

A service for Advent 4 – 20th December, 2020 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 145 verses 1 to 5

I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever.
Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD
and most worthy of praise; his greatness no-one can fathom. One generation will
commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the
glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Mark Earey specifically for the Advent season and so we shall sing the first four verses. It is sung to the lovely, “Angel Voices” by Edwin Monk. We shall sing hymn number 165, ‘Advent candles tell their story’.

1. Advent candles tell their story

**As we watch and pray,
Longing for the Day of Glory,
‘Come, Lord, soon,’ we say.
Pain and sorrow, tears and sadness
Changed for gladness
On that day.**

**2. Prophet voices loudly crying,
Making pathways clear,
Glimpsing glory, self-denying,
Calling all to hear.
Through their message – challenged, shaken –
Hearts awaken:
God is near!**

**3. John the Baptist, by his preaching
And by water poured,
Brought to those who heard his teaching
News of hope restored:
‘Keep your vision strong and steady,
And be ready
For the Lord.’**

**4. Mary’s gift, beyond all telling,
Was to give Christ room.
She gave God a human dwelling
In a mother’s womb.
Who could guess the final story?
– Cross and glory;
Empty tomb!**

© Mark Earey (Born 1965)

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as Christmas draws near, we have come to praise and adore you in words and carols, as we recall how you, the Creator of life throughout the vast universe, have cared for human beings from the beginning of our existence. Despite our sinfulness and disobedience, you reached out to draw us near to you, sending your Son to live among us, sharing our mortal body. What amazing love you have for humankind that you were willing to give your beloved Son as our Saviour and friend, for you knew from the beginning that people would reject him and betray him, deny him justice and kill him on a cross of agony and shame. Yet you did all this for sinners like us. Moreover, you raised him on the third day, thereby breaking the power of sin and death,

offering us a new start with you and life beyond our mortal span. What an amazing God you really are, wholly worthy of all honour, glory, power and praise.

Thank you, Lord, for your constant love that has followed us from our beginnings: for all you have done for us, given us and accomplished in us, but most of all for the amazing grace of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, guide and friend. As we praise your goodness and holiness, we are forced to face our failings and sins, for we know our love for you and our neighbours is not as wholehearted as it ought to be and some of our thoughts, words and deeds have hurt others and grieved you. Merciful God, for the wrong we have done and the kindness we have neglected to show our neighbours, forgive and restore us.

Most gracious Lord, as the light of your love leads us from the darkness of sin to the path you call us to walk, help us to be generous-hearted and kind to all-comers, so both our lives and our words bring Good News of Christ's saving grace to the world. May we serve as your earthly hands, feet, eyes and voice, so we may honour you in Jesus' precious name, not just now and at Christmas, but for evermore. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we say.

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 subjects today are Hannah, mother of Samuel and Mary, mother of Jesus. Our opening hymn was written by Timothy Dudley Smith, Suffragan Bishop of Thetford in 1961, after he had read The New English Bible's version of Mary's hymn of praise, after she was told she would bear God's Son. Although scholarly, the New English Bible is not very poetic, yet it inspired Bishop Timothy to write a wonderful hymn. We shall 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!**

© Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926 ---)

We come to our prayers of intercession. When I say, "Come, Lord Jesus", please repeat, "Come, Lord Jesus". Let us pray.

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

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to your world as King of the nations. We pray for countries afflicted by war, or

terrorism, that their leaders will learn to seek the ways of peace and will learn to negotiate and compromise instead of striking out at opponents. We pray for lands where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, that leaders will seek mercy and justice in their dealings.

We pray for victims of warfare, terrorism and oppression, that they are given help and find healing in body, mind and spirit.

