

**Daily Inspiration for Advent**

**Day 1: 1<sup>st</sup> December – Isaiah 7:14 ‘God with us’**

God with us. That’s really the whole ball game, isn’t it? Over the next 24 days, as we prepare ourselves in this season of Advent, we’ll tell the ageless story afresh, and we’ll marvel again at the wonder of it all: the angels, the shepherds, the wise men, the journey to Bethlehem, a young carpenter and his pregnant wife, the stable and that glorious Christmas night.

But, in all the beauty and mystery of what is to come, nothing really summarises it better than this one word which begins our journey: Emmanuel. God *with* us.

It was always the plan. God is not a distant deity, who winds the clock up and observes passively while it runs. God is a ‘with’ kind of God at the very core of his being. It begins as *God with himself*: ‘the Word was with God’ (John 1:1) as the Spirit hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:2) – a Trinity of love.

Then *God with humanity*, as originally intended. Humans made in his image, knowing true intimacy with each other, and with their Creator. And the Lord comes walking into Eden in the cool of the day to spend time *with* Adam and Eve, only to find the barriers up, and the pattern dislocated.

After that time, we are no longer with God – but even so, not everyone gets the memo. King David, among others down the centuries, knew what it was like to experience God’s presence: ‘I will fear no evil, for you are *with* me.’ (Psalm 23:4)

Somehow the promise never goes away, never disappears for good. God would be with us – in a new way, for all time. It would take a miracle – the Virgin birth – but it would surely come to pass.

And seven centuries later, it does. God comes down to earth. God with us as never before. And this divine Son grows up to utter this great promise: ‘My Spirit will be *with* you.... Abide in me.’ God with us for all time.

There so much we can say about what the Christmas story means. But let’s start here – and maybe let’s finish here, too. *God is with us*. May this beautiful, intimate, faithful God be with you today, and throughout this season. And may this stir all of our hearts to joy and adoration. O come, o come Emmanuel.

**Day 2: 2<sup>nd</sup> December – Micah 5:2-5a ‘A surprising Shepherd?’**

The Advent story is full of surprises. In many ways we're so familiar with it, that often those surprises pass us by. We think of shepherds and angels and wise men and it all seems so... *normal*. Which is odd, when you think about it!

Today's passage from the prophet Micah likewise has its share of surprises. Any of us who've attended traditional carol services over the years will recognise it – the promise that the new king would come from Bethlehem.

That the town of King David should feature is, we might think, not unexpected. The great shepherd king would prove the ancestor to an even greater Shepherd who would 'stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord' (v3). This ruler would transcend even the boundaries of the nation: 'his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth' (v4).

*But there are hidden surprises here.* The first is that prophecies of the new king's birth refer both to God honouring Galilee in the north of the country (in Isaiah), and also Bethlehem in the south (here in Micah). Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries – one was of noble rank and lived at the court, one lived in relative poverty and obscurity away from the corridors of power. How would this conundrum be resolved?

God's solution is simple, but beautiful: Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth (in Galilee), but had to travel to Joseph's ancestral hometown (Bethlehem) to pay Caesar's poll tax. Galilee *and* Bethlehem – both prophecies fulfilled without contradiction.

The second surprise is that Bethlehem was chosen at all. It may have been linked to King David, but in other respects it was a small, insignificant place. Its name means 'house of bread', and its main business was to live up to its name – it provided the capital city of nearby Jerusalem with corn, and also lambs for sacrifice.

Centuries later, the new ruler prophesied by Micah – the one born in 'the house of bread' – would stand up and declare to the world: 'I am the bread of life.' This Great Shepherd would himself become the 'lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.' You never really get away from the place of your birth.

*God knew what he was doing when Bethlehem was chosen.* As we spend the next three weeks on our annual pilgrimage to the stable situated in 'the house of bread', may we too be fed daily by the Bread of Life, and fall in adoration before the Lamb of God. Bethlehem is just the beginning...

**Day 3: 3<sup>rd</sup> December – Matthew 1:1-17 ‘The divine promise-keeper’**

Admit it – you skipped a few lines of today’s reading, didn’t you? Most people do. In fact, if I was able to secretly watch your reading time, I might find it was more than a few lines!

The bible is full of genealogies. Long lists of who begat who, to use the old language – and I’m sure most of you have often wondered what the point of them is. If the bible is first and foremost a book about God, what can we possibly learn from human family trees? Those of you who are family history fans might derive a modest interest from this kind of thing, and others of you – you know who you are – are mostly having a chuckle at the funny names, or trying to pronounce some yourself as a personal challenge. But otherwise, what is the point?

To answer that question you need to go back to the third chapter of the bible – to verse 15 of Genesis chapter 3. It had all started so well. A perfect world, and humans in perfect relationship with their Creator.... and then disaster. The bond broken, the innocence shattered. A fallen world.

But in the midst of this catastrophe God promises that *one day Eve’s offspring would crush the serpent’s head*. You might say that the rest of the bible is The Search for the Serpent Crusher.

And as we read these long lists throughout the Old Testament, generation after generation, we can detect a voice echoing down the ages: ‘where is he? Is he here yet?’ Waiting, waiting.

And the promises keep growing. As God speaks and blesses one family in particular, we see a line from Abraham – through Isaac, Jacob and Judah – which carries special hope. King David came and went, and the promise escalated: one of his descendants would inherit an eternal throne. Then the prophets weigh in, too: this new king would outstrip anything which had gone before – a new era of peace and justice, a global reach. Way more than just the serpent’s head! But still the waiting...

And so we get to the first chapter of the New Testament – Matthew’s gospel. And now the voice changes – a divine voice answering all those echoes of longing, of faith and perhaps also of doubt: *‘the serpent crusher is here. I keep my promises.’*

Jesus is the Anointed One (i.e. the Messiah or Christ of v1). Jesus fulfils the promises of global blessing given to Abraham (v2). Jesus inherits the eternal throne promised to David (v6). The serpent crusher has come!

