

Advent day by day



Prepared by Archdeacon Ian Rees



Introduction

Advent is a wonderful but often overlooked season in the church calendar. For many it is associated simply with getting ready for Christmas, but Advent is much more than that. It is a season when we take time out to prepare for the coming of Jesus, something we celebrate as we mark his birth at Christmas, but something we also await as he has promised to return one day. We wait, not looking up to the skies for something to happen, but we wait celebrating the gift of life and new life through Jesus. We wait, seeking to be more like Him as we look to follow His command to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Perhaps this year we can rediscover something about waiting, about longing. It seems to have been a long and difficult few years for all kinds of reasons, but we wait in hope, we wait in expectation and we wait knowing that God has never failed to deliver on any of the promises he makes.

Whatever we usually make of the Advent season, make this one special – make it about Jesus and make it about you and your relationship with him and with the people and the creation around you.

Come Lord Jesus, Come...

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Week 1

Day 1 – Advent Sunday – Nov 27th

Mark 13: 24-27

(Jesus said), 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Reflection:

The first of our Advent readings sets out a major theme of Advent, that is looking forward to the second coming of Jesus. It's something that we regularly proclaim as we say the words of the Creed but something that we perhaps tend to overlook. It seems so distant, so unpredictable, and yet, there it is in the words of both the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds which we use in many of our church services.

And there is a real danger in overlooking the 'second coming' for a whole host of reasons, but today I want to think of just one and that is that when we ignore the second coming we, consciously or not, believe we're 'there', wherever 'there' is, or that we've 'made it'. That's a dangerous thought because it can lead us to fight and work for all kinds of things to do with preserving what we've got and where we are and how we do things.

With Jesus, we are to live now, but also to live in the expectation of the second coming. We are to be active in our service of God and other people, but we are also to be watchful and reflective, contemplating where we are in our relationship with God and wondering how we can improve that relationship.

What's getting in the way of your relationship with God? What can you do about it?



Day 2 – Nov 28th

Matthew 4: 18-22

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Reflection:

Yesterday, we considered the need to reflect on being ready for the second coming of Jesus, but today we’re called back to recognise the privilege of being called to serve him. Sometimes we associate being a Christian with going to church, but that’s only a small part of it. Being a Christian means living our lives trying to be more like Jesus, trying to be a ‘miniature’ version of him.

Without doubt, we’ll get it wrong sometimes, but that should never distract us from trying.

We’re called to follow Jesus day by day. How do we respond to that calling? Are we willing to throw away ‘our nets’ and go wherever he leads us? Pray today that he’ll show you that way clearly.

Day 3 – Nov 29th

Luke 10: 21-24

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’ Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.’



Reflection:

So far in our reflections we've considered the second coming of Jesus and also the privilege of being called to serve him. Today we're called to think about the fact that to develop a stronger faith we need to let go of so many things. Jesus talks about the faith of infants because in the minds of infants there are so few distractions. As we grow up and grow older we allow our thoughts, our opinions, our ideas and even our unconscious bias to cloud things. There are so many things we need to strip away to allow God to penetrate our minds and our whole lives more deeply. What are those things in your life? Is it the fear of looking silly in some way, or not knowing enough to speak up about your faith? Is it the fear of your faith getting in the way of something you do? Is it a politically correct politeness? Is it busyness with other things? Think about and pray about what things are causing you not to be as close to God today as you could be.

Day 4 – Nov 30th

Matthew 15: 29-31

After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Reflection:

Jesus did remarkable things in his earthly life. Of course he would, he was Jesus after all! Today we are called to be the body of Christ in the world. Teresa of Avila's wonderful verse reminds us of this:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."



We can't be Jesus, but we can do, with his help, amazing things if we're willing to trust him, to be guided by him, to seek his strength and his support, to follow his wisdom. Jesus drew incredible crowds to him because people were intrigued. They heard stories of good news. Today as a Church and as individuals we are to be his body – his hands, his feet, his eyes. May we be confident that God can and will use any one of us and let's pray that God will gather people from everywhere to come and hear more about the good news Jesus can offer.

Day 5 – Dec 1st

Matthew 7: 24-27

(Jesus said), 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!'

