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**Advent Reflections
2020**

Introduction

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation, as the Church prepares to celebrate the coming (*adventus*) of Christ in his incarnation, and also looks ahead to his final advent as judge at the end of time. During this season we are not only directed towards Christ's birth, but also challenged to confront the theme of divine judgement:

*Every eye shall now behold him
robed in dreadful majesty.
(Charles Wesley)*

The Four Last Things – Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – have been traditional themes for Advent meditation. The characteristic note of Advent is therefore expectation, rather than penitence. The anticipation of Christmas under commercial pressure has made it harder to sustain the appropriate sense of alert watchfulness, but the fundamental Advent prayer remains 'Maranatha' – 'Our Lord, come' (1 Corinthians 16.22).

Church decorations are simple and spare, and purple is the traditional liturgical colour. In the northern hemisphere, the Advent season falls at the darkest time of the year, and the natural symbols of darkness and light are powerfully at work throughout Advent and Christmas. The lighting of candles on an Advent wreath was imported into Britain from northern Europe in the nineteenth century, and is now a common practice.

THE BIDDING PRAYER AND INTRODUCTION

It is time for us to wake out of sleep, for deliverance is nearer to us now than it was when first we believed. It is far on in the night; day is near. Let us therefore cast off the deeds of darkness and put on our armour as soldiers of the light.

The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you
and also with you.

My brothers and sisters, we celebrate at this time the solemn season of Advent in which the Church bids us prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ; a coming that we recall in the Child of Bethlehem; a coming that we experience in the gift of his Spirit, in the bread of the Eucharist, in the joy of human lives that are shared; a coming we wait for when God gathers up all things in Christ. Let us in this holy season reflect on the coming of Christ who brings light to the world. Let us leave behind the darkness of sin, walk in the light that shines on our path, and renew within ourselves the hope of glory to which he beckons us. And as we turn towards the light, let us have on our hearts all those who see no light, for whom all is darkness and despair. Let us pray that they too may be illumined by Christ who is our light.

OPENING REFLECTION

Advent is traditionally a season of waiting. It is perhaps worth taking a moment to think about waiting just a little more carefully. I wonder how you feel about waiting. Do you consider yourself to be a patient person, or not? Perhaps it depends on the kind of waiting. Consider the following:

- Waiting for someone to arrive when you've agreed a meeting time
- Waiting for an event you are looking forward to
- Waiting for someone to call
- Waiting for medical test results
- Waiting for a bus or train
- Waiting until you have saved enough money to buy something that you want

I expect that you can think of all kinds of other suggestions. What we all know is that there are different kinds of waiting. You might be better at some than at others.

During Advent, we are waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It is a season of hopeful expectation. It is more like waiting for something you are looking forward to, than something you are dreading. As a result, the season is infused with hope. It is our intention that these reflections will be a support and encouragement in finding hope through this Advent season.

COLLECT OF ADVENT SUNDAY

Almighty God,
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and to put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility;
that on the last day,
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge the
living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

ADVENT 1 – THE PATRIARCHS

Heavenly Father,
you have created a universe of light:
forgive us when we return to darkness.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus,
you are the light of the world:
cleanse and heal our blinded sight.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit,
you give us light in our hearts:
renew us in faith and love.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

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

READING – GENESIS 18:1-15

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.'

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare

it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

REFLECTION 1

I have a bit of a love/hate relationship with the Hebrew Bible – or the Old Testament, as we tend to call it. If you have tried – and perhaps even succeeded – to read it from beginning to end, one thing you will know is that it is anything but a single book. It is in fact more like a library of books, within which there are different kinds of writing, including history, prophecy, hymn and apocalyptic.

Many of us who attempt to read the Bible from cover to cover get little further than the book of Genesis. Although it is long, it tells a great story, including the story of Abraham and Sarah – or Abram and Sarai as they were known until God changed

their names. If you want to read the story yourself, you'll find it between chapters 12 and 26 of the book of Genesis. It is a story that bears reading and re-reading because it tells us something about God and about humanity.