Remember in your mercy people who are involved in Brexit negotiations that they may come to an accord that avoids damage to the United Kingdom and Europe. We pray, too, for a peaceful transition in the presidency of the USA and for healing of the deep rifts among the political parties. Before you rulers will stand in silence.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to your Church as Lord and Judge. We pray for the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us through this pandemic, so we can serve our communities and support the poor and broken-hearted. Help us to find new ways, not only preach good news but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world. 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.**

Come to your people as Saviour and bearer of pain.

We pray for people we know who are sick in body, mind or spirit, others who are suffering long-term effects of coronavirus and bring them hope and healing. We remember people who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers, that they can find peace of mind, help and comfort, especially at this time of crisis.

We pray for people who are facing unemployment, addictions, loneliness and bereavement at a time we usually associate with joyful celebration. Enfold us all in your love and mercy, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to us as Saviour and Friend. Guide those who govern us and their advisors so they adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic. Give them the courage and steadfastness of Mary, mother of Christ, so they do what is right and bless the NHS, keyworkers and scientists as they strive to heal us and keep us safe. As we approach Christmas and the New Year, we feel disempowered, unsure of what to pray for. Hear and answer the groaning of our spirit and grant us the wisdom and courage we need to face an uncertain future, with hope grounded in your redemptive love.

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

Abba, Father God, bless us all and our friends and families. Protect us against harm and help us to resist the temptation to sin. Above all else, send us to live out the Good News in the glorious name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

The Old Testament reading is: 1 Samuel chapter 1 verse 21 to chapter 2 verse 8

When the man Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the LORD and to fulfil his vow, Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always."

"Do what seems best to you," Elkanah her husband told her. "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his word."

So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him. After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh.

When they had slaughtered the bull, they brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him,
"As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given over to the LORD." And he worshipped the LORD there.

Then Hannah prayed and said:

"My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no-one holy like the LORD; there is no-one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry hunger no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away. The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour. For the foundations of the earth are the LORD'S; upon them he has set the world." Amen.

Our next hymn is set to "Scarlet ribbons" and was written for Amblecote Wordsley for Advent 4 six years ago. 'When an angel came to Mary,'

**1. When an angel came to Mary,
Greeting her as blessed by God,
She at first was very wary –
Such a greeting she found odd.
Then his message grew much stranger,
For he said she'd bear God's Son;
Though she knew it might mean danger,
Mary said, "God's will be done!"**

**2. Mary asked, in some confusion,
How could she bear God's own Son:
Would it be some great illusion?
How else could the deed be done?
She was young and yet unmarried,
But the angel said the Lord
Would accomplish what was needed
Through his Spirit's pow'r outpoured.**

**3. Mary bowed in glad submission,
Took the role the Lord desired;
Played her part in our salvation,
Praising God with soul inspired.
Though she knew both friend and stranger**

**Might condemn her for her state,
She resolved to face all danger:
Our redemption could not wait!**

**4. After birth in humble stable,
Shepherds' visit, Magi's, too,
Came the task of raising Jesus –
Mundane years most mothers knew:
But for Mary came the duty,
Teaching Scriptures to God's Son;
Showing him the Father's beauty;
Praising God for all he's done.**

**5. Holy Mary, blessed mother,
Help us learn to trust like you;
May we serve in glad obedience,
God's dear Son, forever true.
May we – wilfulness denying –
Freely worship and obey,
With the rule of God complying –
Turn earth's darkness into day.**

M. Rider 14th December, 2014, for Amblecote Wordsley 21/12/2014 (to "Scarlet Ribbons" StF 222)

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 1 verses 26 to 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.

The author of our next hymn was Sabine Baring-Gould, an Anglican priest and Squire of Lew Trenchard in Devon. This priest, who came from a wealthy family, fell in love with a young woman he rescued from a flood when the River Calder burst its banks. The girl, Grace Taylor, came from a large family that lived in such poverty that not everyone could go to church together, because they did not have sufficient 'respectable clothing' to go round. Grace worked at a 'shoddy' mill, where the cheapest and roughest cloth was made and lacked the social graces expected of a vicar's wife, so he arranged at his own expense for Grace to attend a finishing school near to York Minster. While she was there, he paid her family the

equivalent of her income, so that they could survive, such was their poverty. 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)

Sermon: Two faithful mothers.

