

**A service for 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2022 – Advent 4 (StF)**

**Call to worship: from a Jewish prayer when entering a place of worship**

And we, due to your great kindness, will come into your house, and, in awe of you, we will worship, facing towards your holy Temple. “We will go to the house of the Lord in a crowd”. How good are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel. Lord, we love the dwelling of your house and the place where your glory rests. And we will worship and bow and bend the knee before the Lord our Maker. And as for us, may our prayer come to you in an acceptable time; Sovereign Lord, in your great kindness, answer us with the truth of your salvation. Amen.

*I've chosen to open our worship with a hymn that has a catchy setting and fine words by Clare Stainsby. 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)

***Let us pray***

Almighty God, who spoke life into every being throughout the Universe, we have come to worship and praise your holy Name on the fourth Sunday in Advent. We are amazed that the Lord, whose wisdom and might are far beyond our understanding, care so much for flawed, sinful human beings that you sent your Son, Christ Jesus, to reveal your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection.

Faithful Lord, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we remember his promise to return in glory, so we need to prepare our hearts to receive him and welcome him into our lives. Therefore, help each of us to focus our mind and heart on Christ during our worship, so our singing reflects our joy, our prayers show our faith and our response to your word is centred on the grace of our Lord Jesus. Amen

***In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy' please respond with, 'Hear our prayer'. Let us pray.***

Heavenly Father, we recognize with thanksgiving how you have blessed us in so many ways throughout our lives. Thank you, too, for experiences and opportunities that have given meaning to our lives and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all, Lord, thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, without whom we are lost, hopeless and helpless.

Merciful God, when we consider ourselves in the light of your holiness, we see how often we let you down when we say and do things that hurt and upset others. Lord, help us to change our ways, and forgive us.

***'Lord, in your mercy' ..... 'Hear our prayer'.***

Heavenly Father, forgive us for our unwillingness to see our neighbours as Jesus sees them, especially those whose lifestyles, attitudes and beliefs differ markedly from ours. May we look out for the wellbeing of vulnerable people around us, people of all ages and backgrounds. Warm our souls with your love, so we may serve you with Christ at the heart of all we do and say.

***'Lord, in your mercy' ..... 'Hear our prayer'.***

Faithful, gracious God, we believe you have heard and answered our prayer, offering us your pardon for our wrongdoing. Therefore, Lord, help us to serve both you and our neighbours both faithfully and warm-heartedly from now onwards, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer Jesus taught his disciples:***

**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.**

### **There is room for all ages and genders**

**During Advent, I am going to use the Methodist Programme, 'There is Room' to show how the Scriptures, especially the Nativity stories invite all-comers to feel part of God's story, irrespective of their lifestyles, or backgrounds. This Sunday, the theme is there is room for all ages and genders.**

**The Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 7 verses 10 to 16**

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz,

"Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said,

"I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test." Then Isaiah said,

"Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste." Amen.

Although the nativity character named in “There is room for...”, the idea for today is to consider the backdrop of the story of Jesus’ birth and consider people who are overlooked. Mary lived at a time when women were second-class citizens – even more than today. They had no property rights and were considered their husband’s property. They could be divorced on their husband’s whim – even for a poor meal. Mary was very young when she gave birth to Jesus and probably lacked life experience, yet God entrusted her with the honour and responsibility of being His Son’s mother. She raised him to be the man we worship, filled with love and a deep knowledge of Scripture, which was one of the duties of a Jewish mother – fathers were usually too busy earning a living.

Mary was betrothed, yet unmarried when she gave birth to Jesus, for in Luke’s version of the Nativity, he wrote, **‘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. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.’** Her community would have considered her a fallen woman – they would not have believed that the Holy Spirit had ‘overshadowed her’ and, indeed people in the gospels sometimes refer to Jesus as ‘the son of Mary’, not ‘Joseph’s son’, so here is another strand of how the Lord did not overlook people who are often disregarded by society because of their youth, or age, gender, disabilities.

During Advent and Christmas, churches are often visited by non-church-goers or people who haven’t been to church for a long time. Can we give them room and time to enjoy their experience? Can we encourage them to come to any social activity – a tea and chat morning / afternoon – where they can get to know us and we them? What can we do as church – a people more than the building – to ease some of the loneliness that burdens our community, especially after COVID19 inflicted itself upon us? Can we make room for visitors of all ages, backgrounds and genders including unmarried mothers, or single parents, where they can feel accepted, can socialise and feel included here and not simply in a worship setting? Amen.

