

I sometimes think that there are calendar days which help us to reflect as well as begin to prepare for what is yet to come. The end of the year can so easily be one of these.

Many of us will be reflecting on the journeys that we have made during 2018 and looking forward in faith to the steps that we will make after the clock has struck midnight tonight. But as we go forward, walking this way alongside Jesus, we also need to remember to prepare: not just ourselves for the journey, but also the way for others in their journey's with Jesus.

I pray that in this coming year, and in the years to come, we can continue to clear the paths for others as they make their way to Jesus. It can be hard to keep the pathways clear but if we can sweep away the many trip-hazards that church can put in the way, cut back the brambles of "we've always done it that way" that can snare us up and lay solid foundations of faith and grace for people to walk along, then we could truly help people to come and encounter Jesus afresh and without unneeded challenges thrown in their way.

In this new year, how transformational could it be if we all walked more deliberately and determinedly as we made the way smoother for one another, and for those who Jesus gives us to walk with?

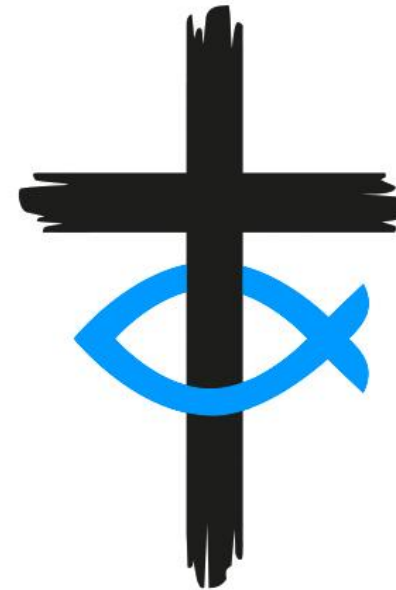
Prayer

God of the journey and the new beginning,
thank you for the journeys we are making,
and for the new ones beginning.
As we reflect on the passing of a year
and the start of a new one,
we thank you for continuing to walk with us.
May we be companions who walk with you
and invite others to join us.
Give us the grace we need to be changed by their companionship.
Guide us in your ways. Amen

Daily Devotions from the URC

16th – 31st December 2018

St Luke (1)



Introduction

We finish the long Saul-David-Solomon saga and start to read through St Luke's Gospel which will take us from Christmas through to after Easter next year. Luke is the longest Gospel and covers the origins, birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. It is the first of a two part work with Luke-Acts dominating the New Testament in terms of length. The editor had, at least, three sources – Mark's Gospel which is reproduced more or less in its entirety, a set of stories shared with St Matthew's Gospel and the editor's own material – for example the story of the angels proclaiming the birth of Jesus to the Shepherds. Neither St Luke nor Acts names its author. Tradition associates Luke the Evangelist as the author. It is thought to have been written around 80–110 but some think it was still being revised well into the 2nd Century.

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and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’

And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

Reflection:

Prepare the way of the Lord...

On this final morning of the year, what a reminder of the joys and challenges of sharing the Good News.

It can all sound huge and maybe beyond us.

We may ask 'where is our God?' in 2019 but start small and in the knowledge that God is right alongside believing in us and giving us strength to follow.

Prayer

Using words by John Bell:

Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by need and pain,
Informed of God's own bias we ask him once again:
"How long must some folk suffer? How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self-interest turn prayer and pity blind?"

God asks, "Who will go for me? Who will extend my reach?
And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?
And who, when few bid welcome, will offer all they know?
And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?"

[Monday 31st December The Preaching of John the Baptist](#)

The Rev'd John Grundy is Minister of St Andrews URC, Brockley and St Michaels United Church, New Cross, London.

St Luke 3: 1 - 20

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

[Sunday 16th December PSALM 77 1-12](#)

Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba's URC, Oxford

I cried aloud to God for help;
I prayed that God would hear.
When I was plunged in deep distress,
I sought the Lord in prayer.

"For ever will the Lord reject
and never show his grace?
Has he withdrawn his steadfast love
and turned from me his face?"

At night I stretched untiring hands,
relief my soul refused.
Rememb'ring you, O God, I groaned
with longing as I mused.

"For all time has his promise failed?
Is God no longer kind?
Has he in his great wrath dismissed
compassion from his mind?"