Reflection:

This is one of the great Sunday School stories, one that many of us will have known for as long as we can remember, yet it's one that also rings absolutely true today. While people are often seeking to build their lives on the things that society applauds such as a nice house and car, good holidays, plenty of money in the bank and so on, we're called to recognise that whether we have all the trappings of a comfortable lifestyle or not, the most important thing of all is what our lives are founded upon.

In all things and at all times our primary foundation in life is Jesus. To try and follow him, to learn from him, to seek his guidance and support, to love others as he loves us and them, to be and share good news with others – these are our foundations.

Celebrate his love for you, be thankful every day for that love and respond by looking to serve him in ways that show that love to others.



Day 6 – Dec 2nd

Matthew 9: 27-31

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David!’ When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you.’ And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, ‘See that no one knows of this.’ But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

Reflection:

There are times when Jesus sends people away telling them to say nothing about the good that has been done to them or for them. Whatever the reasons for that, it is clear that in many cases people weren’t able to contain their joy, excitement or amazement at what had happened to them. As we move through Advent towards Christmas let’s make sure that we never lose such joy, excitement and amazement about what God has done and does for us day by day.

Day 7 – Dec 3rd

Matthew 9: 35-38

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

Reflection:

So much of what is reported about the church and sometimes even spoken of in the church can be rather depressing and yet when we look at what is happening ‘on the ground’ there is an enormous amount of incredible work being done by churches in the service of their communities and in supporting wider worldwide charitable causes. Maybe it’s time to start changing the narrative so that we are more confident in what is happening and to celebrate the good news stories that can be found in so many places. This change might well begin with ourselves!



Week 2

Day 8 – Second Sunday in Advent – Dec 4th

Mark 1: 1-8

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”’,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

Reflection:

The gospel according to Mark is the shortest. You get the feeling of needing to get the information across to people urgently and so it begins at quite a pace. Immediately referring to the prophecy of Isaiah, we are then quickly introduced to John the Baptist. John has come to get people ready for the arrival of Jesus. He has come to encourage people to be ready.

His call to focus on Jesus is urgent and also full of promise. As we await the celebration of the birth of Jesus can we do so excitedly ready to celebrate the birthday of someone we know and love? And as we await the time when he will come again into the world, are we ready? And what does ‘being ready’ look like?



Day 9 – Dec 5th

Luke 5:17-26

One day, while Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralysed— 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

Reflection:

The Pharisees liked nothing more than catching out anyone who seemed to threaten their power and position and Jesus, through his ministry of love and healing was doing just that. In this account some men brought a friend to Jesus desperately in need of healing and Jesus responded with 'Your sins are forgiven you.' Immediately that would send the Scribes and Pharisees into a fury. Surely only God can forgive sins...

Well, Jesus doesn't respond to that, leaving them to make up their own minds based on what they are seeing.

Of course, absolutely anybody could say, 'Your sins are forgiven', and it may or may not mean anything at all, but what came next revealed even more clearly who Jesus is as he physically healed the man as well.

Jesus had immediately responded with spiritual healing but added the practical healing to make the point simply, that he could do it!

In our lives we have the privilege of approaching Jesus day by day to recognise and know the power of his spiritual healing, but we're also never to underestimate his power to offer physical healing.



Day 10 – Dec 6th

Matthew 18: 12-14

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Reflection:

When we hear some of the biblical stories we can feel real comfort and this is one of those stories – the idea that God will go out and search for even one of us who is lost is indeed amazing and something to celebrate day by day. But there's another aspect to this which we often don't think about as much and that is the sheer ludicrousness of this story. How ridiculous is this shepherd? Yes, he's lost one of his sheep but surely now isn't the time to leave the others to go off and look for just one – he still has 99 after all! As we await Christmas let's celebrate Jesus being born into a troubled and broken world to seek out ANYONE who is lost. This is something that is absolutely incredible. Let's celebrate God's magnificent love for us which is so great that it's actually shocking. Let's be confident of his love and know how precious we are to him.

