

**A service for 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2021 Advent 2 (StF)**

**Call to Worship: Psalm 62 verses 1 and 2**

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I shall never be shaken. Amen.

*Philip Doddridge was a Congregational minister in Northampton, who threw himself into helping the community, especially the poor and disadvantaged in the town. In 1730, he inaugurated an Academy in Northampton and in 1738 he started a charity school. Despite a heavy workload, Revd. Doddridge found time to write at least three hundred and seventy hymns. 'Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,' was his attempt to highlight his Advent Sermon of 1735, so it is 286 years old. We shall sing hymn number 171.*

**1. Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,  
The Saviour promised long;  
Let every heart prepare a throne,  
And every voice a song.**

**2. He comes, the prisoners to release,  
In Satan's bondage held;  
The gates of brass before him burst,  
The iron fetters yield.**

**3. He comes, the broken heart to bind,  
The bleeding soul to cure;  
And with the treasures of his grace  
To enrich the humble poor.**

**4. Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,  
Thy welcome shall proclaim;  
And heaven's eternal arches ring  
With thy beloved name.**

© Philip Doddridge {1702 – 1751}

**Introduction to Advent series:**

During this Advent we are going to look at the stories of four prominent characters in the scriptural events before Jesus' birth. Last week, considered Zechariah and his doubts. Today, we shall look at Mary and her amazing trust. On following Sundays, we shall look at Herod the Great and Joseph and their response to the coming Saviour.

**Reading: Luke Ch. 1 vs 26 – 38**

In the sixth month, 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 be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob 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 upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called 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 barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. Amen.

Lighting of candle with words for week 2 of Advent.

**We light this candle to remind us of Mary - whose quiet, faithfulness and acceptance of God's call is a model of trust to us all. Lord Jesus you came to call us to serve in your name – help us to trust you as Mary did. Amen. *(The candle is lit)***

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### ***Advent prayer***

As we light our advent candle

**Light of the world, shine on us.**

As we prepare for Christmas time

**Light of the world, shine on us.**

In this world of pain and darkness,

**Light of the world, shine through us.**

To all the people who don't know you,

**Light of the world, shine through us.**

Jesus you are coming again,

**Light of the world, light the way.**

In our service here today

**Light of the world, light the way. Amen.**

*As Advent is a time of newness and renewal, I've chosen a hymn that did not appear in 'Hymns and Psalms', but has a catchy setting and fine words by Clare Stainsby. Although, strictly-speaking, we ought to sing only the first five verses, I propose we sing the whole hymn. Hymn number 174, 'Light a candle in a darkened place,'*

**1. Light a candle in a darkened place,**

**In its flame see hope on every face**

**Christ our Saviour will be born,**

**Heralding a brand new dawn,**

**So let it burn.**

**2. In the darkness, see the coming light,**

**Word of God speaks through the darkest night,**

**Keep a watch, the time is near,**

**Time for hope and not for fear,**

**So let it burn.**

**3. Stepping through each page of history,**

**Prophets contemplate this mystery,**

**Celebrate the coming King,**

**Words of joy and hope they bring,**

**So let it burn.**

4. In the desert now the waiting's done,  
Make things ready for your King, says John,  
See, his glory is revealed,  
And the hope for all is sealed,  
So let it burn.

5. Mary found true favour with the Lord,  
Yet she trembled at his strange reward,  
Knew this was the special One,  
Hope for many through God's Son,  
So let it burn.

6. Do not fear, today I bring good cheer,  
Jesus Christ, the Saviour now is here,  
God has lit his flame of love,  
Through his Son from Heaven above.  
So let it burn.

© Clare Stainsby (born 1959)

**Our Responsive Reading is Luke chapter 1 verses 46 to 55 / STF 793, the Magnificat: Mary's response to Gabriel's news.**

1. My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;  
**he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.**

2. From this day all generations will call me blessed;  
**the Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.**

3. He has mercy on those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.

4. **He has shown strength with his arm  
and has scattered the proud in their conceit.**

5. Casting down the mighty from their thrones  
and lifting up the lowly.

6. **He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.**

7. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,  
to remember his promise of mercy.