It’s big stuff. Perhaps take a moment to breathe in the enormity of a ‘boring’ family tree. And more than that, remind yourself of something very simple but incredibly profound: God keeps his promises. He keeps them to the world, to his people, and also to you. *God keeps his promises to you*. And may that awesome thought lift your heart, and also your faith, today.

**Day 4: 4<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:5-17 ‘Your prayer has been heard’**

Most modern tellings of the nativity story begin with the Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary. But that’s not quite the beginning of the story – not even in Luke’s gospel itself. Six months before that historic encounter, Gabriel has another divine errand, to an old priest performing his duties at the temple in Jerusalem.

Zechariah was a righteous and blameless man, as was his wife Elizabeth (v6), and their lives were similarly about to be turned upside down, almost as much as Mary’s. It was another miraculous birth – only this time because of age. They had never been able to have children, and presumably had long since given up hope. But they remained faithful, and got on with the day-to-day business of living, and serving their Lord.

And into this pair of quiet lives comes the angel, with an extraordinary promise: ‘Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John’ (v13).

You see, there was one other prophecy in the bible that had to be fulfilled before the Messiah could come. It was one of the very last words in the Old Testament, given to the prophet Malachi: that Elijah would return *first*, preparing the way for the Messiah.

This is the divinely-appointed task that John – later known as The Baptist – would come to do. That’s why it’s so important that he comes ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah’ (v17), ‘to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’. John is that ‘voice calling in the wilderness’ (Isaiah 40:3): the herald announcing that the Messiah has come!

So there’s no time to waste – if Angel is going to visit Mary, he has to visit John’s would-be parents *first*. So he does.

Yesterday we dwelt on the idea that God keeps his promises – which he does again here. But today let’s feast on this short but profound phrase in v13: *‘Your prayer has been heard.’*

What a glorious thought! That Almighty God, the creator and sustainer of the universal, all-powerful and all-knowing – this God *hears our prayers*. He listens, his faced turned towards us, full of love: he knows who we are, and what we’re asking.

Many of us will have prayers we’ve prayed for a long time, just like Zechariah and Elizabeth. Let’s take heart today and seize this promise with renewed faith: God hears our prayers. Yes, yours! And let’s have courage to keep praying them. God has not forgotten you.

**Day 5: 5<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:18-25 ‘He has shown his favour’**

Poor old Zechariah. It's easy to give him a roasting. All those years waiting hopefully and serving faithfully, and when his big moment comes...

But I wonder if Zechariah is not somewhat more like us than we care to admit. One of the great pointers to the truthfulness of the bible is that the characters are so much like us. There's no massaging of egos or marketing jingo. The human characters are very... human. We can see ourselves in them – which reminds us that *the God of the bible is a God for people like us*.

People like Gideon, the mighty warrior who hides in the shed. Or Peter, the Rock who blows his mouth off and then runs away. Or, as here, Zechariah who doubted an angel, and temporarily lost his voice because he temporarily lost his trust.

Never is God's love and mercy more greatly shown than in the people he chooses to use. Ordinary people, people who mess up and let him down. People that God gives a second chance to; and a third, and a fourth...

There is redemption in this story for Zechariah – just as there is for you and me. That's who God is – and we'll see Zechariah come good in a few days' time.

But let's also celebrate the faithfulness of Elizabeth today – one of the great unsung heroes of the bible. Mother of the Baptist, woman of faith – and encourager of Mary, who only sings *after* Elizabeth has welcomed her and prophesied over her. She may only get half a chapter, but her unique contribution alters the course of history: just as it has been for many people of faith through the ages. Her 'appointed time' was brief but brilliant.

*Our God is the God of second chances*: for Elizabeth, long after her childbearing years were over; for Zechariah, when their son was born; for us too, whatever falls, foibles, faults and failures we've had along the way.

God shows his favour to those who don't deserve it. People like us. Give thanks for that beautiful truth today – and may it cause your heart to sing.

**Day 6: 6<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:26-33 ‘What’s in a name?’**

Names matter. They certainly matter in the bible. A name wasn’t just a parental preference, it was meant to signify something. We can learn a lot from names. Take Gabriel, for example. It means ‘God is my strength’ – a perfect name for an angel. Mighty as Gabriel was, he knew where his true strength came from.

Or take Mary as another example: in today’s reading we get the iconic encounter between the angel and the young woman. The name Mary is most likely from the ancient Egyptian name ‘mry’ meaning ‘beloved’. Beloved of Joseph, certainly; but also beloved of God.

So God-is-my-strength meets The Beloved One – and promises a miraculous child. Not surprisingly, his name is important too. Jesus means ‘God saves’ – it is the updated version of the Old Testament name Joshua, the great hero of the Israelites who led his people into the promised land.

*God was coming to save his people again.* Only this time he would do it himself: ‘He will be called the Son of the Most High... his kingdom will never end.’ A greater rescuer, an eternal king.

Tomorrow we’ll deal with Mary’s shock – and her remarkable faith. But today let’s rejoice that *Jesus lives up to his name*. God saves, and his salvation is glorious. All the promises to Israel – to the prophets, to those waiting, for generation after generation – are coming to fulfilment. There is a new way back to God, a new hope for the renewal of our broken world.

‘Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?!’ So jokes the disciple Nathanael 30 years later (John 1: 46). Today we have our answer and it is emphatically yes. The Beloved One is promised the gift of the Messiah – God’s Son, salvation made flesh. A saviour not just for then, but for now. A Saviour for you and for me – for the whole world. *It’s all in the name.*

And may that beautiful truth lift your heart today.

**Day 7: 7<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:34-38 ‘No word ever fails’**

‘How will this be?’ It’s not a bad question to ask, is it? You’ve just received some of the most extraordinary – and shocking – news anyone could imagine. Perhaps as you’ve read today’s passage, you found yourself remembering such a time in your own life, when you received news it was hard to take in. And Mary asks a natural follow-up: but what’s striking in her reply is that she doesn’t question the *fact* of it, only the process.