In my journey of faith, there are a number of traps that I can find myself falling into. In the story of Abraham and Sarah I find reminders of how those traps might be avoided. Let me try to explain.

Perfectionism

I sometimes find myself wanting to read stories of individuals who appear to have led blameless lives. Perhaps this is because I am looking for something to aspire to. Something that shows me the way to perfection. I should know better. While there is that wonderful line in Matthew's gospel – "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" – I don't think we are under any illusions but that, as human beings, we will always make mistakes. It's not something that should stop us trying, but I increasingly find myself wanting to read about people who make mistakes and yet keep returning to God. It is more true to life, and therefore more inspiring and encouraging than a perfection that we cannot attain.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is one of real, flawed people. They are both faithful – extraordinarily so, giving up everything to follow a calling. Yet we see their humanity, too, for example in Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Abraham's sometimes strange behaviour towards Sarah.

When Abraham and Sarah are told that they will have a son, Sarah laughs – and then denies it. I wonder what was behind

that laugh. Disbelief, no doubt. Abraham and Sarah had been married for many years and longed for children, yet it had not happened. And Sarah had borne the shame of being labelled barren, not to mention seeing her servant bear a child for her husband. I wonder if there was a sneer in her laughter; or anguish. And I wonder why she denied that she had laughed. Embarrassment? A desire not to be noticed; not to be the subject of conversation?

Abraham and Sarah are human. And they are faithful. That gives me the hope that I can be both of those things, too.

God's timing

I'm not sure whether those who wrote Genesis counted years in quite the same way that we do. Abraham's father Terah apparently reached the grand age of 205, and Abraham himself was 75 when he received his call from God, and 99 when Sarah conceived. Whether or not the precise numbers are to be trusted, we do know that Abraham and Sarah had been married for a long time before leaving Haran, in response to God's call.

I find great comfort and reassurance in the story of Abraham's call because it reminds me that I don't have to achieve everything now. That our lives rarely work out to the plan we have envisaged. Yet somehow those times that we may have considered to be wrong turnings, diversions, false starts and failures are somehow part of the bigger picture. And that no matter where we are in our life, it is never too late to stop and listen. To turn once again to God and ask where we might be called now.

God's story

There is no doubt that Abraham has his place in history. We talk about the Abrahamic religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, Abraham recognised what we can find it so hard to understand. That none of our lives should be about our own heroism because we are all part of God's story. Asked at 75 to leave his home to go God-only-knew-where, Abraham did not hesitate. He followed. He didn't argue with God about the plans he had or the way he had thought his life would turn out. He knew that we are all children of God and we are all called to follow.

It can be so easy to measure our success or failure in terms of our own status and notoriety; the way others see us. I wonder what people would have said about Abraham as he packed up and left Haran with no destination in mind. It's hard to imagine that they would have labelled him a success or sought to do the same. Yet it didn't matter to him, because he knew he was doing what he had been called to do.

We may well struggle to be as certain as Abraham seemed that we have heard God's call. What we can be sure about is that it's always worth taking time to listen and seek to understand our vocation. And that just because the path we are taking does not lead to fame and fortune does not mean that we are not being faithful followers of the Way.

REFLECTION 2

The one thing we may remember about this passage is that Sarah laughs. Laughter seems totally incongruous in relation to

the serious business at hand. Here is Abraham being visited by God and two heavenly beings and told that he is to occupy a central place in God's plan for his people. What amounts to a miracle will take place in the form of the birth of a child in impossible circumstances, and all Sarah his wife can do is laugh. Even the outcome of this seemingly impossible event is named Isaac, which means "he laughs."

But perhaps laughter is not so far removed from hope, and hope is the central theme of the season of Advent: hope that the coming of the promised Christ will bring light into a dark world; hope that his coming will mean a new relationship between people and between God and his people; hope that love will triumph over evil in spite of appearances to the contrary.