In my distress I could not speak;
from sleep you kept my eye.
I thought about the former days,
the years which have gone by.

Then to my heart there came this
thought:
"On this I will rely—
The years of the right hand of power
of him who is Most High."

Throughout the watches of the night
my songs I called to mind.
I pondered deeply, while my heart
an answer tried to find:

I will recall the LORD's great deeds—
your works of long ago.
I'll meditate on all your acts;
your mighty deeds I'll show.

Reflection

One of the things I like about the Psalms is that the Psalmists don't hesitate to tell God exactly how they are feeling; there's no British understatement or feeling that a sentiment is 'inappropriate' to address to God. This Psalm is one of a group that reflects on Israel's history and relationship with God, and may have been written before the exile to Babylon. At its heart is the question expressed in the sixth stanza above - has the God who brought the Israelites safely through the Red Sea now abandoned them?

The Psalmist finds comfort in looking backwards - recalling God's great deeds in the past, and committing to meditate on them. Perhaps that sometimes helps us - if I've bodedged something at work, it can help me to remember that actually things do go well most of the time - and sometimes they even go very well - and not to catastrophize just because I've had a bad day. But at other times do we

begin to suspect that, as the financial adverts tend to say. "Past performance is no guarantee of future results"?

In this Psalm, we hear feelings of being alone, without hope and without God being expressed and honoured, not dismissed, or dispatched with an instruction to pull oneself together. Psalmists find their way through the dark night, but what is our way? And how do we accompany others as they journey through such times? Perhaps the first step is to recognise that God already knows the depths to which we may feel we have sunk, and that there is no shame in telling God how we feel. And then may we pray that God works through us and our neighbours to bring comfort and hope.

Lord,

When we spend a troubled night
tossing and turning
worrying and fearing
bring peace.

When we fear the day to come
alone and exposed
uncertain and afraid
bring comfort.

When our neighbour is in distress
open our eyes
unfreeze our hearts
inspire us to travel together. Amen.

[Monday 17th December The Death of Solomon](#)

The Rev'd Nicola Furley-Smith, Moderator of Southern Synod

2 Kings 11: 42 - 43

Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, all that he did as well as his wisdom, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of Solomon? The time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years. Solomon slept with his

Why should the surrounding nations
say to us, "Where is your God?"
Make the peoples know your
vengeance
for your servants' outpoured blood.

May the groans of every prisoner
come before your throne on high;
By your arm outstretched in power
save all those condemned to die.

Reflection

What a delightfully cheerful Psalm for the Sunday after Christmas!

If nothing else it is a reminder, if we need it, that life goes on; that the shininess of Christmas celebrations and that of the New Year in a few day's time, is not shared by all of us. The groaning and suffering that pours from the Psalm is all too evident around the world.

Whilst some of us are lucky enough to get a break from the reality of the world's pain, others live with it every day.

That question 'Lord, how long?' has leapt out as being particularly pertinent just before we begin a New Year. We are used to making personal, individual promises to lose weight, finally get to the gym, or use social media less, but what about making promises for our community and world?

When we ask 'Lord, how long?', we know from Jorge Maldonado's song 'Sent by the Lord' that 'the task is mine(ours) to do'.

What about New Year promises to care for creation, recycle more, road-rage less, smile more, care more, pray and prophesy about God's Good News more?

What about every-day promises to learn about things we don't understand more, talk rather than judge more, seek peace more, walk the way of Jesus more?

Lord, remember how our neighbours
treat you with contempt and scorn;
And into their laps deliver
sev'nfold judgment in return.

Then shall we, the sheep you
pasture,
worship and adore your name;
And through every generation
your unending praise proclaim.

The family return home and we are told Jesus was obedient to his parents and he grew in wisdom, gaining favour with God and with people. Jesus grows up, matures, just as all teenagers do, and gains experience to help him continue life as an adult.

Gracious God,
we pray for families, especially during this Christmas season.
For those who struggle to find ways of communicating with one another;
where illness or anxiety dominate their experience of family life;
where poverty is a daily reality and providing food,
heat and clothing is a major challenge;
May we reach out in love to those we know who are in need,
enabling them to experience family as a place of wellbeing and security,
as a place which reflects your love for us. Amen

Sunday 30th December PSALM 79

The Rev'd Martin Knight is Minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon

LORD, the nations have invaded
and attacked your heritage;
They defiled your holy temple—
crushed Jerusalem in rage.

