

A service for 19th December, 2021 Advent 4 (StF)

Introduction to Advent series:

During this Advent we have been looking at the stories of four prominent characters in the scriptural events before Jesus' birth. We have looked at Zechariah and his doubts, Mary's amazing trust, Herod the Great's fear and today, we shall look at Joseph, who stood firmly with Mary, despite pressures to abandon her. As we consider their response to the coming Saviour, we are challenged to look at our own response.

Lighting of candle with words for week 4 of Advent.

We light this candle to remind us of Joseph – who, in the face of rejection and shame, stood firm beside Mary and obeyed God's command. Lord Jesus you came in order that we might become Children of God – give us the courage to live out our faith. Amen. *(The candle is lit)*

After the candle is lit, we say.....

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.

Call to Worship: Psalm 33 verses 1 to 5

Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skilfully, and shout for joy.

For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. 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. We shall sing Tim Hughes' Advent hymn, '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, author of all life throughout the universe, we come to worship you on this fourth Sunday in Advent, as we seek a greater appreciation of both your saving grace and purpose for us. We know your faithful love sustains us, day by day and the beauty, power and complexity of our world remind us of your mighty wisdom and holiness.

We rejoice that, despite our failings and faithlessness, you love us so much that after we failed to respond to the words of the patriarchs and prophets, instead of rejecting or punishing us, you took human form, coming as Christ Jesus, to reveal your true nature through his healings, miracles and teaching. We believe his crucifixion and resurrection have redeemed us from enslavement to sin and death, so we come into your presence with awe and joy, in Jesus' name. Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving and confession. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for everything that you do for us, give us and accomplish in us, for people who have loved and guided us and for opportunities that You provide for us to be fulfilled in you. Thank you for loving us not only at our best, but at our worst when we are loveless and unlovable. Merciful Lord, your grace and goodness humble us, for we know we fail to live as you call us to. In grief we confess we don't love others as we love ourselves and we are sometimes full of doubts, or half-hearted in our service to you. Gracious God, help us to change our ways and in Jesus' name forgive us both for the sins we have committed and for the opportunities to do good that we have ignored.

Gracious God, we believe you hear and answer our prayers. Confident that you have forgiven us and call us to follow you once more, help us to serve and love you and our neighbours with joyful, faithful hearts, in the glorious name of Jesus, our Saviour and friend. Amen.

We shall say the prayer that Jesus gave us:

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.

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. I have adapted it to correspond with our advent theme. Although,

strictly-speaking, we ought to sing only the first five verses, I propose we sing the whole hymn. Let us sing, '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. Zechariah heard the angel say,
'Priest, the Lord has heard your prayer today.
You will have a mighty son,
Who'll precede the Holy One,'
So let it burn.**

**3. Wicked Herod feared 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.**

**4. 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.**

**5. Gabriel spoke to Joseph in a dream,
'Stand by Mary – things aren't what they seem.
In her womb lives God's dear Son;
Earth's salvation has begun!'
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) adapted by Martin Rider (Dec, 2021)

Advent Song: 'Servant King we wait on you' (2 verses – StF 781)

*Servant King, we wait on you,
Watching for that special day,
When your glory will descend
To us, we pray.*

*Love that will not let us go,
Born in humble human form,
May our hearts respond with faith,
In you, O Lord.*

We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns and petitions to our Lord.

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 to. Therefore, in response to your overwhelming love, we pray that you will grant us the faith and compassion we need to act as your earthly hands. However, there are many issues that concern us but which we can do little to nothing to change, so we ask you to intervene, for nothing is impossible to you.

Lord of all, Jesus came to bring peace and wholeness to this broken world, so we pray for an end to conflicts that rage across the planet, causing deaths, destruction and injuries, besides swelling the number of refugees. Inspire leaders of the nations to seek justice and to deal mercifully, for only when justice and mercy prevail will peace come. Hear our prayer for the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, that they may receive the support and care they need to rebuild their broken lives. Remember in your mercy the people of Afghanistan under Taliban rule once more and facing severe food shortages and Sudan, Ethiopia and neighbouring countries where fighting seems certain to result in a catastrophic famine.

Lord of grace, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by striving to end poverty here and abroad, by sharing the earth's resources instead of fighting over them and by learning to co-operate with one another, by accepting our differences and rejoicing in diversity, rather than being divided by it.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, so we pray that you will look with compassion on people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. May they receive the care and support they need to be healed and be granted new strength. May your presence in their time of need give them fresh hope. We remember, too, people who have been deeply marked by this pandemic: those living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers, for whom the last twenty months have been nightmarish.

Also, we pray for neighbours who, because of the effects of lockdown and COVID19 on society, feel lonely, afraid and unloved; for others who are now unemployed or in debt and everyone who has lost loved ones in these awful times. In a time of silence, we bring to mind people who are in special need of your care. 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, so they find healing, courage, comfort and a transcending peace.

God of creation, the recent tornadoes in the USA, terrible floods and wildfires on several continents remind us about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We pray that the declarations at the COP26 conference will encourage all of us to begin the necessary changes to our lifestyles before it is too late, so that we learn to live in harmony with the earth, so future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

Sovereign God, we pray, for all the churches in our city and 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.

We ask you to bless people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: the NHS, carers, scientists and key-workers throughout the country. May they remain successful and safe in their work, dear Lord.

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 be as steadfast as Joseph when we answer your call. 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 hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1744 and reminds us that Christmas is not just a celebration of Jesus' birth, but we are also waiting for his Second Coming, so let us be ready to receive him when he comes. We shall sing hymn number 169, 'Come, thou long-expected Jesus'.

