

# 18<sup>th</sup> December 2022 – Morning Service

Rev Alan Combes

## Advent Liturgy

It's Advent. Not yet Christmas. It's not just time for you and me to prepare, it's time for all the world's different people to prepare. It's time to see God's message in all living created things, the environment around us. It's time to make room in our lives for all ages and all genders; people who are overlooked, second class citizens ignored or put upon. Time to be grateful for Mary who was one of these.

Let us think, without Mary, young, pregnant and unmarried, where would we be?

When God reigns **there is room for all ages and genders.**

Without that young woman who put her trust in God, what would we believe?

When God reigns **there is room for all ages and genders.**

Without that commitment, that vision and faith, what faith could we have?

When God reigns **there is room for all ages and genders.**

Without Mary saying yes to God and mothering Jesus, would the Saviour be ours?

When God reigns **there is room for all ages and genders.**

Let us ask ourselves if we scorn and shun because of age or gender.

When God reigns **there is room for all ages and genders.**

We lit our first candle for you and me. We lit our second candle for people who are different from us. We lit our third candle for the environment and its care. Let us light our fourth candle for Mary and all who are marginalised because of age or gender.

## Call to worship

In the beginning, before time, before people, before the world began, God was. Here and now, among us, beside us, enlisting the people of earth for the purposes of heaven, God is In the future, when we have turned to dust and all we know has found its fulfilment, God will be. God was, God is, God will be.

## StF 214 – Once in Royal David's City

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| 1) Once in royal David's city<br>Stood a lowly cattle-shed,<br>Where a mother laid her baby<br>In a manger for his bed:<br>Mary was that mother mild,<br>Jesus Christ her little child.                   | 3) And our eyes at last shall see him,<br>Through his own redeeming love,<br>For that child so dear and gentle<br>Is our Lord in heaven above;<br>And he leads his children on<br>To the place where he is gone.     |
| 2) He came down to earth from heaven<br>Who is God and Lord of all,<br>And his shelter was a stable,<br>And his cradle was a stall;<br>With the needy, poor and lowly<br>Lived on earth our Saviour holy. | 4) Not in that poor lowly stable,<br>With the oxen standing by,<br>We shall see him; but in heaven,<br>Set at God's right hand on high;<br>There his children gather round<br>Bright like stars, with glory crowned. |

*Cecil Frances Alexander*

## Opening words and prayer

We are here to meet with God, to worship God, and to hear once again the story of the first Christmas. And because we know Jesus came for our salvation, let us in heart and mind go once again to Bethlehem. We may know the story well, but we ask God to help us hear it afresh. That once again we can see the wonder of what God has done. So we come together as the family of God, in God's presence, to celebrate the great festival of Christmas. In this service we hear and receive the good news of the birth of Christ and we offer to God our joyful thanksgiving.

Lord, at the beginning of this service of celebration, we take a moment to pause – to wait on you for You are an awesome and majestic God. You hold the whole world in the palm of Your hand, yet at the same time you work quietly to fulfil Your will, by guiding and inspiring people like us, and setting us in the right time and place. For all of this we offer You our worship and praise. We thank you that all those years ago you acted to send Jesus to live with us on Earth; that He, like us, was born into a human family and became tied to a time and a place, teaching, healing and pointing to God as a loving Father. We thank you for Your love and grace shown in all of this.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

### **Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7a**

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.*

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.*

### **StF 180 – O come, O come Immanuel**

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| 1) O come, O come, Immanuel,<br>And ransom captive Israel,<br>That mourns in lonely exile here<br>Until the Son of God appear:                           | 3) O come, O Rod of Jesse, free<br>Your own from Satan's tyranny;<br>From depths of hell your people save,<br>And give them vict'ry o'er the grave.            |
| Ch) <i>Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel<br/>Shall come to thee, O Israel.</i>  | 4) O come, O Key of David, come,<br>And open wide our heavenly home;<br>Make safe the way that leads on high,<br>And close the path to misery:                 |
| 2) O come, O come, thou Lord of might,<br>Who to your tribes, on Sinai's height,<br>In ancient times did give the law<br>In cloud, and majesty, and awe: | 5) O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer<br>Our spirits by your advent here;<br>Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,<br>And death's dark shadows put to flight: |

*Based on Advent Antiphons translated by John Mason Neale*

Our story begins in Nazareth - north of Jerusalem in the Province of Galilee. This is what happened to Mary.