They have given your saints' bodies
to the birds of prey as meat;
And the corpses of your servants
to wild animals to eat.

They have poured out blood like
water
all around Jerusalem—
Bodies everywhere, and no one
to give burial to them.

We are objects of derision
to the neighbours of our land;
Scorn, reproach and degradation
circle us on every hand.

LORD, how long? Will your
displeasure
still run on and never tire?
How long will your jealous anger
burn like all-consuming fire?

Pour your fury on the nations
that refuse to seek your face,
For they have uprooted Jacob
and destroyed his dwelling-place.

Charge us not with the
transgressions
of our forebears long ago;
May your mercy come to meet us—
you have brought us very low.

Help us, LORD, our God and Saviour,
for the glory of your name.
For your name's sake come and save
us; take away our sin and shame.

ancestors and was buried in the city of his father David; and his son Rehoboam succeeded him.

Reflection

Solomon dies. Not the most exciting verses in 1 Kings but some of the most poignant as a lesson for us all. We remember Solomon as a man rooted deeply in God whose wisdom outshines all the peoples of the East, and who pens over 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs. Not a bad legacy for a 40 year reign. Leaders of the ancient world, including the Queen of Sheba, sought him out for counsel. Yet, despite his wisdom, he turned from his first love and his unfaithfulness led to dividing the kingdom.

Solomon was undoubtedly a great statesman. However, expanding trade routes put temptation in his way. Deuteronomy gives clear instructions to kings warning against three things: not to take too many wives, not to accumulate too much wealth nor acquire too many horses. Despite the warnings, lust and greed turn his head as he takes 700 wives, and 300 concubines, from foreign territories. He acquires much wealth but at the cost of high taxes and conscripted labour. He multiplies his horses (amasses a large army) despite never going to war. God warns him that the legacy of his turning will be a divided kingdom; that is what happens. When he died, Rehoboam, his son, continued his father's oppressive policies and Israel divided from Judah and the unified kingdom ended.

Willful failure to do what God asks brings destruction. It is as simple as that. Lust, greed for power, and love for the world makes Solomon compromise his faithfulness and obedience to God. Yet Solomon's story could be our story. It is so easy to drift away. Lust, greed and preoccupation with worldly things are still human problems. Solomon, who was once close to the heart of God - preferring Wisdom to the ways of the world - died smothered in wealth, sex and power. The story of Solomon is a sad moral tale for us all.

Merciful God,
create in me a clean heart, O God.
When I am steeped in the empty values of the world
instead of your holiness and glorious light
create in me a clean heart, O God.

When I have allowed myself to be immersed in the darkness and corruption that seduces me away from being light and salt to the world.

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

When I have hung onto worthless things

having a heart of selfishness

and lacking a sense of awe at your Wisdom and your Word.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,

and renew a loyal Spirit within me. Amen.

[Tuesday 18th December The Birth of John the Baptist Announced](#)

The Rev'd Andrew Royal, Minister Maidstone & Staplehurst URC

St Luke 1: 1 - 24

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before

in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Reflection

This story concludes Luke's account of Jesus' birth. He follows the Greco-Roman literary style which ensures that the heroic adult has an equally heroic childhood. In telling this story of Jesus in the Temple, Luke emphasises Jesus' grace and wisdom, themes which run through all of Luke's birth narratives. In using this literary device Luke may have wished his readers to focus on the divinity of Jesus, however I suspect that many 21st Century readers understand this story as highlighting the humanity of Jesus.

'He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy' declares Mary, in the Life of Brian and that may be our first thought on reading this story. The anguish experienced by Mary and Joseph as they search for their son manifests itself as anger when Jesus is found, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' If we have ever had an experience of 'losing' a child, even if just for a few minutes, then we can readily identify with Mary's words, we have had her experience of anxiety for Jesus' welfare, guilt at not realising he was missing, relief at finding him safe and well and that coming together in anger towards the disobedient child.

And what of Jesus, those who heard him were amazed at understanding and his answers but do we see him in this story as some kind of child genius or a self absorbed teenager, doing what he wants to do and seemingly unaware of the consequences of his actions and the impact it has on others?