Sarah laughs but God is not angry. God seems to accept that to laugh in the face of such a momentous and seemingly impossible happening is a perfectly normal human reaction. Whilst we may not feel that laughter is an appropriate reaction to misfortune, there are times when laughter helps us to relieve anxiety and worry, fear and despair. If we can laugh at the seemingly impossible, at what we know we cannot do, we may discover in our best moments that God can.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story of the mystery of God's presence. Abraham clearly has no idea who the three men are who visit his home. Yet his reaction is one of warm welcome generous hospitality. God is revealed to him in the person of an unknown visitor. Jesus himself tells us that God is revealed to us in all kinds of unexpected ways. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed

me.....I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food.....and when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or sick and visited you?” And the King will answer them: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of one of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The story is also about the fulfilment of God’s promises. What may seem to us impossible is not impossible to God. This is where faith comes in: faith that God will do what he has promised; faith that our lives are in his hands and that he will guide, strengthen and support us even when we feel that the future is bleak and uncertain and cannot see a way forward. God makes the promised future possible. God is the source of our hope when the way into the future seems so uncertain. God gives shape to possibilities when all around us seems impossible. The active engagement of God in the midst of the problems of daily life opens up new possibilities and gives us hope.

PRAYER

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, God of our ancestors:
to you be praise and glory for ever.
You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith
and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment.
May we be obedient to your call
and be ready and watchful to receive your Christ,
a lamp to our feet and a light to our path;
for you are our light and our salvation.
Blessed be God for ever.

ADVENT 2 – THE PROPHETS

Heavenly Father,
you call us to repent of our sins:
soften our proud and stubborn hearts.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus,
you declared the forgiveness of God:
teach us to forgive one another.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit,
you search our hearts and show us the truth:
direct us in your way of righteousness.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

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

READING – ISAIAH 6:1-8

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

‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

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

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

REFLECTION 1

I wonder whether you have favourite prophets from the Bible. At Christmas time we hear quite a lot from Isaiah because connections have been made between words in the book of Isaiah and the birth of Jesus. A more depressing read is Jeremiah. There is little doubt that he didn’t think people were behaving in the ways that they should – and he had no problem in telling them so. I have a soft spot for Elijah, who found God

in silence, not to mention Elisha who became his disciple. I love both the story of Elijah throwing his mantle on Elisha, and his preparedness to see Elijah taken from him in order to receive a double share of his spirit.

There are other wonderful stories of prophets, like Micaiah, thorn in the side of the then King of Israel, because he was apparently the only prophet who refused to say what the King wanted to hear. And of course he proved to prophesy correctly. Not to mention Nathan, who was not afraid to highlight the wrong done by David through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba.

It is through the prophets that we often hear God's words, and those are not always easy to hear. We know that not all who claimed to be prophets really were – there is plenty of evidence of false prophets. And so, while the scriptures give us clarity about who is speaking God's word and who isn't, we can also recognise that it would not have been so easy for those encountering prophets to know which were true and which were false. Just as in our own time we are called to listen carefully to hear the prophetic voices.

I wonder which those voices might be today.

In Christian circles, we often speak about being counter-cultural. About being willing to challenge those forces in the world which appear to have dominance. That may cause us to ask questions of those who lead us as well as being prepared to stand up for values that may not make us popular or indeed successful in worldly terms. Yet part of the challenge is that we aren't simply called to oppose and criticise, though both may sometimes be necessary. We are called to listen carefully and

understand where God is working in the world. To hear those voices which really are prophetic; which really do stand up for Kingdom values. A good starting point is to keep in the forefront of our minds the words and actions of Jesus. He tells us to love God and to love our neighbour as ourself. Wherever we see love in the world, it is likely that God is involved. And Jesus also spent a disproportionate amount of his time with the poorest in society. With those on the margins. So any voices calling us to those places are likely to be authentic prophets.

There is little doubt that the lives of most prophets are not easy. It is a role of constant challenge. Of speaking up when others dare not. We may or may not be prophets ourselves. But their voices are essential in calling us to the places we need to be. Throughout the world we see glimpses of where God is at work. It is the prophets who are well placed to remind us to keep looking, and to keep joining in with the work that God is already doing.