This is in stark contrast to Zechariah earlier. He asks: ‘How can I be sure?’ (i.e. ‘...that what you’re saying is true?’) Mary doesn’t doubt the message, only the method. And her faith is rewarded with a direct answer from the angel.

The text doesn’t tell us what she felt emotionally after receiving this visitation. The hundreds of portrayals of this scene in art through the ages tend to reflect the values of the society of the time. Mediaeval paintings picture her receiving it demurely, like a good lady of the court. Modern versions tend to emphasise the emotional shock and even pain, reflecting our more therapeutic culture.

In some ways, this is good – it means that we see Mary as fundamentally *one of us* – a real human being. And yet, we can so easily read into her response what she ‘must’ have felt. Luke cleverly avoids such guessing. Instead he tells us simply that Mary accepted the word, whatever it would cost: ‘I am the Lord’s servant.... may your word to me be fulfilled.’ (v38)

It is a remarkable encounter – and at its heart is a remarkable young woman showing even more remarkable faith. This single scene changes the course of history, and in its turn transforms this anonymous young villager into the most famous woman in history. Lady Di might have been photographed more often, but nobody has been captured more in art and literature over the course of 2,000 years. I do wonder what Mary herself would have made of that.

But let’s close with a glorious affirmation: *God’s word never fails* (v37). It didn’t fail for Mary – it doesn’t fail for us, too. The bible is full of promises – and ‘all of them are yes in Christ Jesus’ (2 Corinthians 1:20). Because God’s word never fails, we can say ‘yes’ to God’s love, to his salvation, to God’s gift of the Spirit to dwell in our hearts, bringing peace that passes understanding, joy that gives us strength, and hope in times of trial.

Christ comes into the world as the fulfilment of God’s word – today let’s spend a few moments reading any one of our favourite passages and choosing to rejoice in those promises again. ‘For no word from God will ever fail.’

**Day 8: 8<sup>th</sup> December – Matthew 1:18-21 'This is how...'**

Today we flip from Luke back to Matthew, to allow us to cover the story in broadly chronological order. Mary is now pregnant, so it's time for Joseph to enter the picture. Like Elizabeth, Joseph is another of the great unsung heroes of the text – he is usually pictured as being a frail old man, quite without foundation. In all probability he was in his late teens or early twenties, marrying the bride arranged for him by his family, as would have been the custom.

Tomorrow we'll look at the character of Joseph in more detail, but today, let's ask a simple question: how does Jesus' birth come about?

The natural answer would be to quote the passage from Luke we looked at yesterday – it was a mighty supernatural act of God. Mary conceives miraculously, confirming the divine ancestry of the Messiah. And this of course is true.

But there is also another, human answer to that question. Jesus is born because Joseph and Mary get married anyway, and Jesus has a human family to be born into. Jesus has an earthly father, too, who likewise receives a divine messenger and the revelation of the new baby's name (and what it means for the world).

*This is so often the way God works. The divine and the human weave together.* Very occasionally, God does something totally down to him. But most of the time, God works through *our* work, our faithfulness, our prayer. 'Pray as if everything depends on God: act as if everything depends on you.' That's not a bad maxim for the spiritual life – and here we see Joseph and Mary embody it perfectly.

Yes, Jesus is wonderfully and divinely conceived. But he is still born to human parents, with a real life in a real village. They make a real journey to Bethlehem, and have to agree on a very real (and hard) choice to wed anyway, despite the circumstances. And so – praise God! – we have a fully divine and fully human Saviour, born as the result of fully divine and fully human faithfulness.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.

It's also how most of the work of God in our own life and times comes about too. *We* co-operate with God's plans – we pray for them, obey them and see God work through our faithfulness.

*Where is God at work in you presently?* Pray today for wisdom, courage and resolve to co-operate fully with whatever God is up to. This is how God's marvellous work comes about.



**Day 9: 9<sup>th</sup> December – Matthew 1:22-25 ‘He did as commanded’**

It's always a lovely surprise when you hear about people with unexpected gifts. Friends you thought you knew suddenly appear in a different light, as they manifest some striking creative ability, or describe an unusual hobby. People never fail to surprise you!

I often feel the same way about Joseph, as he is described in the nativity story. In many respects Joseph comes across as a conventional character – honest, hardworking, keen to observe the law. A pillar of the community, you might say.

And yet, below the surface beats an equally remarkable heart as that of his more celebrated bride. It was no small thing to choose to live with the ongoing scent of scandal, the whispers in an insular village of being a cuckold – to stick by Mary, come what may, and fashion a stable family home.

And Joseph also had a hidden gift – he was unusually sensitive to the Holy Spirit. No less than four times he receives divine instruction through a dream – only his Old Testament namesake with the multi-coloured dreamcoat receives significant dreams as often as this Joseph (1:20, 2:13, 2:19, 2:22).

These dreams dramatically affect the course of his life, and those around him – he marries Mary, flees to Egypt with his young family, returns to Israel a few years later and then settles in Galilee. But what is often overlooked is the very simple observation that *Joseph acted upon these revelations*. He believed that God had spoken, and he obeyed. Each time he does exactly what has been revealed to him in the dream.

We may not receive such striking revelations – although I'm frequently surprised by how many 'ordinary' people tell me about significant dreams they have received at some point in their lives. But, whether we do or not, there is a simple two-fold lesson in the story of Joseph: *to trust in what God speaks, and to obey*. As the old children's bible song has it: 'Trust and obey, for there's no other way....'

Life is complicated, but in many ways faith is simple: trust God, and try to do what he wants you to do. As Joseph knew all too well, such childlike trust led him in very unexpected ways. The life of simple trust is never dull! But it is the path to intimacy with God. The more we trust, the more God speaks. The more God speaks, the more we trust.

Keep saying yes to God. And our loving God will keep drawing ever closer to you.

**Day 10: 10<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:39-45 ‘Blessed are you’**

Shared experience is a powerful thing. So much of what binds us together as humans lies in what we can share – in a sense, we were made for it. It is particularly powerful when people who have experienced similar challenges or opportunities find comfort and inspiration in each other.