Many of us have spent our lives serving God. We have catered meals, prayed, led worship, mowed lawns, painted rooms, moved chairs, washed dishes, visited the sick and imprisoned. No job has been too big or too small as we have cared for the community gathered in our churches. We do all this because we want to serve God, the one who loves us.

Yet sometimes we may struggle with all we are called to do—especially, as we, like, Anna, age. We may even wonder what it is all for—who will come behind us? When we are gone, who will serve God? We pray, we wait, we hope. And then one day, like Anna, we catch a glimpse of the future, a glimpse of hope, in the face of a child running around the church, in the smile of a stranger who receives a cup of tea at the coffee morning, in the tears of a young mum relieved at being heard, in the lonely man who shares a joke. And we know why we keep doing it—love. Love for the stranger; love for the friend. Love for the young, the old, the in-between. God’s love calls us and God’s love keeps us serving.

Loving God,
We catch a glimpse of you in the face of the “other.”
As our lives meet, help us offer a word of hope or an act of love.
As our lives meet, help us receive them as a gift.

Give us courage to continue serving, despite our age, our fears, our inadequacies.
Keep us faithful and hopeful like Anna.

Fill your Church with the spirit of love and hopefulness.
Amen.

[Saturday 29th December Jesus in the Temple](#)

The Rev’d Lindsey Sanderson is minister of the East Kilbride and Hamilton Joint Pastorate and Scottish College Tutor.

St Luke 2: 41 - 52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind

his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ‘This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’

Reflection

In the Retail Sector the Christmas tree and decorations may already be down. Forget Advent, let’s fast forward to Christmas. We still have 7 days to go. Do you remember and could you play a cassette and video - the rewind and fast forward buttons?. I have no need to worry about finding a DVD or video for my favourite Christmas movie: ‘Miracle on 34th Street’. A little girl presents a judge with a Christmas card and within it is a one dollar bill and she has highlighted ‘In God We Trust’. It will have been played over and over again as channels dedicated to Christmas movies have been showing since August.

If you follow the Revised Common Lectionary it fast forwards to verse 26: ‘In the sixth month’. The Lectionary omits this text from Luke. If you only follow the Lectionary then you would never hear: ‘Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us’ (Luke 1:1). In the preface to the African Bible Commentary, edited by Tokunboh

Adeyemo, it says: 'Luke acknowledges that he is not the first to try and record Jesus' life'.

Some of us may be counting down the number of carols services left, hoping that our voices hold. Zechariah became 'silent and unable to speak' with the appearance of Gabriel: 'I was sent to you to bring you Good News'. So let's put our trust in God. If we are left speechless or silent we trust in the One who sent a vulnerable Baby Jesus into the world to transform the world as we know it.

And if the worst happens: 'Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary'. But first let's welcome John who prepares the way for Jesus of Nazareth.

Prayer:

The countdown continues -
only 7 sleeps to Christmas -
only 7 services to go.

Scriptures show us

that you never give up on us,
and you use people who feel
they have nothing left to give.

('For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years')

'Actions speak louder than words'

and may the birth of Jesus
change the lives

of those who are desperate,
alone and afraid.

For Christ's sake. Amen.

[Wednesday 19th December The Visitation](#)

Dr Lesley Bailey, Lay Preacher, St George's URC, Maghull, Liverpool

St Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house

and our own longings too.

In the life and ministry that you will have
we are destined to fall and rise.

Give us to depart in peace

and to confess

the pale but certain dawn of grace that we have seen.

[Friday 28th December Anna's Words](#)

The Rev'd Martha McInnes is the Chaplain at Willen Hospice, Milton Keynes

St Luke 2: 36 - 40

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Reflection

These verses are ones which we often skip over as we move from the joy of Jesus' birth to the importance of his life. Yet these verses teach us something about the community in which Luke found himself. This growing community included the ministry of strong and faithful women.

Anna was one such woman. She, before Elizabeth or Mary were born, gave her life to serving God. She had married, yes, but she was widowed at a young age. Instead of remarrying, as was common practice, she dedicated herself to serving God. She lived many years in the Temple, praying, waiting, and hoping for a sign from God. One day she saw that sign in the face of a child.

Reflection

Jesus was brought to the Temple and named in the common way. They called him “Jesus” as they had been told. His was an ordinary name for Jewish children. Its meaning carried a very ordinary longing, the longing for salvation.