8. **The promise made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and his children for ever.**

Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

**Address: *Mary trusted***

The Roman Catholic Church has a radically different view of Jesus' mother, Mary to those of Protestant churches, for Mary has been venerated above all saints. **In 1854**, basing his decision on early Church tradition, **Pope Pius IX issued a papal bull**, or

order of faith, that the Virgin Mary was conceived free from sin, because she was to bear God's Son, that she never sinned throughout her life and remained a virgin – despite her marriage to Joseph and the birth of a number of children besides Jesus. I find the elevation of Mary sad rather than ridiculous, because the bull denied Mary her humanity and cast a slur of sexual relations. Even the finest people fall short of God's glory and the papal insistence on virginity can be traced back to Gnostics, heretics who held that anything earthly, including sexuality was sinful. **No, it is far better to see what God saw in Mary, to all appearances an ordinary woman, yet in fact an extraordinary woman whom God chose to bear and raise Christ Jesus.** I agree, however, that Mary is the 'new Eve', as Jesus is the 'new Adam' who restored fallen humankind to his Father, God.

Let us consider God's choice of Mary as mother of his Son. We know that Mary was related to Elizabeth, wife of the priest, Zechariah and mother of John the Baptist, that Elizabeth was descended from a priestly family, so it is reasonable to surmise that Mary, too, came from a Levite background. She was living in Nazareth when the angel Gabriel gave her news that she would bear God's Son. At the time she was betrothed to Joseph which means more than being engaged, for in First Century Judea girls of twelve and a half or over could legally cohabit when betrothed and it was so solemn a commitment that it needed a letter of divorce to break it. Until that moment, she would have been planning to build a good life with Joseph, so Gabriel's message raised serious issues for Mary, as her pregnancy might have led to charges of infidelity levelled against her, especially if Joseph denied that he was the father. It is unlikely she would have been stoned in those circumstances, yet adultery was punishable by death. Nevertheless, at the least, Mary would have borne public disgrace for bearing a child outside marriage and, had Joseph rejected her, she would have become an outcast like the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well.

What is remarkable about our reading is Mary's acceptance of God's commission. Many young women would have been less than enthusiastic about such a case, but not Mary. In amazement she asked how she could give birth whilst still a maiden. Unlike Zechariah, Mary did not doubt the angel, but instead was filled with wonder and intrigued how the Lord would fulfil his message and she accepted Gabriel's explanation, which ended with the declaration that **'nothing is impossible with God'**. She displayed an amazing trust in God and made herself wholly available to his will and simply replied, **'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.'** In other words, she was prepared to take on the world, its finger-pointing, spiteful condemnation, disgrace and ostracism to do God's will. What remarkable faith Mary exhibited to trust God in such a venture; to put herself at his disposal because she believed what he said is true and would come to be. It is all the more remarkable because women were dominated by their husbands and had little to no part in decision-making. Mary wasn't naïve nor foolish. She knew the cost of obedience and was willing to pay it for the Lord's sake – for the redemption of Israel. It is hardly surprising that her Son, Jesus, was obedient, even to death on a cross, trusting only in God's saving grace after being raised by such a mother. Two verses from a hymn by Charles Wesley seem to sum up Mary's attitude better than a long-winded explanation:

**'Behold the servant of the Lord!  
I wait thy guiding eye to feel,  
To hear and keep thy every word,  
To prove and do thy perfect will,  
Joyful from my own works to cease,**

**Glad to fulfil all righteousness.**

**Here then to thee thine I leave;  
Mould as thou wilt my passive clay;  
But let me all thy stamp receive,  
But let me all thy words obey,  
Serve with a single heart and eye,  
And to thy glory live and die.'**

We know that Mary had a good grasp of the Scriptures, for the **Magnificat**, her hymn of praise, develops the song of **Hannah after she conceived Samuel**, from Hannah's words of triumph over her enemies to Mary's praise for the goodness and grace of God towards the downtrodden and poor. In "**His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation**", the word, '**chesed**' which our text gives as '**mercy**' can also be translated as '**loving-kindness**' and Jesus came to offer loving-kindness especially to the despised and marginalised in society. Unlike some of the anti-heroines of our television soaps, Mary retained her faithfulness and integrity amid the troubled society in which she raised her children. As a Jewish mother, she would have begun to teach Jesus the Scriptures and to encourage him to explore them. It was her influence and personal example that developed the human side of Jesus – his outreach and trust in God the Father and, I suspect his praying, too.

The story of Mary challenges us to examine our commitment to God's kingdom. Are we willing to make big changes to our lives, to set aside our station in life, to risk our reputation and friendships to answer a call from God? I've known a few people who have given up well-paid, prestigious jobs to serve as presbyters or deacons, or to serve the church in other ways and I haven't found one who laments that he or she could have been wealthy or powerful, because serving Christ is reward in itself. Are you, are we, willing to honour these words from the Covenant Prayer with a sincere 'Amen'?