In today’s passage we see such a meeting. Mary ‘hurries’ to see Elizabeth, and although they find themselves at opposite ends of their journey in life – one is very young, the other very old – they find themselves in the same unusual situation: that of an unexpected pregnancy, and the enormous life-changes that will bring.

One senses that this is the main reason for Mary to visit Elizabeth. Whilst it would be common for relatives – especially female relatives – to pay their respects upon hearing of a new pregnancy, Mary needs to go somewhere, *anywhere*, that she feels safe, where she can share all her deepest hopes and fears with someone who gets it, who understands.

And there is a good deal of healing in this encounter. Elizabeth already seems joyfully reconciled to her new reality, praising God as early as v25 of Luke’s narrative. However, Mary’s position is more ambiguous. When the angel first visits, she is ‘greatly troubled’ (v29). By the end of the encounter she shows remarkable faith and composure in receiving and believing the angel’s word (v38), but her emotions are veiled – at least not that Luke records. It is only in the company of this wise old mentor and friend that she is finally able truly to embrace her calling, and to burst out in a song of great joy – now known to us as the Magnificat, and the subject of tomorrow’s reading.

It is surely significant that Elizabeth’s first words to Mary are ‘Blessed are you...!’ It might have been the first time that Mary heard it put like that. The Messiah would bless the world, of course – but bless *her*? It probably didn’t feel like ‘blessing’ at that moment: the scandal, the disgrace, the fear for her own and her family’s safety. Elizabeth’s divinely inspired utterance enables her to see it in a new light – *God was blessing her, too*.

Perhaps we too have faced – or are facing – great challenges, and have wondered where God is in the midst of it. It is hard to cling on to faith and trust in those times. And we may never get a complete answer this side of heaven. But today’s story encourages us to dare to hope that, somehow, God is in what we face, and that he can bring good out of it.

May we too, like Mary, have courage to receive Elizabeth’s words, this acclamation of God’s healing presence with us in all things: ‘Blessed are you...’ And may the Lord grant us grace to trust again that he always fulfils his promises.

**Day 11: 11<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:46-55 ‘The great reversal’**

Blessed are the self-sufficient, for they will never need help from God, or anyone else. Blessed are those who have no problems, for they will avoid pain and discomfort. Blessed are the assertive, for they will usually get what they want. Blessed are those who don't want to be too good, for they will avoid moral dilemmas. Blessed are those who know their rights, for they will usually get what they want. Blessed are the cynical, for they know how life really works. Blessed are the competitive, for they will win out more often. Blessed are those who follow the crowd, for they will avoid unpopularity and blame.

Who is really blessed in this life? The list above – the ‘anti-beatitudes’ – might sound like a fairly blunt summary of modern culture: but to be honest it could have been written at most times in history. Life is full of winners and losers – and it's best, on the whole, to be one of the winners.

But what if God sees it differently? In today's famous passage, as Mary bursts into song, we see another dynamic at work. Maybe it's not the ‘winners’ who prevail after all. *God's intervention will reverse the natural order of things.* The humble are lifted up and the rulers are brought low (v52); the hungry are filled and the rich sent away empty (v53). God's mercy extends to those who fear him (v50), but the proud are scattered in their inmost thoughts (v51).

The kingdom of Christ is the great reversal – the world's values are turned upside down, ‘success’ is redefined, and the marginalised are suddenly at the heart of the story.

And God achieves this, as Mary recognises, not through a birth to a queen in a palace, but to an obscure young mother living in an unfashionable town. It starts how it intends to go on.

Thirty years later, someone else stood on the side of a hill and declared: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, the persecuted....’ Or to put it another way: *blessed are the losers in this world, for they are the winners in the kingdom of God.*

This is great news to all of us who have ever wished we were more than we are. Who've failed, or fell down, or felt low. Who wished we were louder, or richer, or funnier, or more popular, or more clever. God is for *you* – yes, you. This God is not interested in status or self-assurance. This God lifts up the humble, feeds the hungry and showers his mercy and love on all who know they haven't got it all together – as Brennan Manning beautifully put it: ‘weak, unsteady disciples, whose cheese is falling off their cracker.’ People like us.

Today, give thanks and claim afresh the love of this God – it's for people like us that Jesus came.

**Day 12: 12<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:56-66 ‘His name is John’**

I don't know about you, but it's not easy to name a child. It was a bit more straightforward with our first child Amelie, but for our second, we spent weeks batting around various names. We didn't know if it was going to be a boy or a girl, so we had to have at least one of each. All kinds of options were discussed: at one point for a girl we had 'Raymonda Ping' on the shortlist – well, the longlist.

In the end we settled on Isaac for a boy and Charis for a girl. One means 'laughter' and the other means 'grace'. That worked for us. And we got laughter.

We return today to Zechariah, who has been mute for 9 months after his debacle with the angel in day 5. And names come to the fore again. In this case, Zechariah and Elizabeth face strong encouragement to stick with tradition and name the new baby boy after his dad. But Elizabeth is having none of it: so they turn to Zechariah for his view.

And, with the help of a convenient tablet – not that kind of tablet – he writes four simple words, which in one moment restores both his voice and his relationship to God: 'His name is John.'

John – the child promised by the angel, the name given by God, the declaration that a new work of God was on its way. 'John' means 'God is gracious', which is spot on. Gracious to Elizabeth. Gracious to God's people. Gracious to a waiting world.

Gracious to us as well. *John comes to herald the arrival of God's grace in all its fullness.* A Messiah who sacrifices himself to win our forgiveness and freedom. To reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of his cross. To draw us back into the loving arms of Almighty God.

Grace. What Philip Yancey calls 'the last, best word of the English language': nothing we can do will make God love us more. Nothing we can do will make God love us less. The beating heart of our faith, and what inspires faith in our beating heart.

And it's all in a name.

His name is John. May his name's meaning be ours too.

'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.' Amen.