### **Reading: Luke 1:26-38**

*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'*

*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'*

*'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.'*

*'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.*

God's choice might seem odd as Mary was very young at 16 and not married. For her to say "yes" was really quite risky, as people would certainly have been appalled at this. However, God's plan and timing were still working out. Jesus would be about 6 months younger than John and we know that Elizabeth and Mary spent some weeks together at this time. Another snag that needed to be sorted out was that her fiancé, Joseph, wasn't very pleased about it.

### **Reading: Matthew 1:19-21**

*Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'*

Thankfully Joseph came round and married Mary. So our story moves down the long Nazareth to Jericho road and to Bethlehem...

### **Reading: Luke 2:1-5**

*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.*

I wonder what some of those involved in this story thought? Here's the view of one Roman soldier

### **Dramatic Reading – The Soldier from "A Cloud of Witnesses"**

*My dearest, it is so cold here, and I long for the comforts of Rome, marching as I am from town to town barely resting between. And for what? So that Quirinius can count these Jews and tell how many there are. Then there'll be more taxes, and we shall have to enforce them.*

*I wish that I was at home now, beside the olive grove, Marcus at my knee. I long to see Rome— and you - again. But on to the next town, and then the next. Nazareth in Galilee today. Another little town, more sullen faces, perhaps even spitting behind our backs or muttered curses under their breaths. Mind, if Aurelius sees them, they will be flogged for sure.....*

*Well, it was not so bad. A carpenter lent us nails and a hammer, and we put the notice up on a tree. Then he told us that many people would not be able to read it, so we read it aloud to them. He was a good man - for a Jew. Not a trouble-maker at all. I asked him where he would have to go for the enrolment. He seemed quite proud of some links with a house of David, and that he would have to go to Bethlehem in Judea. Small town - I've been there. Nothing much to see - narrow streets and the hills beyond.*

*I asked about his wife. She is far gone with child, but will have to go with him. It seems cruel, somehow, that this could not have waited until Spring. Still, they're only Jews when all is said and done. I shall be glad to be home. Hug Marcus for me...*

As we know the Jews and Samaritans didn't get on at all and so Jews travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem would refuse to go through Samaria. This meant that they had to follow the Jordan Valley as far as Jericho then turn west to Jerusalem. The journey was not easy. There is a long hot trail along the Jordan Valley and then a long climb up to Jerusalem.

Finally we arrive in Bethlehem. There is a reason why Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem. David, Israel's greatest kings, was born and brought up in Bethlehem and there is a prophecy in Micah 5:2 about Bethlehem being the birthplace of a king. Jesus was to be the king of kings.

### **Reading: Luke 2:6-7**

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

Things were working out to God's plan. The fact is that Jesus was born to an ordinary family, away from home and in a cave or a stable. This all fits with Jesus' ministry which focussed on people like this, rather than the rich, famous and powerful. Mary took Jesus, put some clothes on him and placed him in an animal feeding trough.

### **StF 175 – Light of the world**

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| 1) Light of the world, You stepped down<br>into darkness,<br>Opened my eyes, let me see.<br>Beauty that made this heart adore You<br>Hope of a life spent with You.                      | 2) King of all days, oh so highly exalted,<br>Glorious in heaven above,<br>Humbly You came to the earth You created,<br>All for love's sake became poor. |
| Ch) <i>So here I am to worship,<br/>Here I am to bow down,<br/>Here I am to say that You're my God:<br/>You're altogether lovely,<br/>Altogether worthy, altogether wonderful to me.</i> | B) And I'll never know how much it cost<br>To see my sin upon that cross.<br>And I'll never know how much it cost<br>To see my sin upon that cross.      |

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Jesus' first visitors also fitted in with this theme.

