,
stepping out into the unknown
in the strength of your Spirit,
playing their part
in the fulfilment of your plan
to bring your prodigal people
home again.

We pray that their example
might be the pattern of our lives,
that when your gentle whisper
breaks through the clamour of this world
and into our small corner,
we might be ready to listen,
and having listened, to act.

Saturday - 19th December

Daily Reading

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty saviour for us

in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.’

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Luke 1:67-80

Reflect

The story of the birth of John ends with this song of Zechariah (*Benedictus*). With this song Luke continues to put the birth of John in the correct context. The story is indeed about Jesus, *He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David*. This birth will be the fulfilment of prophecies, and John is the last of the prophets to point to Jesus, *And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins*. This is a completion of God's saving work.

Pray

God of the journey, your invitation is to all
to walk with you without fear of stumbling,
Your arm enough to steady the feeblest soul,
Your grace to rescue us should we fall.
Grant us faith enough to take you at your word,
To know that when our hearts are heavy
and the destination seems so distant,
that you are there with us along the road.
Forgive us those times when we doubt your Word,
when we awake and feel alone.
Draw us ever closer into your family
that we might know your presence
and sing your praises,
all the days of our lives.

Sunday - 20th December

Daily Reading

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.

Isaiah 7:10-14

Reflect

We return to the Old Testament for this key passage from the prophet Isaiah. Christians have always understood this as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus. Isaiah is talking about the time-scale on which God will act – within nine months. But it is the title *Immanuel* which is so important for Christian identification of this child with Jesus. *Immanuel* means *God-is-with-us* – a key Christian understanding of what the incarnation means.

Pray

You gave your all to the world
In the bleakness of that stable.
Love was born that day,
Pure love,
Undiluted,
Poured out for all
Who call on Your name.
Such Grace,
Undeserved
Deserves a response
In the life that we lead,
Forgive our ingratitude
After all you have done,
Draw us to your Word,
Give us a new song to sing
That will resonate throughout this world
And begin with us today

Monday - 21st December

Daily Reading

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 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.'

Luke 1:26-35

Reflect

For Luke this passage is packed with meaning. It relates to the Old Testament in the way it portrays the promise of the birth of a child in the most improbable of circumstances (Sarah, Hannah, even Elizabeth). But it is also very much set in an entirely new context. The words that Gabriel uses to describe the son Mary will bear are words that describe the Messiah. This birth will herald a new

Pray

Advent God,
we journey with you,
to Bethlehem's stable
and a new-born King,
ears attuned
to the song of angels,
eyes alert
for Bethlehem's star.
Forgive us
if on our journey
if we are distracted
by the tempting offers
of this world.
Keep our hearts aflame
with the hope
of Christmas,
and the promise
of a Saviour.

Tuesday - 22nd December

Daily Reading

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.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
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.

Isaiah 9:2-7

Reflect

It is no wonder that time and again Christians have turned to Isaiah as the prophet who foresaw the coming of Christ. Passages like this, which prophesy the coming of a deliverer, a Messiah fit Christian belief about Jesus so well. This Messiah is the Son of David, the Prince of Peace. Isaiah speaks here of a new hope for humankind, a hope Christians see fulfilled in Jesus.

Pray

Saving God, who came to earth for us,
we praise you for your everlasting love,
your endless patience,
and for the greatest gift you could possibly give to us,
the possibility of Salvation
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Wednesday - 23rd December

Daily Reading

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.

Matthew 1:18-25

Reflect

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is brief compared to Luke's. This is the whole of it, although the genealogy which precedes it (Mt 1-17) is crucial in setting the context. For Matthew it is just as important that Jesus is understood to be the Messiah and the Son of David as it is for Luke. Jesus is just as much the fulfilment of prophecies.

Pray

Restore us, O Lord, we pray,
bring us back to that place
where we once met,
as shepherds to the stable
after hearing angels sing.
Bring us back to that place
when our love was fresh,
not embarrassed
to express itself in praise
to our heavenly King.
Restore us, O Lord, we pray.

Thursday - 24th December

Daily Reading

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.

Luke 2:1-20

Reflect

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is full of miracle and mystery – and glory. He clearly wants us to understand that this is a special birth. John's birth, which had seemed so significant just a chapter ago is put in the shade by this birth. Here we have angels singing, their glory filling the sky, we have shepherds leaving their flocks to worship the newborn king. Even where Luke tells us little we have invented legends about a packed town, over full inns, a stable, an ox and an ass. This could never be mistaken for any ordinary birth. This is the Messiah, the Saviour, the Son of God!

Pray

Shout for joy
The whole earth
And everything within!
Rejoice!
For Light has come into the world!

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

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

Friday - 25th December

Daily Reading

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1.14

Reflect

It is probably John, though, who expresses the glory of the coming of Jesus. In these words he captures the eternal significance of the presence of Christ among us. God has come to live among his people and through him we can see God's glory.

Pray

Let the just rejoice,
for their justifier is born.
Let the sick and infirm rejoice,
For their saviour is born.
Let the captives rejoice,
For their Redeemer is born.
Let slaves rejoice,
for their Master is born.
Let free men rejoice,
For their Liberator is born.
Let All Christians rejoice,
For Jesus Christ is born.

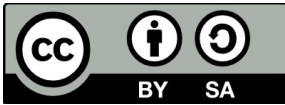
St. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-440)

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