**Day 13: 13<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 1:67-80 'The great rescue'**

On this very day in 2018, the writer C.J. English published the bestselling book 'Rescue Matters'. It charts the astonishing story of Keith Benning, who, using his own garage to house those rescued and with just a small team of volunteers, over four years rescued 4,000 dogs from terrible situations: unwanted, starving, mistreated. As the subtitle summarises: 'An incredible true story of rescue and redemption.'

Today's passage looks forward to another incredible true story of rescue and redemption – only this time, *it's our own*. If Mary's song describes the Great Reversal, Zechariah's could be called The Great Rescue.

Rescue images are studded through the text of Zechariah's song, but the literal and metaphorical centre is v74, which uses the word directly. And it promises a rescue in three dimensions:

*From our enemies* – for the Israelites of the time, that would mean the Romans and other nations around them, but for us today we might cast the net wider towards everything that stops us from enjoying the relationship with God that we were designed to have. It could be summarised as sin and death – our ultimate enemies – but might be anything that has a poisonous effect on our spiritual lives. God's purpose is that we should be free, and the coming Messiah will rescue us from these enemies.

*From fear* – since time immemorial, humans have feared God. And there is something wise about that: God is God and we are not. But we were made for more than fear – we were made for *love*. God wants us to love him as he loves us – and, as St John says later, there is no fear in love.

*For righteousness* – it's not just what we're rescued from, it's what we're rescued *for*. The life we were made to have, living God's way. To be holy is to be set apart, called to something better. Like Keith Benning's dogs it's not enough just to save us from death, but *to lead us into life*, to a true home, to wellbeing and wholeness.

This is what the Messiah comes to do! It is a story of redemption (v68), salvation (v71), mercy (v72), faithfulness (v72-73), wisdom (v77), light and peace (v79).

*This is our story*. The new baby John would grow up to declare it. And, thanks be to God, we get to live it. The great rescue is a story that hasn't finished yet. Let's pray that, this Christmas, others may find the joy of knowing and receiving this Great Rescue.

**Day 14: 14<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 2:1-4 ‘Our plans, God’s plans’**

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, the UK entered a full national lockdown for the first time in 100 years. One immediate effect of this was that all church buildings were shut. No services of any sort could be held. A couple of days later, most church denominations went further still: to avoid the risk of ‘mixed messages’, ministers couldn’t even record acts of worship in their buildings. In the space of a week, physically-located worship ceased to exist.

What would happen to God’s Church? From the very beginning, our pattern of faith has been built around physical gatherings – the very word ‘church’ is derived from the Greek word meaning ‘assembly’. Understandably there was considerable fear – sobering statistics of church decline have been received wisdom for decades: notwithstanding the pandemic itself, the future looked bleak.

Yet in mid-April, a survey of UK residents indicated that 25% of the population had accessed an online act of Christian worship within the last month. Given that the equivalent face-to-face figure for average monthly in-person attendance is around 10%, this was astonishing news. Millions of people who would not have set foot inside the door of a Christian building were connecting online. As one lovely cartoon portrayed it, the devil and God were having a conversation: the devil was boasting that he’d managed to shut down every church – ‘yes, and I’ve just turned millions of homes into churches instead,’ God replies.

*Humans decide, God acts.* So often things that might seem to be problems only unleash a new work of God in different ways. It took the forced shutting of our buildings by the current government to unleash a mighty new wave of mission that has reached millions of people – and nine months later, still is. After all, you’re reading this on the church website right now!

God is not ‘apart’ from what happens on earth. He might give us freedom, but equally God is so great he is well able to use the calculated decisions of human leaders and authorities to achieve his purposes. In today’s reading, Caesar wants to raise money from taxing the populations he ruled – it is what powerful people have done since time immemorial. But in the midst of the process, God resolved a conundrum written into the biblical prophets for hundreds of years. How would the Messiah come from both Galilee and Bethlehem?

The answer – a census, at *just the right time in history* when fading Greek power nevertheless left the legacy of widespread use of the Greek language, allowing easy communication between people and therefore sharing of ideas/messages; when recently upgraded Roman infrastructure allowed the easy movement of people to spread a new message; and, crucially when a young descendent of King David had to travel from Galilee to Bethlehem with his young, heavily pregnant wife.

It doesn’t matter whether Caesar would have made the decision to tax anyway. The point is that God used it to birth something – *someone* – remarkable, that would change the world and the course of history.

God is good. God is also great. Let’s commit ourselves again today into the mighty and merciful hands of this amazing God. And let’s trust in his capacity to achieve his good purposes in all circumstances.

**Day 15: 15<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 2:5-7 ‘The time came...’**

And so we get to the crucial moment in the story – Jesus is born! Most of us know the story inside out... or at least we’re fairly sure we do.

Images of how the nativity happens are so full of our minds, *it’s almost impossible to imagine it any other way*. We’ve seen it so many times: Joseph and Mary travelling down to Bethlehem with Mary on a donkey (even though a donkey is never mentioned). Arriving late, with Mary’s contractions already starting. Joseph frantically dashing around trying to find an inn or guest house with a spare room. The last B&B in town offering them access to their stable just as Mary’s contractions get too severe to go any further.... a ‘modesty time gap’ fast forwards us a couple of hours to see Jesus in the wooden manger, with an exhausted but blissful Mary sat next to him, gazing lovingly at Jesus and then Joseph in turn...

And it’s possible that this is how it went. Unlikely, but possible! And it’s a much better story than the more likely one: that, given the length of journey, Joseph and Mary travelled down several weeks earlier and stayed with relatives in Bethlehem. That they shared the single living area with these relatives for the time they stayed there, only relocating into the other adjoining room – small Palestinian houses of that time had two rooms joined together: one for people, the other for animals – to offer some privacy for Mary when it was time for her to give birth. That the female relatives would therefore probably have been with Mary for the birth, rather than Joseph, who probably joined them shortly after Jesus was born, like most fathers of the time would have done. That the makeshift bedding arrangement of the animals feeding trough (manger) was likely made of stone, not planks of wood.