Day 11 – Dec 7th

Acts 20: 32-35

And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"



Reflection:

Paul is writing to the Elders of the Ephesian Church here and it is an example of some wonderful fellowship. As he comes to the end of his message, he encourages them prayerfully and reminds them of the need to support the weak 'remembering the words of Jesus.' This year has highlighted and perhaps increased the problems of poverty in our communities. Many people still argue about what help can be given, suggesting that people who receive such help should help themselves a bit more or even more unkindly suggesting to some that 'it's their fault anyway, so why should we help them?'

These reflections are too short to contest those points but I can say it's very rarely as simple as that. But even if it were, Jesus makes it absolutely clear that we should help the weak, not judge them. It is our duty to care for those in need around us and support them in any way we can.

During Advent let's prayerfully reflect on where we can be good news in our communities in caring for others and let's do something about it, not just for Advent, but as something that is life changing for us, and will certainly be life changing for others.

Day 12 – Dec 8th

Matthew 11:12-18

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!

'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn."

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"



Reflection:

Today's reading marks out the new beginning that Jesus offers to people but it also encourages us to reflect on how closely we match some of the fickle nature of some of the people mentioned. Too many people had drawn up their own picture of what a Saviour might look and act like and Jesus confounded many of those thoughts, so people were not satisfied. They moaned about John the Baptist as he came to prepare the way for Jesus and they moaned about Jesus when he came.

What picture do we have of Jesus? How much of it is one that is conveniently constructed to suit our own vision of what a Saviour might look like? What might he really expect and hope for from us?

Day 13 – Dec 9th

Luke 4: 16-21

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Reflection:

Jesus' words were provocative to some of those listening and I'm sure he knew that. Here he outlined his ministry as being the Saviour who has come into the world to bring transformation. I wonder who was dozing off in the Synagogue at the time. I know it shouldn't happen, but it does, doesn't it? People don't listen as well as sometimes they should and they can end up missing out on something crucial!



Here, they'd have listened perhaps to a familiar piece of scripture being read and something made them look at him intently and then they got the bombshell, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' This man was claiming to be no less than God!

What words of Jesus do we find provocative? What words make us really sit up and do something?

Day 14 – Dec 10th

John 4: 31-34

Meanwhile the disciples were urging Jesus, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'

Reflection:

I like food. Sometimes the best sort of food for me seems to be the least healthy! Jesus of course is using the analogy of food very differently. He is recognising that it's essential, but actually that there are other things that are even more important and that is to do God's will. Food is good and I recommend it, but so is a relationship with God. God doesn't want our relationship with him to be an optional extra in our life, something that can remain on the periphery but something that impacts us positively every moment of every day.

What is our story? Where do we recognise the positive presence of God in our lives?



Week 3

Day 15 – Third Sunday in Advent – Dec 11th

John 1: 6-8

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.

Reflection:

Much as I would like to be a shining light all of the time, I recognise that there are plenty of times when I'm not. One of the gifts of Jesus though is that he accepts me with my imperfections. But like John I, and all of us as Christians, are called to testify to the true light that is Jesus and to seek to be more and more like him day by day. We've got plenty of imperfections and we get things badly wrong at times, and God loves us just the same. But we don't settle for the imperfections, we try to be better.

How can you be more like Jesus today and every day? In what ways will you shine as a light for Jesus today?

Day 16 – Dec 12th

Matthew 21: 23-27

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.



Reflection:

Just occasionally it would be nice if we could do something to absolutely prove our faith is 100% true wouldn't it? But of course, that wouldn't be faith and it would simply mean we were created as programmed and ordered people without the ability to think for ourselves. That gift to think for ourselves is the gift that allows us to love and know what it is to be loved.

When Jesus was asked this question he decided that it was up to his questioners to make their own decisions about him just as he invites each one of us to decide whether to follow him or not. What is our decision?

Day 17 – Dec 13th

Matthew 21: 28-32

(Jesus said) 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'

Reflection:

Lots of organisations, indeed lots of churches, now have mission statements, statements which outline their mission. These can be extremely useful and positive as they can be used as a regular mark against which to measure performance, but by themselves words mean nothing at all. The phrase 'actions speak louder than words' is one that is both accurate and true.

This is especially true for us as Christians as people often, frighteningly, judge Jesus based on what we do or say. In this account the one son was asked to go and work in the vineyard and said he wouldn't, but he did. The other son was asked to go and said he would, but didn't. What we say and what we do are really important and this reading reminds us that it isn't always the ones who look right that will be the ones who are going to do the right thing in the end.