**1. Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.**

**2. Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, / Joy of every longing heart.**

**3. Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child, and yet a king,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.**

**4. By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone:
By thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Address: "Joseph – stood firm". Matthew 1:18 – 25

The gospels essentially underplay Joseph, yet his absence from the nativity story would be as grave as if Jesus was missing – I still remember Joseph and Mary 'forgetting' Jesus at a nativity at Wordsley Methodist Church. We are told very little about Joseph, probably because the gospel-writers wanted First Century Christians to grasp that he was not Jesus' real father. We know he was living in Nazareth when the narrative began, but his family originated in Bethlehem, King David's town and his ancestors were related to that great king. Joseph was a carpenter, which was a term also used for a builder and a smith, so he was a skilled tradesman – don't forget wood was scarce, so he had to make use of all he could. He was betrothed to Mary, who may well have

been in her early teens, but although tradition depicts Joseph as an old man, he was probably only a few years older. The tradition arose because Joseph disappeared from the gospels before Jesus began his ministry at the age of around thirty. I offer two arguments against Joseph being much older than Mary. To begin with, when Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in the temple, they sacrificed two doves rather than a lamb, because they couldn't afford a lamb. Had Joseph been well-established as a tradesman, he would have had enough to provide a lamb, but if he was just starting out in his career, money would have been tight. Secondly, life-expectancy was short and disease was rife, so it is possible that Joseph died in his forties or fifties.

Joseph was a 'righteous man', but not irritatingly self-righteous: someone who sought to do the Lord's will, to be straight with God. Betrothal to Mary meant 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 when Mary told him that she was expecting a child which he knew was not his, he would have been planning to build a good life with her. All his plans must have crumbled into dust, for he knew that Mary would be swiftly judged and face condemnation for conceiving out of wedlock. His family and neighbours would have expected him to reject her and may have considered him a fool to stand by her. In those circumstances, he would have faced mockery and shame as well as Mary.

A self-righteous man would have rejected her account of the encounter with Gabriel; let's face it, it does sound improbable, but not with God, for whom nothing is impossible. A self-righteous man would have blamed and shamed Mary, issued her with a letter of divorce and left her to face the world, with its finger-pointing, spiteful condemnation, disgrace and ostracism. Yet, despite his disappointment and shock, Joseph remained determined to do what he felt was right in the Lord's sight. He decided not to publically humiliate Mary, but to spare her from neighbours' scorn by sending her away quietly. He treated Mary with respect, even though it must have come at a cost, requiring self-restraint and self-discipline.

When an angel spoke to him in a dream, Joseph listened and because of his spiritual insight he was able to accept that Mary's child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. What probably convinced him was the name the angel directed him to give the child: **Jesus – Jeshua – 'God saves'**. He realised that this child was holy and would somehow bring people back to the Lord. So, despite his original distress and the strong Hebrew traditions he'd grown up with, Joseph stood firm with Mary and her child. He said 'yes' to God: he took Jesus as his own son and was not swayed by public opinion. Even though he remained largely out of the spotlight, he remained committed to Mary. If you have ever wondered why Joseph's relatives who lived in Bethlehem wouldn't take them in, it is because, according to Luke, they were still betrothed, so they were considered unworthy of hospitality until the formalities of marriage had taken place after Jesus' birth.

Again, Joseph listened when he was warned in a dream about Herod's malignant plans, so he fled with Mary and Jesus into Egypt until Herod the Great died, possibly two years later. Then they returned to Nazareth where Joseph and Mary raised God's Son, passing on his carpenter's skills probably from when Jesus was twelve – around the time when Jesus remained behind for three days in Jerusalem after Passover. I

wonder how Joseph felt when Jesus called the temple, ‘**my Father’s house**’? Was he hurt, or reassured by those words?

Joseph was an ordinary man who acted in an extraordinary way by defying tradition, public expectation, even ridicule in order to do God’s will, to stand firmly by the side of his wife and the holy child. He did not seek the limelight, or public approbation, yet played a small but vital part in God’s plan of salvation – and it was enough. Joseph represents many faithful Christians who serve quietly, doing routine tasks without seeking recognition, yet without whom the church would struggle. His story should be an encouragement to us, for whilst our discipleship may not put us into the limelight and our part in God’s kingdom may seem insignificant, our role is in fact very important. If we re-commit ourselves to answering our call; if we seek to do God’s will; if we stand up for what is right, we are vital members of the kingdom.

In this post-modern society, values have been twisted, truth has become a commodity to be bought by the corrupt, compassion for the marginalised and refugees is sneered at and personal self-fulfilment has become the goal of many. We must stand firm, for the Good News brought and lived out by Jesus is the antidote to the brokenness we see around us. Christ taught us to love our neighbours and the light of his love will scatter the darkness around us – if we are willing to stand firm like Joseph. Lord, grant us the trust of Mary and the steadfastness of Joseph to do your holy will and make a home for Jesus in our heart. Amen.

How many adults here remember the radio series, “Round the Horne”? Well, it may interest you to know that our closing hymn was written in 1909 by Revd. Charles Silvester Horne, the father of Kenneth Horne! We conclude our worship as we sing hymn number 185, ‘Sing we the King who is coming to reign;’

**1. Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King: *Chorus*
*Come, let us sing: Praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:
This is our song, who to Jesus belong:
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.***

**2. All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
Justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King: *Chorus***

**3. Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
Doubt shall not darken his witness within;
Hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
Love is victorious when Jesus is King: *Chorus***

**4. Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray;
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
When this new song thy creation shall sing:
Satan is vanquished, and Jesus is King: *Chorus***

© Charles Silvester Horne (1865 – 1914)

Benediction

Come, Lord Jesus: fill us with your love and guide us by your truth. Come, drive away the gloom that covers the earth. Let your love shine brightly upon us and help us stand firm to the end in our love of Jesus Christ. And the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us now and remain with us evermore. Amen.