What were the parents who gave that name hoping to be saved from, I wonder. From everything, I suppose you could say. There were so many things that one might wish salvation from – from the Romans, and the Law, certainly. Perhaps from the past and from the present, and from the future that seemed inevitably coiled into both.

In later years Jesus would be found in the Temple as a questioning boy, as an ordinary pilgrim and again as an angry prophet. But today the child is the object of others’ action and by their deed bound into the community in that very physical way practiced by the Jewish people.

Then Simeon speaks and yearning itself is named, and the beginning of hope’s fulfilment.

People through the ages have longed for so many things – for justice, for love, for freedom, for wholeness and reconciliation, for emancipation in law and society, for peace, for forgiveness and an end to pain. Sometimes it is enough to see the dawn and to know that the light of hope’s fulfilment is coming.

In imagination can you stand with Simeon? Can you stand beside those who suffer injustice, prejudice, poverty? Join their longings with your own and rejoice at signs of hoped-for change begun, watching keenly for the first signs of a new kingdom order?

And will you commit to live and speak, to pray and act to hasten the coming of fullness of life?

Jesus, child of promise
bearer of our deepest longings
we cradle you in our tired-of-waiting arms
and gaze into your face.

In your eyes we see the hopes of the ages,
24

of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection

I don’t know about you, but I’ve often wondered exactly what Mary was doing when Gabriel turned up that day. Of one thing I am sure - she didn’t expect what happened. The angel arrives and tells her that her whole life is about to turn completely upside down. Perplexed doesn’t begin to cut it for me!

She’s nothing special - and certainly doesn’t think of herself as anyone special - that’s why Gabriel’s greeting - “favoured one” - confuses her.

It gets worse from there on in - because what Gabriel has to tell her is big - life threatening - news; the punishment for being an unfaithful woman (and Mary was betrothed to Joseph - and being betrothed was as good as being married in Jewish society) was stoning. Mary is quick to protest her virtue.

She protests her innocence. I’m not sure she really understood it all - and I’m not sure that we do either. It’s one of those holy, mysterious, things that God does from time to time. So, in order to reassure her, Gabriel offers something that she can understand - her relative Elizabeth, who was thought to be far too old to ever have a baby is six months pregnant - God can do anything.

And that was enough for Mary - perhaps she had seen how despairing Elizabeth had become, just as likely she had heard her mother talk about the great sorrow

visited upon Elizabeth and Zechariah in a society where children were seen as such a sign of God's blessing (as they are today). With the clear sighted faith that characterises each of her appearances in the Gospel narratives, Mary says yes.

Just sometimes - it's all a bit of a mystery to us. Life unravels at the seams - and all the certainties change. It certainly doesn't seem to be anything we've done! Do we, I wonder, have the clear sighted faith to look around us and see God at work - and just say "yes" - no matter how perplexed we may be?

Lord, in the middle of everyday life you appear
and turn our ordered world upside down.
We're nothing special - and You intervene to change things.
We don't always understand,
we make excuses,
we look for proof.
You've shown us before how You've acted
to change lives - so why not ours?
Help us to respond with clear sighted faith
knowing that You will see us through
because it was always Your idea. Amen

Thursday 20th December Mary Visits Elizabeth

The Rev'd John A Young retired minister of the Scottish Synod, member of Giffnock URC

St Luke 1: 39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Thursday 27th December Naming and Presentation

The Rev'd Dr John McNeil Scott is Principal of the Scottish United Reformed & Congregational College

St Luke 2: 21 - 34

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

rather later pairing. I like the tune Ilkley Moor not just because it's rather fun to sing but because it speaks of the north, of common ordinary people.

Shepherds were the uncouth outsiders of their day. They had to be outside the villages with their sheep. They "keeping watch" over their flocks to see off wolves or thieves. Neither wolves nor thieves are great at observing the Law to rest once a week so Sabbath day work was necessary. To these outsiders, the message of God's passionate, embodied, entry into the world is first announced. No royal announcement on the palace gates, no feasting, no flummery, not even an ode from the Poet Laureate. Instead the angels of heaven sing in joy and announce the news that God is now one of us to, as the hymn puts it, "certain poor shepherds."