*Our next hymn was written in 1965 by Revd. Frederik Kaan, a Dutchman who served as Moderator of the West Midlands Province of the URC and sometimes worshipped at Birmingham Cathedral. Hymn number 119, ‘God of Eve and God of Mary,’*

- 1. God of Eve and God of Mary,  
God of love and mother-earth,  
Thank you for the ones who with us  
Shared their life and gave us birth.**
- 2. As you came to earth in Jesus,  
So you come to us today;  
You are present in the caring  
That prepares us for life’s way.**
- 3. Thank you that the Church, our Mother,  
Gives us bread and fills our cup,  
And the comfort of the Spirit  
Warms our hearts and lifts us up.**

**4. Thank you for belonging, shelter,  
Bonds of friendship, ties of blood,  
And for those who have no children,  
Yet are parents under God.**

**5. God of Eve and God of Mary,  
Christ our brother, human Son,  
Spirit, caring like a Mother,  
Take our love and make us one!**

© Fred Kaan (1929 – 2009)

***We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns for people nearby and far away to our Lord. When I say, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' please say 'Come Lord Jesus'. 'Come, Lord Jesus.'***

In joyful expectation of his coming to reign, we pray to our Lord Jesus, saying,  
Come, Lord Jesus. **'Come, Lord Jesus.'**

Loving Lord, come to your world as King of the nations, to bring peace, built upon justice and mercy to all nations. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern the countries of the world, so they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way. Instead, may they govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of true peace.

Heavenly Father, we offer our prayer for victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution. Bring an end to their suffering and help them rebuild their lives. Warm our hearts with your compassion, so we ensure that all receive the support they need to have a fresh start and hope for the future.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord, before you rulers will stand in silence. Guide the leaders of the wealthy nations to be generous to the people of the Developing Nations, where there is great poverty and suffering. We pray for the victims of recent natural disasters, that they may receive speedy help, as well as people in countries facing severe famines, where droughts and warfare have made the situation worse. We ask a blessing on the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid which are working to provide them with desperately-needed aid.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of food and energy rise and as inflation increases to record levels. We thank you for food banks, warm spaces and for other initiatives which are helping the poor, but may the Government and other agencies find new ways of helping people who are facing the awful choice of heating their homes, or eating to manage during the coming winter.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Saviour, come to your Church as Lord and Judge. We pray for this church, that we may be a light of hope to a sin-darkened world. We pray, too, for the World Church, that old differences may be set aside, so all Christians learn to serve you in unity of mission and draw many to you. Help us to live in the light of your coming and give us a longing to do your will.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord of shalom, come to your people as healer and bearer of pain. We pray for people from this church, for families and friends, for people from work, or from our community who are ill, recovering from injuries or operations, or who face surgery in the near future. We remember also everybody who is lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In your grace, enfold us all in

your love, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever.

O Loving Jesus, come to us from heaven with power and great glory, and lift us up to meet you, where with all your saints and angels, we will live with you for ever.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Father God, as Christmas nears, we pray for ourselves. 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.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us and our families. Keep us safe and fill us with the love and grace of Jesus, so that our thoughts, words and deeds offer peace and love to people around us, bringing you glory in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 1 verses 18 to 25**

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and 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." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. 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 Cobley and all! Without further ado, let us sing hymn number 87, '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)

**Sermon: *Mary, the mother of Christ.* Luke 1: 26 – 55**

A few years ago, Radio 4 announced that in a survey of one thousand people by St. Helen's Church, Bishopsgate, London, over seven hundred doubted the accuracy of the nativity accounts in St. Matthew's and St. Luke's gospels. Moreover, one in four who declared themselves Christians shared the scepticism of non-believers. One of the most controversial aspects is the virgin birth, because it is unheard of in human nature. However, sceptics ought to remember that the incarnation of God in man is also a unique event, so God may well have decided to make Jesus' birth a miracle in itself. Certainly, the gospel writers were intent on showing that Jesus' nativity reflected the words of Isaiah chapter 7: **'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'** However, Bible scholars point out that the two forms of Jewish Bibles translate the prophecy in different ways. The Hebrew version uses **'alma'** which means a **young woman**, whilst the Greek version uses **'parthenos'**, literally a **virgin**, so you might argue that a physically virgin birth may not be necessary to fulfil Isaiah's oracle.