REFLECTION 2

The vision of Isaiah comes to him “In the year that King Uzziah died.” The death of Uzziah is significant, because according to the book of Chronicles, Uzziah was a good and righteous king who ruled over Judah during a very long and prosperous period. His death would raise important questions: What direction would the nation take? Would Uzziah’s son, Jotham, continue his good work both religiously and politically. What if he did not?

This is the background to Isaiah’s vision of a king who was none other than God. A time was coming when earthly kings and

their subjects would be ruled over by God. As Isaiah says: “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne” and hears those familiar words “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.” The awesome task of announcing this news falls on the shoulders of Isaiah. He has no hesitation in answering the Lord’s question: “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” - “Here am I, send me.” But it’s not that easy. Isaiah feels totally unworthy of such a task: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

Such sentiments will be familiar to all who feel called to serve God and their fellow human beings: a reaction which begins with astonishment and a declaration of unworthiness, but ends with submission and a resolve to be true to one’s calling. But first there must be a recognition and acceptance of one’s unworthiness. Isaiah knows that if he is to be worthy of the task God is giving him, he must acknowledge his guilt and past failures. Only then can he receive forgiveness and a release from the burdens he carries around. Only then can he undertake the task God is giving him.

So this is the beginning of Isaiah’s story - a vision of God which leads to the wonderful passage in Isaiah chapter 9, and the announcement of the birth of the Messianic King - “For unto us child is born, to us a son is given.....his name will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” What we do not know is when this will happen. What we do know is that the arrival of this King will usher in a time of hope, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. This is Isaiah’s commission: to prepare God’s people for the coming of a King who would transform people’s lives and the world in which they lived. The vision has turned into a promise,

and the promise would bring hope into a dark and forbidding world, a world which seemed to have lost all hope that things could ever change.

PRAYER

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true:
to you be praise and glory for ever.
Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets,
but in our days you speak through your Son,
whom you have appointed the heir of all things.
Grant us, your people, to walk in his light,
that we may be found ready and watching
when he comes again in glory and judgement;
for you are our light and our salvation.

ADVENT 3 – JOHN THE BAPTIST

Heavenly Father,
you call us to prepare for the coming of your Son:
forgive us our unreadiness to receive him.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus,
you were proclaimed by John the Baptist:
help us also to prepare your way.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit,
you speak through the prophets:

make us attentive to hear your word.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

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

Amen.

READING – JOHN 1:6-9, 19-28

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

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" ', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

REFLECTION 1

I wonder what image you have of John the Baptist. The image we are given is quite specific. John wore camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. Even two thousand years ago I rather think that will have made him quite an unusual chap. Indeed, if you have ever felt like you don't fit in, I expect you might have some time for John the Baptist, because I don't think he was one of life's conformists.

There is so much that makes John the Baptist stand out – beyond his unusual dress and eating habits. Not to mention so much that can guide us and give us hope.

Humility

Humility is generally something best not talked about. It's really an oxymoron to list humility as one of your gifts, yet in the Christian life, we find ourselves called again and again to humility.

There is something about John the Baptist's life that can really help us here. John was a leader and follower at the same time.

Before Jesus came on the scene, he had gathered people around him and was going around baptising and calling for repentance. He played a significant role and was well known. Yet he knew that he was there to point people towards Jesus.

There is no sense in John that he resented his role, that he would have preferred to be the Messiah. Although people asked him, it simply didn't seem to be a question for him. Yet he was firm in what he said. He had no qualms about addressing people as a "brood of vipers". He was firm and determined; full of zeal. It's just that he pointed beyond himself.

I love the way Matthew's gospel tells the story of Jesus's baptism, because it is here that we hear John the Baptist suggesting that he is not worthy to baptise Jesus. It is here that we understand a little more about humility. Not in John's questioning, but rather in his willingness to go ahead and do as Jesus asks. John knew that the story wasn't about him. He was aware that his role was one of preparation. And yet when Jesus approached for baptism, he fulfilled the task, knowing that his own sense of unworthiness was less important than Jesus's blessing.

