

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”. 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.

The writer of our opening hymn, Revd Tim Hughes, was born in 1978 the son of an Anglican vicar. He grew up in High Wycombe, before moving to Birmingham as a teenager when his father was appointed vicar of St John's Church, Harborne. Formerly the Director of Worship at Holy Trinity, Brompton, he has since been appointed Vicar of St Luke's, Gas Street, Birmingham, where he and his wife, Rachel, lead very lively worship. We shall sing, ‘Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,’ number 175.

**1. Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,
Opened my eyes, let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore you,
Hope of a life spent with you. Chorus:**

*So here I am to worship,
Here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that you're my God,
And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,
Altogether wonderful to me.*

**2. King of all days, oh so highly exalted,
Glorious in heaven above.
Humbly you came to the earth you created,
All for love's sake became poor. Chorus:**

**3. And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost
To see my sin upon that cross..... Chorus:**

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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 Jesus, our Saviour, 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 offer praise and thanksgiving for the many blessings you have bestowed upon us, for experiences and opportunities that have given meaning to our lives, for people who have loved, cared for, inspired and guided us, but most of all thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, without whom we are lost, hopeless and helpless. In response to your amazing grace, may we look out for the wellbeing of vulnerable people around us, people of all ages and backgrounds. Teach us to serve you with Christ at the heart of all we do and say.

‘Lord, in your mercy’ ‘Hear our prayer’.

Merciful God, as we confess your holiness, might and glory we know how we let you down, because of what we say and do that hurt and upset others. Moreover, we recall occasions when we haven’t helped people who were in trouble or in need, even though we know we ought to have done. Lord, warm our hearts, help us to change our ways and forgive us.

‘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, may we serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and warm-heartedly from now onwards, in Jesus’ beautiful name. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn written by Francesca Leftley, fourteen years ago. Hymn number 168, ‘Come. Lord Jesus, come’.

1. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Come, Lord Jesus, come,

To this world of ours.

2. Lord, we need you now;

Lord, we need you now;

Lord, we need you now

In this world of ours.

3. Fill us with your peace;

Fill us with your peace;

Fill us with your peace;

In this world of ours.

4. Touch us with your love;

Touch us with your love;

Touch us with your love

In this world of ours.

5. May we see your light;

May we see your light;

May we see your light;

In this world of ours.

© Francesca Leftley (b1955)

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. We pray for just endings to wars in Ukraine, Myanmar, Congo, Somalia and Sudan. May the fragile ceasefire between Israelis and Palestinians develop into a lasting peace and may border tensions between Thailand and Cambodia and between India and Pakistan be resolved without violence.

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 offer them practical support in whatever way we can.

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

Lord, before you rulers will stand in silence. Guide the wealthy nations to be generous to the people of the Developing Nations, where there is great poverty and suffering. We pray in particular for the victims of recent natural disasters, in the Caribbean and Southern Asia, that they may receive speedy help and relief. Generous God, you ordained that we should be stewards of this planet, yet we have signally failed you, as increasingly severe storms, droughts and floods bear witness. May we do all we can to care for our environment, to reduce the harm that global warming is causing, here and abroad, so that future generations will inherit a healthier planet.

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

Saviour, come to your Church as Lord and Judge. We pray for this church and churches in our Circuit, 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 and

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 our church, our families and friends, people from work, or from our community who are ill, recovering from injuries or operations, or who are lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In a time of silent reflection, we offer names of people for who we are particularly concerned. In your grace, enfold them all in your love, so they find, healing, strength, comfort, courage and peace

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 Redeemer. 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)

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

One of the most controversial aspects of Christ’s nativity 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 why God's chose Mary as mother of Jesus 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, especially as Jesus had a wonderful grasp of the scriptures and it was a mother's duty to instill knowledge of the Jewish faith. She was living in Nazareth and was betrothed to Joseph when the angel Gabriel gave her news that she would bear God's Son. Betrothal 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.

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 had been raised by such a mother.

Mary's grasp of the Scriptures is shown in the **Magnificat**, her hymn of praise, for it 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 faced real horror as she stood 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 through thick and thin, too. Amen.**

We shall continue our worship with a hymn by Bishop Timothy Dudley Smith, a former Suffragan Bishop of Thetford, Norfolk. It is his version of the Magnificat, inspired by the 1961 "New English Bible", probably the least poetic but most learned version. 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!

© Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926 – 2025)

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.

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 love of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit remain with us evermore. Amen.