The danger is that, by concentrating on this aspect of the birth story we may lose sight of its real significance: **Jesus is both fully human and fully divine; he is God in our mortal frame.** In effect, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus bore the characteristics, or chromosomes of Almighty God, as well of Mary's human genes. May I remind you of the words spoken by the Angel Gabriel: **'nothing is impossible with God'**, so if he chose a virgin birth for his Son, he could easily accomplish it. Most importantly, even if somebody rejects the gospel accounts of how Mary became pregnant, it certainly does not invalidate his ministry, death and resurrection. Therefore, let us consider God's choice of Mary as mother of Christ.

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 certainly living in Nazareth when the angel Gabriel gave her news that she would bear God's Son. She was betrothed to Joseph at the time, 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 divorce to break it. Now this raised serious issues for Mary, as her pregnancy might have led to charges of infidelity levelled against her and adultery was punishable by death. Many young women would have been less than enthusiastic about such an angelic announcement, but not Mary: after politely asking how she could give birth whilst still a maiden, she accepted Gabriel's explanation 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 and possible death sentence to do God's will. What remarkable faith Mary exhibited to trust God in such a venture: it is

hardly surprising that her Son, Jesus, was obedient, even to death on a cross, trusting only in God's saving grace after he has been raised by such a mother.

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 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, '**hesed**' 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.

It was no coincidence that Mary and Joseph were devout but poor, for the birth narratives describe in some detail the straightened circumstances surrounding Christ's birth: homeless; in a shelter used by livestock that would have been cold, dark and smelly – even if the inn-keeper's wife had swept it out and put down fresh straw; unwelcomed by Joseph's family – perhaps because they disapproved of her pregnancy. The nativity shows that God became incarnate amongst the lowest of our social order, not just ordinary people, but refugees, the homeless and destitute, for whom he cares with a passion – and expects us to do so, too!

Jesus was not born in a mansion, or palace, attended by midwives and servants, guarded by soldiers; he was not laid on a downy mattress, wrapped in silk sheets – his first bed was a straw-filled manger in a draughty byre. Christ came to share the common lot, not to lord it over us, remote and superior. He is Immanuel – God with us – knowing our pain as well as our pleasures, our hopes and fears, our joys and woes. 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. It was her influence that developed the human side of Jesus – his outreach and trust in God the Father and, I suspect his praying, too. Despite Simeon's warning that '**a sword would pierce her soul**', Mary was prepared to face anything for the Lord God – as was her Son, Jesus.

Mary followed him even to Calvary, where she had the fortitude to stand beneath the cross, but she also shared the joy of Jesus' resurrection and ascension and it is reasonable to surmise that she was among the hundred and twenty inflamed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Let us therefore strive for some of Mary's qualities: her spiritual insight; her humbleness that allowed her to bear the stigma of being pregnant before marriage; the trust and faith to entrust her future to Almighty God. May we avoid being judgemental of others because of their age, race, social status, colour, gender, lifestyles or politics. Jesus offers salvation to the wealthy and poor, people of all kinds. **The nativity accounts teach us that everybody is welcome in God's story. Above all, may we develop the loving-kindness to make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, so we may serve him unquestioningly, too. Amen.**

*Our closing hymn is a carol written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a Methodist Minister and prolific hymn-writer, whose life almost spanned the Twentieth Century. Notice how the last line of the first three choruses ask, "Who will make him welcome?" However, the final chorus ends, "We will make him welcome!"*

*May that be our heartfelt response. Hymn number 178, 'Long ago, prophets knew'*

1. Long ago, prophets knew  
Christ would come, born a Jew,  
Come to make all things new;  
Bear his People's burden,  
Freely love and pardon: *Chorus*  
*Ring bells, ring, ring, ring!*  
*Sing choirs, sing, sing, sing!*  
*When he comes,*  
*When he comes,*  
*Who will make him welcome?*

2. God in time, God in man,  
This is God's timeless plan:  
He will come, as a man,  
Born himself of woman,  
God divinely human: *Chorus*

3. Mary, hail! Though afraid,  
She believed, she obeyed.  
In her womb God is laid;  
Till the time expected,  
Nurtured and protected: *Chorus*

4. Journey ends! Where afar  
Bethlem shines, like a star,  
Stable door stands ajar.  
Unborn Son of Mary,  
Saviour, do not tarry! *Chorus*  
*Ring bells, ring, ring, ring!*  
*Sing choirs, sing, sing, sing!*  
*Jesus comes,*  
*Jesus comes,*  
*We will make him welcome!*

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#### ***Benediction***

May the joy of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, the worship of the wise men and the peace of the Christ child be ours not only at Christmas, but always. And may the peace of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit remain with us for evermore. Amen.