Hannah probably lived a thousand years before Jesus was born, at the end of the period of Judges, but before the appointment of Israel's kings. Although she and her husband, Elkanah, loved one another, Hannah's marriage was blighted by childlessness – considered a curse by many Israelites – so Elkanah had taken a second wife, Peninnah, who bore him children. Peninnah, realising that Hannah was still the apple of Elkanah's eye, grew jealous, so she taunted her about Hannah's inability to conceive. Matters reached their zenith when they went to the tabernacle at Shiloh and Hannah poured out her bitter anguish to the Lord, vowing that, if he granted her a son, she would dedicate him to God's service. In other words, he would be a Nazarite, bound in service to the Lord by a solemn promise, abstaining from strong drink, rich food, luxurious living and refraining from cutting his hair. (Other Nazarites include Samson and John the Baptist). Unfortunately, the old priest, Eli, mistook her silent prayer for drunkenness, so he began to rebuke her. Nevertheless, when Eli heard her woeful story, he added his prayer to hers and, soon after her return to Ramah, she conceived and in due course gave birth to a son, who she called Samuel – Shemuel – heard of God, because the Lord had answered her prayer.

It would have been a natural instinct for Hannah to forget her vow and keep the son she'd so longed for, but, true to her word, she kept him only until he was three and had been weaned. Then she took him to Shiloh, made the customary thanksgiving sacrifice and placed the young boy into Eli's care. Hannah's trust in and love of the Lord was wonderful: to give up a son she'd wanted so dearly after such a short time and to do so with a glorious prayer of thanksgiving is awe-inspiring, for there is no bitterness, nor regret, only delight in God's goodness which humbles the mighty and exalts the meek. The story of Samuel's presentation shows how Hannah responded to the generosity of God's love by giving her longed-for son back to the Lord, to serve as intercessor for the Jewish people in troubled times. Having been freed from the stigma of barrenness and from Peninnah's spite, Hannah showed her practical love for God and her son, Samuel, was a blessing to his people.

Another faithful mother was, of course the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, yet the controversies over the virgin birth have often caused Christians to lose sight of the real significance of God's incarnation as Jesus: **Jesus is both fully human and fully divine; he is God in our mortal frame.** Although virgin birth is unheard of in human nature, 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 virgin birth is a way the gospel writers countered claims of heretics called **docetists** that Jesus was wholly divine and only appeared to be human and others called **adoptionists**, who claimed that Jesus was not divine, but was adopted by God at a key stage in his life – be it baptism or crucifixion. I repeat: **Jesus is both fully human and fully divine; he is God in our mortal frame.** 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, nor indeed does it diminish the qualities of Mary. Therefore, 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 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 announcement, even from an angel, 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.

God chose a mother who had a good understanding of the scriptures, for it was a mother's duty to teach her offspring about the Law given to Moses and the writings of the prophets. 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.

We know it was Mary who bade Jesus perform his first miracle, turning water into wine at a wedding feast at Cana, but according to Mark, she was amongst family members who urged Jesus to return home, believing him to be deranged at the start of his ministry. Despite these initial doubts, she followed him even to Calvary, where she had the fortitude to stand beneath the cross. She 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. **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, as did Mary. Amen.**

We shall close our worship with a wonderful hymn by Charles Wesley which is a delight to sing in either of its settings, 'Stuttgart' or 'Cross of Jesus'. You will probably already worked out that it is 'Come, thou long-expected Jesus', number 169.

**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}*

Benediction

May the sacrificial love of Hannah, the courage and faith of Mary and God's most precious gift for everybody fill our hearts with joy, not only during Christmastide, but every day of our lives – and may the full blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be ours forevermore. Amen.