The nativity stories hammer home the point that God is to be found with the lost, the poor, the outsider, in the least expected places - smelling of His sheep. The irony is that Christianity has become far too respectable, clean, and moralistic. Pope Francis, early in his reign, exhorted priests to "be shepherds with the smell of sheep so that people can sense the priest is not just concerned with his own congregation, but is also a fisher of men."* It seems to me that we all need, minister or member, to smell of the sheep that the Lord has given us to care for.

*<https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/pope-francis-priests-should-be-shepherds-living-with-the-smell-of-the-sheep/13439>

Prayer

Don't sate my soul
with common sense
distilled from ages past
inept for those who fear the world's
about to breathe its last.

Don't set the Cross before my eyes
unless you tell the truth
of how the Lord, who finds the lost,
was often found uncouth.

So let the Gospel come alive
in actions plain to see
in imitation of the one
whose love extends to me.

I need to know that God is real!
I need to know that Christ can feel
the need to touch and love and heal
the world, including me!

Reflection

Why the haste? Was Mary bursting to tell the news? A young pregnant unmarried mother with her story of a divine conception? If so, why the rush to go to her kinswoman's house some distance away? It was surely a story worth telling firstly to her Nazareth relations and neighbours? But no, Mary chose to travel. Alone? Possibly, we're not told of any companion.

Many have speculated on Mary's reasons for going away in haste. Was it on an impulse to get away from village gossip? Were her local relations (on her side and Joseph's) scandalised by her news? Did they actually encourage her to go? Or did she need time and space to reflect on the momentous happenings in her life (we recall that after Jesus' birth she pondered on all that had happened). Whatever we might conclude, the Scriptural link is the figure of the angel Gabriel appearing to both women – announcing the forthcoming births of John to Elizabeth, and Jesus to Mary. Both are amazed at the news of such divine providence in their different lives, and despite this, both accept it.

Mary may have left in haste, but she did not return in a hurry. It would be some two months into her pregnancy before she returned to Nazareth. In Elizabeth she found a kindred spirit. But she found more than that. In Elizabeth she found confirmation that her pregnancy was even more special than that of Elizabeth. She was 'Theotokos' (bearer of God) as Greek Orthodox theology names her. As a result, her son's adult mission was to be just that, God bearer. Do we, in our turn, recognise that we too are called to be bearers of God to others. What a privilege. How far has our mission gone?

Prayer

Gracious God help us to reflect slowly
and with deep gratitude and wonder, on the story
of how you chose to come among us.
You choose ordinary people like us to be God bearers
to a world in need of good news.
Strengthen our hearts and minds with your Spirit in these days,
so that our lives become a blessing to others Amen

Friday 21st December Magnificat

Kirsty-Ann Mabbott, Church Related Community Worker

St Luke 1: 46 - 56

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflection

Throughout Advent we reflect on the Nativity; many will have been involved in Nativity plays with children over the last few weeks, whether it be directly in church or school, or, indirectly, as someone who has been to watch children perform. Often in these plays Mary is presented as meek and mild, yet, if we are honest with ourselves, that isn't who Mary is.

Mary is bold and courageous, Mary breaks social norms and protocols. Mary's song can be seen as an act of resistance, a song that has confidence in God's

the God who loves us and sent His son,
born as our saviour,
so long ago and far away,
and who still lives in our hearts today. Amen.

Wednesday 26th December The Shepherds and the Angels

The Rev'd Andy Braunston is minister of Barrhead, Shawlands and Stewarton URCs in the Synod of Scotland.

St Luke 2: 8 - 20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflection

Over the years my long-suffering musicians, have learnt that I do like to play with tunes, swapping what, at times, can be dreary to rather more interesting ones. For many years, I've watched congregations enjoy (not so sure about the musicians) singing *While Shepherds Watched* to the Yorkshire tune *On Ilkley Moor Bar 'tat*. It works well, gives some gusto to the hymn and was one of the first to be set to that hymn. Winchester New - the tune normally used - was a

bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Reflection

First of all, Merry Christmas! If you are reading this on Christmas Day itself, well done! I'm tempted to say you should be enjoying yourself instead, but reflecting on the Gospel is surely a good way to celebrate.

We know the stories around the birth of Jesus very well; they're comforting and familiar readings we enjoy hearing at Carol Services, ideally in a candle-lit church. However, if we read carefully all sorts of difficulties emerge. Matthew and Luke have mutually contradictory stories, while many scholars consider that historically they don't add up (there's no record of a census at the right time.) Meanwhile, the writer of John's gospel doesn't even seem to be aware of the tradition that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (see John 7.40-44).