### **Reading: Luke 2:8-18**

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'*

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.' When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'*

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*

Shepherds were not approved of. They were considered to be a bit rough and ready and their work meant that they couldn't obey all the niceties of the law. For example, sheep still needed looking after on the Sabbath so shepherds were thought of as sinners by the Scribes and Pharisees. Yet these rough and ready shepherds were the very people that God invited to be the first to see his Son.

The other visitors we are told about were very different. They were educated men and lived a long way away - way over here to the East. They saw something in the sky that led them to believe that a new king was about to be born. And so they made their way westwards until they got to Jerusalem. If you're looking for a king then you're going to go to a palace, aren't you? Well that's what happened.

### **Reading: Matthew 2:1-8**

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."'*

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'*

The visitors arrived and brought three gifts. Can you remember what they were? Gold, a gift for king; Frankincense, a gift for a priest, someone who is a bridge between God and people; Myrrh, sweet smelling spices for a body, a gift for someone who is going to die. Strange gifts, but gifts that tell us much about Jesus and his mission. Again by the visit of these men, God was setting the timing and the agenda. Herod wanted to know where Jesus was, not to worship him, but rather to kill him. So the visitors then departed, for home, but this time, having been warned about Herod in a dream they went back a different way. And Mary and Joseph had yet another journey to make.

### **Reading: Matthew 2:13-14**

*When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.' So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.*

So Mary, Joseph and Jesus headed off to the south-west and to Egypt where they would be safe until Herod was dead.

## Reflection - Will you come and do something different Lord

God came - when the world was dark and the city was quiet. Quietly – he came, no fanfares or parades. Quietly he slipped in beside us. And no one knew – well only the few. Some who didn't understand. A few perhaps who dared to believe that the prophecies might actually be true that God was doing something different.

Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord? Will you come into the darkness of tonight's world? Will you come into the fearful darkness, in which people have stopped believing: that terrorism will cease; war will end; or that food will come; or that governments will change; or that the Church is relevant anymore?

Lord God, will you come into that darkness and do something different to save us - your people - from despair? Will you come into the quietness of this our lives, of my life...the fearful silence when: the phone has not rung; the letter has not come; a friendly voice is no longer heard. Will you come into the darkness of when the doctor's face says it all; when the diagnosis is Covid or cancer or 'there's nothing more we can do; when the future is uncertain; work or family is unclear.

Will you come into that darkness, and do something different, to embrace us - your people? It seems to me that we can never separate the crib from the cross. The truth is - you have already come into our world; our lives; my life. You have already lived rough; been mistreated; accused; betrayed and scorned. You have already come into the world...

So perhaps the real question today is... Will I let you in – to my life? Will I open my life for you to do something different? Will I let go and follow you?

When the world was dark and the city was quiet you came. You crept in beside us. Do the same this Christmas, Lord. Do the same this Christmas with me Lord. Amen.

## StF 202 – Hark the Herald

- 1) Hark! The herald-angels sing  
Glory to the new-born King,  
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled.  
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,  
Join the triumph of the skies;  
With the angelic host proclaim:  
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'
- 2) Christ, by highest heaven adored,  
Christ, the everlasting Lord,  
Late in time behold him come,  
Offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!  
Hail, the incarnate Deity!  
Pleased as man with men to dwell,  
Jesus, our Immanuel:
- Ch) *Hark! The herald-angels sing  
Glory to the new-born King.*
- 3) Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!  
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!  
Light and life to all he brings,  
Risen with healing in his wings.  
Mild he lays his glory by,  
Born that man no more may die,  
Born to raise the sons of earth,  
Born to give them second birth:

*Charles Wesley*

## Blessing

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us now and evermore. **Amen.**