It’s much less romantic, isn’t it? A planned visit, a stay with relatives, decent midwifery, stone bedding furniture.

But it’s real.

And that’s the point. The nativity is not a fairy story, but a gritty, real-life drama. A real baby is born into a real family with a real home and real problems. In other words, *when God comes to earth, this is a real God for real people*. People like Joseph and Mary. People like you and me.

We like the fantasy version – it’s visually much more appealing, and allows us to put tea towels on our heads with impunity for a couple of weeks. But let’s never miss the real joy of this scene: a real baby is born – a real Messiah for real people. ‘And he is called Emmanuel’ – God *with* us. Amen.

## ***Advent Reflections, written in 2020***

*Accompanied by original artwork, posted in an online Advent Calendar:*

<https://calendar.myadvent.net/?id=6d0b36bd8e9c773fb4c3e46c1f4a0171>

### **Day 16: 16<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 2:8-12 ‘There were shepherds...’**

A young man sits round an open fire at night, warming his hands and dreaming of revolution. He needs to think to stay awake – his job means that he can't afford to fall asleep. By the standards of the time he's not particularly religious: can't afford to be, his work consumes all hours, and he's too much of a scruffbag to show his face on Saturday at the synagogue. His life is *here*, out in the open – just him, his friends and his animals.

But all the same, he dreams. The current lot that rule his small nation are much better than most of the previous ones, who were far more corrupt and far less competent. He's heard tales of the terrors inflicted by tyrants of old. But even so, they're not *his* people. And one day, his God, Yahweh – the one true God of the universe, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings – will ensure that they are free once more. He's read the prophets, he's heard the preachers. And still he dreams, of victory and freedom and prosperity. Of planting vines and sitting under them in summer.

His head starts to nod – he feels sleepy. He pinches himself: 'Not tonight, old son, not tonight...'

And then – LIGHT! Glorious, brilliant light. His mates are terrified – he pretends not to be, but really he is just as scared too. What is this? An angel?? You've got to be kidding....

Did someone just say good news? The Messiah is coming? After all these centuries? Never mind 30 years of hurt – how about 500? Really? Coming – now?

Oh yes. And what's more, you can see him. Just head into town – listen for the cries of a newborn bedded in with the animals. Just like you lot, really. Born to be a shepherd.

Imagine that. The divine shepherd visits us human shepherds, telling us to go and visit a newborn shepherd lying there with the animals. He really is one of us! Not just another posh tyrant, a normal lad, who lives like we do. Come on lads! Let's go and take a butcher's....

Good news: God comes as one of us. He meets those who are keeping watch, waiting for him. We don't always dream the right things – or perhaps we do, but in the wrong way or for the wrong reasons. But God is gracious. He comes anyway.

Keep watch. Good news is coming.



**Day 17: 17<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 2:13-14 ‘The heavenly host’**

We live in a spiritual world. Yes, it's material and physical as well – but we are also spiritual beings, able to connect with spiritual realities. We don't necessarily see those realities very often, but we remain attuned to it. Even in our secular culture, the continuing fascination with ghosts, horoscopes, superstitions and the like, while misguided, remind us that we are spiritual beings. We are made to make spiritual connections, one way or another.

Today's reflection is a counterpart to day 15. There we affirmed that a real God comes for real people. God enters our flesh-and-blood world, as a flesh-and-blood human. He laughs, he cries, he feels pain. It is earthy, grounded.

But let's beware making this amazing story all (or only) about this world. There is a spiritual reality to all this too. *Heaven is real*, and is populated by created spiritual beings – generally referred to as angels, though this broad term covers a number of words which might refer to different types of spiritual being.

The word angel itself means 'messenger' – their job is to do God's bidding, and, throughout history, Christian theology affirms that they *do* interact with our physical world. The nativity story is, of course, a key moment in this interaction, full of angelic activity – first Zechariah, then Mary, then Joseph, and now the shepherds.

What is the significance of all this? In essence, *heaven comes to earth*. The spiritual realm connects with our physical existence in new and deeper ways. It's not just Jesus – it's the whole machinery of heaven. Here the heavenly host appear in the sky – the shepherds were uniquely blessed to see them, and we can only imagine what that sight must have been like.

We are sometimes tempted to imagine that heaven is kind of empty, until humans are reconciled to God and able to fill it. But this passage reminds us that heaven is pretty full already! Angels abound, praising God eternally. And the amazing truth is that *we get invited into that*. One day, we'll join the fantastic heavenly party.

But it's not just 'for later', it starts well before that: whenever we worship God here, we are joining in with the eternal song of heaven, joining heaven with earth in our praises. And one day, we will get to do that forever. Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth!

**Day 18: 18<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 2:15-18 ‘They hurried off...’**

On Wednesday I almost lost our car. I arrived for a school event at All Saints and parked up as the children were rounding the corner on the redway about a minute’s walk from the church. Although I was mostly set up already, I had about two minutes of final preparations to do. I grabbed my kit from the boot, waved to the class, asked the teacher to hold them at the gate for two minutes, and hurried into the church. As it happened, I left the car key in the boot lock, on show for all to see.

A couple of hours later, as I was finishing another meeting after the school had gone, a very kind local family popped into church asking if anyone had left their key in the boot-lock of a blue car. That was, of course, me. Thanking them profusely I retrieved the key, grateful that we lived in a safe and neighbourly area!

When events overtake us, and we have to act quickly, it’s easy to do things like that. For the shepherds in our story, the golden rule was: ‘Never leave your sheep.’ Sheep were precious, and vulnerable to rustlers and predators alike. And yet here we find them doing just that: hurrying away from the fields and into town. Risking their livelihoods, and their reputation.

For good reason, it turns out. *They were on their way to visit the king!* And they, of all people, had been chosen to do just that. To be first on the scene. To represent humanity offering its worship and praise to the child in the manger. God had come down, and they had the ringside seats.

I imagine, in that moment, their business was the last thing on their minds. When God meets with us, *we crave more of his presence*. Something keeps drawing us back. We want to meet Jesus again, and again.