So if we read these stories as we would a modern history book they soon unravel. But that's to miss a much bigger, and more profound, point. In piecing together their texts from various sources the four Gospel writers had to make all sorts of tricky literary and theological decisions. How could they possibly make clear that Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfilment of God's promises? The details all have symbolic meaning, and show just how amazing the birth of this one child was. Bethlehem links Jesus back to King David, the stable shows Jesus on the side of the dispossessed and the poor. All of this is astounding and powerful testimony to a quite remarkable claim: that God really was born in the person of Jesus Christ. Looked at critically, that seems very unlikely indeed. But we believe it happened. The Gospel writers believed it, and they used every tool they had to proclaim it; these stories are theology, not history.

So enjoy your Christmas dinner, enjoy watching Doctor Who, and remember too the God who came down to earth to live with us.

Prayer

In the midst of our Christmas,
whether it is noisy and crowded or quiet and intimate,
remind us, O God, that the celebrations
are to help us to remember and give you thanks -

promise to turn the world upside-down by overthrowing the powerful and raising up the oppressed. Mary is an agent of liberation, one who sings in hope. Recognising her own dark and difficult situation Mary knows that God promises to bring her (and us) through to the other side. Mary sings not of the work God will do, but of the work God has done, and is doing, to save, liberate and reconcile humanity to each other and to God's own self.

In Eastern Christianity Mary's song is called the Ode of the Theotokos (God-bearer often translated as Mother of God.) The title reminds us that God and Mary both made radical choices, God in choosing incarnation and Mary in saying "yes" to God. We could do well to remember that this was the beginning of a revolution that still ripples through the world today.

So I dare you, in the coming days as we move closer to celebrating the birth of Christ, to remember the not-so-meek-and-mild but still grace-filled Mother of God, Mary. Remember how her act of courage and conviction demonstrates the power of God and the ever renewing work of liberation to which we are called to be a part of and party to.

Prayer

Radical God,
Mary's song of your mercy and love
resounds in our ears.
Enable us to not only hear that song
of hope and redemption for ourselves,
but also be your agents of liberation
in the world today for others.
At this time we remember
the light, hope and joy
that came into the world
in the person of Jesus
and spur us to share that
with all we meet in action and love. Amen.

[Saturday 22nd December The Birth of John the Baptist](#)

The Rev'd Geoffrey Clarke, Minister, The Crossing (Methodist & United Reformed) Church, Worksop and Wales Kiveton Methodist Church

St Luke 1: 57 - 66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Reflection

I am amused by one of my friends, who frequently remarks, "It is never going to happen. Not in a million years." Up until nine months earlier the couple at the heart of today's reading might well have used that phrase. The joy of becoming parents was never going to happen. Not in a million years. And Zechariah – despite being a priest – was, literally, silenced by disbelief. Yet here we find them rejoicing. (Or, in the case of Zechariah, on the eighth day he is finally able to sing his praises!) John's birth is cause for rejoicing. It is truly good news. Something that, humanly speaking, was never going to happen through God's mercy does happen. In common with Elizabeth's relative, Mary, this couple can proclaim that "the Lord has done great things" for them. Holy is his Name!

This special baby could well have ended up with his dad's name. Yet both Elizabeth and Zechariah were agreed: 'His name is John.' Was it purely coincidental that it was at the point the two of them agreed on the name for this gift of God that Zechariah's mouth was re-opened, his tongue freed and he began speaking and praising God? I'd like to think not. There is such liberating

On Christmas Eve we remember past Christmases with their joys and sorrows. We look again to the coming of Jesus among us, the gift of the Holy Spirit to Mary. We lament unfulfilled dreams and anticipate the simple reality of the birth of God's son, present at one time for all time.

With the full heart of Zechariah, let us sing God's praise. Let us pray for the dawn of God's mercy, which Zechariah anticipated, to break in again on us.

Prayer:

In your tender mercy,
May your light dawn in my life
May that light illuminate my darkness,
Give me courage in the face of death,
Guide me in the paths of peace.

May this Christmas be a time of blessing
In the midst of joy or lament,
In the giving and receiving of gifts
In activity or inactivity.