May our words be positive and may our actions match those words.



Day 18 – Dec 14th

Luke 7: 19-23

(John the Baptist summoned two of his disciples) and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"' Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

Reflection:

It's perhaps comforting to know that even John the Baptist occasionally needed some reassurance that Jesus was the anticipated Messiah. At times it is possible to feel a bit empty, a bit lost, but at those times we are invited to talk – to talk to others but also to talk to Jesus. He hears us, he knows us and he loves us.

And just as he did in this account Jesus suggests that we sometimes need to just take time out and think of all the good things we can see, all the signs of God still at work today.

When did we last take time out to reflect on our relationship with God? When did we take time to think of the good things we see and to give thanks?

Day 19 – Dec 15th

Matthew 1: 1 & 17

¹ *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

¹⁷ *So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.*



Reflection:

The first seventeen verses of the gospel according to Matthew are taken up with the genealogy of Jesus. It's not a section we're likely to learn off by heart very easily! One of the reasons for including this genealogy was to give Jesus some credibility amongst the Jewish people. His heritage was good!

It's perhaps less obvious why it's important to us but here are some reasons. Firstly it's clear that God is in control, that God's hand is on every generation, including ours. Secondly, it reminds us that we're part of something bigger, we're part of God's big plan for his world and his people and thirdly, in knowing something of our history, our past, we learn something about ourselves as well. That past may contain all kinds of different characters, some good, some not so good, but God has remained faithful to them as he is to us. His faithfulness is evident in Jesus, who came into the world to reveal what true love looks like and what possibilities there are if we're willing to put our lives into his hands.

Day 20 – Dec 16th

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:

One of the most popular Advent hymns is the beautiful 'O come, o come Emmanuel'. I think Emmanuel has to be one of the most beautiful words by itself, meaning 'God with us'. This incredible reality is something we often push to the back of our minds allowing it to become obscured by busyness, by grief or sadness, by indifference or by enjoying ourselves too much!

But this reality is world changing and life changing. It is something that we should be thankful for every moment of every day. If you don't do this already, then it's worth stopping for a simple prayer of thanks in the morning and the night thanking God for his love and his presence with us, and just trusting our lives into his care. And then perhaps at another point of the day just think about the times when we've seen or felt God at work over the past 24 hours.

God with us! A reality to change us and a reality to live by!

Day 21 – Dec 17th

Luke 1: 5-15

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. 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.'



Reflection:

What a fascinating passage this is. We often hear of the faith of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in saying yes to God, but this passage offers us another example of faith. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both, (as we're sensitively told!), 'getting on in years'! The idea of them becoming parents must have long since disappeared but here was an angel telling Zechariah that it was going to happen.

There are many things that can be considered from this account but let's just think of two. The first is that we're told the angel said to Zechariah, 'your prayer has been heard.' It's clear that Zechariah had never lost heart in his prayers. God hears and answers prayer. We don't know how, or when, but this is a lesson never to give up on prayer. Turn to God, day by day, and pray.

Secondly, we know that Zechariah heard the words and listened to them. This child would be special and he would be named John. Normally he would be named after his father and some people would find this really strange (and they did), but Zechariah understood that just as God had been faithful to him and Elizabeth, so he was being called to do what God wanted.

Sometimes God can lead us on strange and unexpected paths, are we listening for his call and are we ready to follow wherever we're led?



Week 4

Day 22 – Fourth Sunday in Advent – Dec 18th

Luke 1: 26-38

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. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection:

'Let it be with me according to your word'. Yesterday we thought about the faith and trust of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist and today we have the faith of Mary declared so boldly in these most amazing words.

Today, why not take some time out just to pray those words, 'Let it be with me according to your word.' Answers might not come quickly or easily but it's a prayer we can repeat day by day as well as a challenge as we ask ourselves if we truly mean the words. As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, what does his birth mean to us and how do we respond?



Day 23 – Dec 19th

Luke 1: 39-45

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.'