Calling

I expect that many of us would like to have such a clear sense of calling as John the Baptist. He is clear from the outset that he is preparing the way. That he baptises with water, and Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit. In many ways, it makes John a better role model for us as Christians than Jesus. After all, we are none of us called to save the world – that has been done already. But we are called to point towards the one who does.

And yet if John ever seems too certain, we can also take comfort in a short section of Luke's gospel. John the Baptist is in prison, and his followers are reporting to him what is happening, yet he appears unsure and asks them to ask Jesus whether he's the person they've been waiting for, or whether they need to wait for another.

Jesus's response is to ask John's disciples to report to him what they have seen: people being cured of their illnesses. It's a pretty clear answer. And John's moment of doubt is a reminder to us that we, too, can have our doubts and ask our questions without it meaning that we have somehow failed. Doubts and questions are a healthy part of our faith. And we listen carefully to the response, drawing closer to Jesus as seek to understand more of God's purposes.

REFLECTION 2

What is surprising about John's Gospel and its description of John the Baptist is just how little it tells us about John. The other Gospels tell us much more: they describe the circumstances of John's birth to an old priest and his wife who is related to Mary, Jesus' mother. They tell us how he got into trouble with Herod and ended up losing his life.

John's Gospel is not so much about who John is, but who he is not. John was not the light; he is not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet. He is unworthy to untie the sandal of the one coming after him. While he baptises with water, the one coming after him will baptise with the Holy Spirit. In denying that he was any of those things John is pointing people towards

Jesus. John was called not to witness to himself and his own abilities and significance but to Jesus. To be a follower of Jesus means denial of self.

In spite of this, some regarded John as a far more significant figure than Jesus. The Book of Acts tells of Paul's discovery of a group of disciples in Ephesus who were baptised not in Jesus' name, but "into John's baptism." Understanding that John's ministry is only a preliminary to the main story suggests that what brings promise and what does not are not always obvious. John is a witness to what is to come. But what is John testifying to?

John himself has been described in human terms - a baptiser, prophet, even Elijah. Not so with Jesus. Throughout the Gospel Jesus is identified by metaphors - "living water", "light of the world", "bread from heaven", "the true vine." What Jesus is and what he means cannot be captured in ordinary language. This is not true of John, for whom ordinary language is sufficient. We are told that John has been sent by God and that he came as a witness to testify to the light. Jesus is the true light which enlightens everyone. And light is what we cannot do without. Not only does it show us where we are and where we are going; it enables us to see things as they are. Where there is light nothing is hidden.

To describe Jesus as the "light of the world" and the "true light is to point us in the direction of something beyond our imagination and our greatest hopes. It points us to the presence of the divine in our world: a presence which is known and experienced wherever love and goodness and peace beyond our understanding are seen to be at work in the lives of ordinary people.

PRAYER

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true:
to you be praise and glory for ever.
Your prophet John the Baptist was witness to the truth
as a burning and shining light.
May we your servants rejoice in his light,
and so be led to witness to him
who is the Lord of our coming kingdom,
Jesus our Saviour and King of the ages.
Blessed be God for ever.

ADVENT 4 – MARY

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

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

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

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

READING – 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 1

How often do you find yourself wishing that the gospels told us just a little bit more? We often remind ourselves that the gospels are not biographies. They do not tell the story of Jesus’s life. Rather, the meaning of the word “gospel” is good news. And that is exactly what they do. They tell the good news of Jesus.

And yet in doing so it can feel like there are so many gaps. Mary’s life is one such gap. It is Luke who gives her the most starring role, describing her response to an appearance from the Angel Gabriel, and describing her visit to Elizabeth, her cousin and the mother of John the Baptist. It is Luke, too, who narrates the presentation of Jesus at the Temple, and Simeon’s prophetic words to Mary, that a sword would pierce her own soul, too.

Yet for all the gospel writers, Mary’s role throughout is largely peripheral. There is a reference to Jesus’s brothers, suggesting that Mary and Joseph bore children, but we hear nothing of this. Just like John the Baptist, Mary had a role in relation to Jesus, and all we hear of her life is those parts that relate directly to that role.