The shepherds are a great part of the story. They are people like us, and do things like we do. At least they had a heavenly host as their excuse, rather than thirty 5 and 6 year-olds. But their hearts had been ‘strangely warmed’ – they were filled with the excitement of God’s intervention in their lives. They got to meet Jesus – ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary story.

That is our privilege too. God is still meeting ordinary people. Often in unexpected ways. Always to draw us into his presence, and towards worship, hope and peace. May God meet with *us* this Advent, as he did the shepherds. And may it too cause us to ‘hurry’ once more to meet Jesus, and worship the new-born king.

***Advent Reflections, written in 2020***

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<https://calendar.myadvent.net/?id=6d0b36bd8e9c773fb4c3e46c1f4a0171>

**Day 19: 19<sup>th</sup> December – Luke 2:19-20 ‘Mary treasured all these things...’**

Today’s beautiful image really needs no words from me – as a visual representation of Mary’s thoughtful godliness it captures the moment perfectly.

So lest I detract from the power of the image, just a very short reflection from me today. I have always been struck by v19, and Mary’s capacity to *treasure* what she sees and knows. It is a great gift, and one we have largely lost as a society. Everything is instant, and we move from one experience or morsel of useful info to the next.

It was the old philosopher Plato who said that: ‘The unreflected life is the unlived life.’ We all need to treasure more. I certainly do. To allow ourselves time to dwell on beautiful truths; to root ourselves in things that are solid and permanent; to drink deep of profound experiences.

Mary was perhaps privileged to share more than most. But her simple lesson lives on, and is pure gold. Here’s to treasuring.

What could you ‘treasure’ today?



**Day 20: 20<sup>th</sup> December – Matthew 2:1-2 ‘Magi came....’**

‘We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar...’

The image of the Wise Men or Kings is so iconic that it’s etched into most of our minds. Three elegant travellers, dressed in fine richly-coloured robes, perched on majestic camels, striding across the desert, with a large train of servants. There’s usually the star up above (more on that tomorrow), and a few romantically undulating desert hills in the background.

It’s a wonderful image, with more than a whiff of blarney about it. For a start, they weren’t kings. The word used to describe them is Magus (plural Magi): these were originally Persian priests or even sorcerers – it’s where we get the word ‘magician’ from. More broadly you could translate it as ‘scholar’. So, probably wealthy, certainly clever – but not kings.

There may well have been more than three of them too – we only assume there were three because they gave three gifts. But allowing for ‘group offerings’ there could have been any number... there might even have been just two, one of whom was particularly generous!

And they probably avoided the desert. Rather than go direct across the Arabian sands from Iran or Iraq to Israel (and almost certainly die in the attempt), they would have gone north-west round the so-called Fertile Crescent – adding a good 200 miles to their journey, but saving their lives in the process.

The image of a dozen magicians travelling through scrubland isn’t quite as magical (pardon the pun) as the alternative, I’ll give you that. But there is something much more important going on here. The extraordinary thing about the nativity story is that the key witnesses are (in the case of the shepherds) ceremonially unclean, and (in the case of the Magi) not even Jewish! It’s like a play which at first sight appears to have all the wrong people cast in it.

But that’s the point. *When God comes to earth, he comes for everyone.* Smelly shepherds, exotic magicians, teenage mothers, furniture makers – everybody. The great and the good, as well as the lost, the last and the least. Every nation, every age, every culture. The good news of Jesus is truly universal – the Messiah is a Saviour for *all of us*.

That’s why the Magi matter. As we travel with them for a few days, let’s be astonished once more by the extraordinary length, breadth and depth of the love of God. A love which reaches to you too – right here, today.

**Day 21: 21<sup>st</sup> December – Matthew 2:1-2 (ii) ‘We saw his star’**

We didn’t plan this but it’s amazing that we come to the famous star which the Magi saw *on this very day*; because tonight the two largest planets in the solar system, Jupiter and Saturn, will be so close to one another in the sky that they will appear to be fused into a single point of light.

Although the trajectories of these planets come close to one another every twenty years or so, to be aligned within a tenth of a degree is something that hasn’t been seen for at least 400 years, and probably longer. Although it may possibly have been visible in 1623, the last time this event is believed to have actually been witnessed by human observers was in the year 1226, on a certain day before dawn, which afforded about ninety minutes to see it before the sun rose.

Even more remarkably, there also has been speculation among scholars that *the conjunction of these planets formed the very Star of Bethlehem* quoted in today’s reading that inspired the Magi on their journey. A possible date can be calculated which falls close to the year of Jesus’ birth.

We can’t say for sure – and sadly the typically British forecast for tonight is for mostly cloud, so we’re unlikely to get a glimpse. But even so, isn’t it amazing that we might be privileged to witness an astrological phenomenon which connects us directly to the story of Jesus’ birth!

We’ll never know this side of heaven; but what we do know is that this phenomenon – whatever it was – so profoundly moved our intrepid travellers that they were willing to stake their time and reputations on following it. And this despite it relating to a ‘foreign’ religion in a faraway country.

I sometimes hear people bemoan the diversity of belief in Britain today. I wonder if rather we should celebrate the fact that many more people around us are spiritual searchers, hungry to connect with eternity. They may sometimes look for it in unusual places, to say the least. But, like the Magi, our response is surely to point all seekers towards the real Way, Truth and Life.

God honoured the spiritual hunger of Persian astrologers, and marvellously brought them into his story. And so should we. Perhaps you consider yourself a seeker in a similar way. Or perhaps you are confident in your beliefs. Either way, God loves those who seek after him. He longs for all of us to become part of his story. Wise men and wise women still follow the star towards Jesus.

**Day 22: 22<sup>nd</sup> December – Matthew 2:3-8 ‘Greatly disturbed’**

In February each year, the charity Open Doors publishes its World Watch List. This constitutes the 50 countries where it is most dangerous to be a Christian – places where it is not just frowned upon but actually illegal to convert or own a bible, and where persecution is commonplace. Sadly, the list could be longer than 50, and the levels of danger experienced by Christians has risen sharply in many places over the last 20 years.