**I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you, or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing: I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.**

**And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.**

**May God grant us the trust and faith of Mary to make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, to serve him unquestioningly. Amen.**

*Our next Advent carol is known as "Gabriel's Message" and was written by Revd. Sabine Baring-Gould in the 1890s, but did not become popular until the 1970s, which I find extraordinary! Incidentally, Revd. Baring-Gould was not only the vicar of Lew Trenchard in Devon, but also its Squire. Incidentally, collected old Devonian folk-songs, including "Widcombe Fair", with Uncle Tom Cobby and all! Without further ado, let us sing hymn number 187, 'The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,'*

**1. The angel Gabriel from heaven came,  
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame.  
'All hail,' said he, thou lowly maiden, Mary,  
Most highly-favoured lady.' Gloria!**

**2. 'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be.  
All generations laud and honour thee.  
Thy Son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold,  
Most highly-favoured lady.'** *Gloria!*

**3. Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,  
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said.  
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name':  
Most highly-favoured lady.** *Gloria!*

**4. Of her, Immanuel, the Christ, was born  
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn;  
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say:  
'Most highly-favoured lady.'** *Gloria!*                      © *Sabine Baring-Gould (1834 – 1924)*  
***In our prayer of Intercession, we pray for neighbours nearby and far away. Let us pray.***

Lord of all, we recognize your faithfulness in meeting our daily needs and for loving us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus, to show us how to live as you want us, by bringing healing and hope to our broken world. Therefore, we pray for our neighbours, both near to us and far away: for people who are facing hardship and suffering. Grant us the faith and compassion to act as your earthly hands, reaching out to offer practical support to our neighbours, but where the best we can offer is inadequate, we ask you to intervene, for as Gabriel told Mary, nothing is impossible to you.

Heavenly King, guide the rulers of the world's nations to care for the well-being of the people they govern. Teach them to seek justice and to deal mercifully, for only when justice and mercy prevail can there be real peace. Indeed, Lord, we pray for an end to conflicts around the world, for they not only cause death, injury and destruction, but swell the number of refugees who are forced to flee from terror and suffering. In your mercy, remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice across the world. Grant them healing and hope, so they may rebuild their lives.

God of creation, recent terrible floods and wildfires on many continents are salutary reminders about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We pray that the declarations at the COP26 conference aren't just empty pledges, but will encourage all of us to begin the necessary changes to our lifestyles before it is too late, so that future generations will have a world fit to live in.

Lord of health and wellbeing, hear our prayer for all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, including people who are living with a dementia and all who are seeking to support them. Let them experience your presence in their time of need, to bring them healing, renewed strength and hope.

We remember, too, neighbours who, as a result of the pandemic, are lonely or afraid, or feeling abandoned and unloved; for others who are burdened by unemployment and debt; for everyone who has lost loved ones during this time of pandemic. In a period of silence, we shall bring to you the names of people for whom we are concerned .....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, in which they may find healing, courage, comfort and peace.

God our Saviour, we ask your blessing upon people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: the NHS, carers, scientists and key-workers throughout the country. May they be successful and safe in their endeavours.

Sovereign God, help our Circuit to find new ways to serve our community as we begin to emerge from the pandemic. We pray, too, for the worldwide Church: unite us in love and outreach, so our words and actions bring the light of your love to our neighbours and reveal that Jesus is indeed, the Saviour of the world. Loving Lord, we don't know what others will ask of us, so we pray for the Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead Christ-centred lives but to have the same trust as Mary when we answer your call. Amen.

***As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:***

**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. Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.**

***In 1961, Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith read a review copy of the New Testament of the New English Bible which is not noted for its poetry. Nevertheless, he was so moved by the first line of the Magnificat, he used it as the opening of his hymn and, in his own words, he 'speedily wrote the rest'. The editors of "The Anglican Hymnbook" of 1965 saw the potential of the poem as a hymn and made the inspired choice of setting it to 'Woodlands' written by Walter Greatorex. Since its publication, "Tell out my soul" has become one of this country's favourite Advent hymns. We close our worship as we sing hymn number 186, 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!'***

**1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!**

**Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;**

**Tender to me the promise of his word;**

**In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.**

**2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!**

**Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;**

**His mercy sure, from age to age the same;**

**His holy name – the Lord, the Mighty One.**

**3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!**

**Powers and dominions lay their glory by;**

**Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,**

**The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.**

**4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!**

**Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.**

**Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord**

**To children's children and for evermore!**

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***Benediction***

**Come, Lord Jesus: fill us with your love and guide us by your truth. Come, drive away the gloom that is over the earth. Let your love shine brightly upon us. And the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us now and remain with us evermore. Amen.**