I wonder, though, does that mean that what we don’t hear about is irrelevant? Can Mary’s life be reduced to giving birth to Jesus, and being there at his death?

That surely cannot be the case. It is after Christmas that I often find myself wondering about Jesus's childhood. The gospels have so little information. Luke is the only one who gives us even a glimpse, describing the twelve year old Jesus in the Temple, unaware that his parents have left without him.

We are taught that Jesus is both human and divine, and if that is so, his childhood will undoubtedly have been formative. We may hear nothing about it, but we know that God chose Mary as his mother, however unlikely that choice might have appeared. He grew up in a home with Mary, Joseph and some siblings, and that upbringing helped to form him into the figure we follow.

It's impossible for us, over 2000 years later, and in a very different part of the world, to really have a sense of what Jesus's childhood was like. Of Mary's role in his life. The way she brought up her children. The relationships within the family. The combination of discipline and nurture. The values that were espoused in their household. The frustrations and petty squabbles as well as the significant conversations. Yet it is hard to imagine that they did not happen.

Whatever our circumstances in life, whether we are single or partnered; whether or not we have children; whatever our working life looks like, we can find ourselves wondering whether something else would have made us more complete. There is something about what we see of Mary that can remind us of the ways in which our lives interact, so that completeness is never only about ourselves, but is rather about the entire Body of Christ: God and all God's people.

REFLECTION 2

We are all familiar with the words that are often used in our worship: “The Lord be with you.” Not so familiar are the words spoken by the angel Gabriel to Mary telling her that she will be the mother of Jesus: “The Lord is with you.” The words familiar to us suggest that if we are to experience the presence of God in our lives then we need to do something to make it happen. It sounds almost conditional: it will happen if..... Not so with Mary. Gabriel’s words make it clear that in spite of how Mary might react or what she might do, God is with Mary. There is no doubt about it. And because the Lord is with Mary extraordinary things will happen.

But they will only happen because the Lord is with her. Mary is the favoured one. She has been chosen. Her response reminds us of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Here am I, send me.” Mary is much more specific: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word.” However, also like Isaiah, Mary is perplexed, even downright confounded: “How can this be?” For Isaiah it was even more perplexing: “Woe is me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.” As soon as Isaiah discovered the details of his mission, he objected. Not so with Mary. She responds with joyful obedience. Mary is but a lowly servant, as she describes herself in her song, the Magnificat. She is just the kind of person Luke loves to exalt in his pattern of status reversal where the poor and humble are lifted up and the powerful and proud are brought down.

Even so, the story of Mary hints at scandal as Mary is blessed with having a child out of wedlock, a child who would later be executed as a criminal. If Mary embodies the scandal, she also

exemplifies obedience. The greatest blessings come from our fellowship with God and from knowing with certainty that “The Lord is with us”, even in the most difficult and darkest of times. Faithfulness to God is living with that certainty and being prepared to make those words a reality in all that we say and do.

There are times when such living for God and for each other may indeed appear scandalous as it did for Mary. The ultimate scandal is that God entered human life with all its violence and corruption. The annunciation to Mary is an announcement of hope for humankind. God has not abandoned us to the consequences of our failures and shortcomings. He has sent Jesus as our Saviour. That is a cause for great rejoicing and an even greater reason to hope.

PRAYER

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, merciful and gentle:
to you be praise and glory for ever.

Your light has shone in our darkened world
through the child-bearing of blessed Mary;
grant that we who have seen your glory
may daily be renewed in your image
and prepared like her for the coming of your Son,
who is the Lord and Saviour of all.

Blessed be God for ever.

CONCLUSION

The night is far spent, the day is at hand.
Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness
and put on the armour of light.

Come, O Lord, comfort the soul of your servant.
Even so, Lord, come.

O Lord Jesus Christ, come
at evening time, with light,

and in the morning, with your glory,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

He who receives our prayers says:
Surely I come quickly.
I am the root and offspring of David,
I am the bright and morning star.
Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.