Reflection:

I think that one of the most powerful parts of this passage is simply to pick up on the excitement of Elizabeth and Mary. Yes, these were two expectant mothers and this was an exciting time, but there was more. These two women had been chosen by God for a very special purpose and to undertake a very practical role in the changing of history. John the Baptist would spend time preaching that the Messiah was coming and that people were to be ready for his arrival. And Jesus came as the Messiah.

It's an exciting, life changing, history changing moment. Can we capture and maintain that excitement as we reflect on the life and words of John the Baptist about announcing a Saviour and of course about the salvation offered for each of us by Jesus. Excitedly may we be willing to be and share good news, to make people aware of Jesus and ready to welcome him, and let us, through our own words and actions live out the love of Jesus, whilst celebrating and being thankful for all he has done and does for us.

How do we share good news? Do we know our story of faith and are we ready to share it?



Day 24 – Dec 20th

Luke 1: 46-55

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.'*

Reflection:

These words, well known to many as the Magnificat, are used daily in Evening Prayer Services. They're a song of praise and thanksgiving from Mary to God for choosing her to be the mother of Jesus. The words begin with rejoicing and then thanksgiving but are then extended to relate what God was doing in the world. He is showing mercy and strength. He is offering hope to everyone and he is honouring his promises to previous generations.

Today God's is still showing mercy, grace, love, strength and power. Today he calls on us as well to offer those things to others through our words and actions.

This is a wonderful piece to spend some time on. Read it over regularly, praying it with Mary and treasuring the words and we may well find Christ becoming even more alive in our hearts.



Day 25 – Dec 21st

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:

A few days ago I gave a little spoiler about this passage. As John was born there was great rejoicing but as the name of the child was revealed there was much puzzling. At first people assumed that Elizabeth was having a strange turn and shouldn't be listened to but then Zechariah agreed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed. God had honoured his promise as he always does and Zechariah had kept to his side of things as well.

Sometimes God does call us to do things we're not sure about, to go a little way beyond our comfort zone, but when he does, he always goes with us. We can trust him, he will never let us down. Is there something that we think God might be saying to us? Pray about it, talk about it.



Day 26 – Dec 22nd

Isaiah 40: 1-5

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her
 that her hard service has been completed,
 that her sin has been paid for,
 that she has received from the Lord's hand
 double for all her sins. A voice of one calling:
 "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord;
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
 Every valley shall be raised up,
 every mountain and hill made low;
 the rough ground shall become level,
 the rugged places a plain.
 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.
 For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

Reflection:

We're approaching Christmas. It's a wonderful time of year for many people, whether people of faith or not. However, for some it's a difficult time, bringing back memories of things that still hurt, perhaps people that are missed. The prophet Isaiah is promising here, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, that something better is coming, someone is coming to take away the darkness and the pain and smooth out our lives. Jesus came to do that. And today, through whatever darkness in our lives or in the world around us, that promise still holds true. One day we will see the world as God intended it to be. However you're feeling today, know that promise to be true. Jesus who came and lived on earth and died on the cross, rose again, bringing new life and new hope and revealing once again the depth of his love for each one of us.



Day 27 – Dec 23rd

Luke 1: 67-71

Then his (John the Baptist's) 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.*

Reflection:

We're approaching the end of our Advent journey with this wonderful message about a Saviour and about salvation. Today and every day we need to reflect to this message! Sometimes things in life are really good, let's remain thankful. Sometimes things are tougher, but we can still be thankful that Jesus is alongside us. What we celebrate at Christmas isn't a one off event with far reaching consequences, but an every day event as we proclaim Emmanuel, God with us, today and for all eternity.

Day 28 – Christmas Eve - Dec 24th

Luke 2:8-20

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:

There are no words needed for this really except to remind ourselves of this scene and the excitement. Yes, the shepherds were terrified but they moved quickly! What they had heard and seen they wanted to look at more closely. The long awaited Messiah had been born and they went to see him. And then they returned 'glorifying and praising God...' Their lives were surely transformed for ever, just as our lives can be by a relationship with Jesus.

Charles Dickens wrote in 'A Christmas Carol', *"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year."* As we celebrate this Christmas, may we take forward the excitement, the mystery, and the praise of that first Christmas.

May the comfort, the joy, the love and the peace of Christmas be with you all.