Whilst many of these countries will point to a clash of religious cultures as the root of this issue, in other places it is much more overtly political. No matter that most Christians are peace-loving, servant-hearted, and in many other respects model citizens: hardworking, clean living, law-abiding. Power corrupts, and there are many ‘powers’ across the world who hate the idea that any of their citizens might ultimately worship a different boss. Or indeed that they might themselves be answerable to a Higher Power.

This insecurity in the face of the Lordship of Christ is nothing new. It started right from his birth. As the Magi enter the court of puppet King Herod, propped up by the Romans and every bit as venal and ruthless as popular history makes him out to be, news of a new king, a true king, is not welcome.

Herod has already executed several members of his own family, including his wife Mariamne, in the paranoid belief that this will help him cling on to power. To have foreign travellers journeying hundreds of miles to worship someone else right on his doorstep is frankly horrifying, and yet another threat to his rule.

We love to read the prophecies of the coming Messiah, one of which is quoted in today’s reading. They stir the heart and fire the imagination. But Herod’s response sets another, more sobering context for these prophecies. They never come in a vacuum. A new source of authority threatens the old order, however radically different this new authority might be.

Today let’s pray for just and godly leadership around the world – we need it as much as ever. And let’s also give thanks for the freedoms we still enjoy, whilst praying blessing and protection for our brothers and sisters around the world who face similar dangers to those faced by the Magi and the Holy Family. May the joy of the Lord be our – and their – strength today.



**Day 23: 23<sup>rd</sup> December – Matthew 2:9-12 ‘They opened their treasures’**

Our best wedding present was in many ways the most unlikely. Like most couples we’d received a lot of wonderful gifts to start a new home. Shortly after we’d arrived back from honeymoon we received one final gift, which came in an unmarked brown cardboard box, wrapped up with brown parcel tape. For those of you who like bows, tags and hospital corners on your wrapped edges, this would have given you palpitations. What on earth was it?

However, when we opened it (with some difficulty), we discovered inside a beautiful crystal lamp – like a larva lamp only much prettier – and an amazing poem written specially for us and our wedding. It was a unique gift: in fact, two unique gifts, both of which were among the best we’d ever received, and from the same dear friend.

The theme of unusual but well-chosen gifts sits at the heart of our reading for today. I guess if you’re going to trek 600 miles across the world, you’d better bring *something* with you. And as the Magi finally get to meet the new king they’d come so far to see, and after they had knelt in his presence in worship, it was time to crack open the chest and offer the (now obligatory) baby shower presents.

Much is made of the meaning of the presents and their prophetic significance: gold for a king, frankincense for an offering to God, myrrh foreshadowing what Jesus came to do i.e. his sacrificial death. And that’s all true – we can interpret the outline of Jesus’ life and ministry purely from those extraordinary treasures. But today, let’s observe very simply that these were unexpected gifts. After all, there was no reason to assume that this unknown king needed any more gold; frankincense was for priests, not kings; and myrrh was the equivalent of bringing a food-poisoning testing kit to a dinner party.

*But God used those unexpected gifts, and did something wonderful with them.* And not just as a prophetic sign: the gold probably kept the family alive as they fled into exile. Frankincense might have helped sustain their home prayer life as they left behind the familiar festivals and rituals of their home country. And myrrh could remind them of their unusual visitors and the greater sense that God was up to something special.

This Christmas many of us will share fewer gifts than usual. That is rightly a cause of sadness and regret. But let’s take heart from today’s story and pray instead that we would give and receive unexpected gifts. Anything offered to Jesus can be used for his glory. What treasures might you open as you worship the newborn king?

**Day 24: 'The Light shines in the darkness'**

'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.'

We live in dark and anxious times. Fears for our health, for our loved ones, for our prosperity, for our mental wellbeing are all prevalent in our hearts and minds this Christmas. We are not alone in this – such fears are widespread across our world – but they are none the less real for that.

**We need the light.**

But what use is a light, we say – what about a vaccine, or a trade deal, or just a Christmas meal with our loved ones? Isn't that what we really need? Is not this talk of light just a distraction?

These are fair questions to ask, but I think they miss something: our world runs according to deeper truths, deeper realities. Truths which outlast the crises of our, or any, passing age. The light shone long before us, and will shine long after we are gone.

And we need light for what it brings to us. **We need light for its perspective**. When the light shines, we see things as they really are. We see God coming to earth, bringing salvation, bringing hope and healing, bringing love, authority and wisdom. We see the dawn of redeeming grace – God's great rescue plan put into operation.

*May God grant us grace to see life again as it really is, infused with the light of God's coming into the world.*

**We need the light for the warmth that it brings**. In ancient societies all forms of light generated measurable heat. And the light of Christmas is not just something to stand and admire, or to gaze upon. When Jesus comes, he promises his very presence, here in our hearts. 'Behold I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' The light of the world brings us warmth: intimacy with God, the chance to discover unexpected peace in our hearts, and praise on our lips.

*May God grant us grace to welcome the light of his presence in our hearts, and be warmed by his love and peace.*

**We need the light to be guided on right paths**. So much of what happens we can't control at the moment. There are forces at play – be they viral or political – which seem overwhelming. But if we can't change the world, we can change the world *in us*. We can still be bringers of light to others, we can still share grace and peace with those around us, we can choose the quietly radical path of peace-making and joy-bringing in the small places where we do have an influence.

*May God grant us grace to be guided by light to be bringers of light to others.*

We may still wish things were different. And that's normal and natural. I do, too. But can I encourage us all to look in two directions this season. Firstly **to look down**, into the face of God lying in that manger, and see that hope still lives on in the world. And then **to look up**, towards the light – the light which shines in the darkness, *and still shines* – and the darkness does not overcome it.

And may God's light shine in our hearts, our homes, our families, our nation, and our world this Christmas. Amen.