May my life echo Zechariah's song of praise and hope,
At this time, for all time.

[Tuesday 25th December The Birth of Jesus](#)

The Rev'd Nick Jones is minister of Heswall URC & St. George's URC, Thornton Hough

St Luke 2: 1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in

and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon[h] us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until
the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Reflection

Christmas Eve, only one day to go before the big day itself. Christmas Eve, a
time of anticipation of all that lies ahead, with family and friends, with gifts
given and received, with solemn or celebratory services. Christmas Eve, heaving
a sigh of relief at the end of a busy Advent and looking for a moment of calm, or
gearing up for an even busier Christmas Day. Christmas Eve, a time when the
memories of those who are no longer with us come home to us, and when the
unfulfilled dreams of the embodiment of God's love amongst the hungry and
the suffering cause us to lament.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had gone through difficult times over many years,
yearning for a child. In their old age their yearning was fulfilled. Zechariah calls
out in praise to God, in words that have been turned into song over many
centuries. 'Blessed be the God of Israel...'. Some have imagined Zechariah
holding his son John in his arms as he uttered the words of the Benedictus.
These words point to the sweep of Jewish history, through God's power at work
in the prophets, in David and in Abraham. The words draw together past
memories, with the present moment of birth, and the promise of future
fulfilment.

joy when any of us discover a bond and affinity with others in appreciating the
goodness and generosity of God: mouths and hearts are opened, tongues are
freed and God is praised.

In two days' time the Church will celebrate the birth of a baby to whom
Elizabeth and Zechariah's lad will play 'second fiddle'. As we anticipate that
birth let us give thanks for any and all whose lives and love defy those who have
concluded, "It is never going to happen. Not in a million years."

Prayer:

Almighty God,
when we witness your mercy and goodness
may our mouths be opened and our tongues freed to give you praise.

We give thanks for those whose birth means most to us:
those in whose love and lives we find joy, encouragement and affinity.

Grant comfort and consolation to those who, today,
know the sadness that was to afflict Elizabeth and Zechariah:
the grief of losing one beloved.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

[Sunday 23rd December](#) [PSALM 78 1-11](#)

The Rev'd Jo Clare-Young is minister of the North Yorkshire Coast Pastorate of
the URC

O my people, hear my teaching;
parables I will unfold.
Give attention as I utter
dark and hidden things of old—
things that we have heard and
known;
by our fathers they were shown.

We will tell them to our children,
generations yet to come;
We will show the LORD's great
power
and the wonders he has done.
Laws for Israël he made,
statutes firm to be obeyed.

These he ordered our forefathers
to their families to tell,
So the coming generation,
not yet born, would know them well,
and their children, in their turn,
God's commands and laws would
learn.

Then to God they would be faithful,
mindful of what he had done—
Not like their disloyal fathers,
stubborn rebels every one;
for God's word they had denied
and his precepts they defied.

Such were those of Ephraim's army
who, though strong and armed with bows,
To the cov'nant were disloyal,
turned their back upon their foes.
They forgot what God had done,
and the wonders he had shown.

Reflection

The Psalmist is well aware of the power of stories - parables that teach. Stories that will be told to children for generations. The Psalmist knows that stories are a formidable way to teach about the Lord's power and wonders. Almost every child likes to be told a story, and, if we are honest, most adults love them too.

What an apt reminder to us, two days before Christmas, that stories should be told and re-told, for this is a time of year when we have an amazing story to tell. This is a time of year when people are curious about our story; a story of love, hope and joy, of a child in a manger; a child that saved us all.

Great stories are about love, heartbreak, battles won, enemies defeated, adventures, journeys, challenges, friendships and hope – and our story has all of these in one way or another. So just for a while, forget those questions and niggles we have about the facts, forget issues around the accuracy of astronomy, or virginity, or stables, and enjoy the story. Tell the story. Tell the story to anyone who will listen; the world is perhaps more willing to listen at Christmas. So, let's join the Psalmist and be storytellers.

Once upon a time in a land far far away there lived:

a donkey (little)
cattle (lowing)

angels (a host of)
shepherds (possibly with socks)
wise men (three or more)
an innkeeper (busy)
a king (insecure)
sheep (black, white and rainbow)
a mother (blessed)
a father (or two)
and a baby (a saviour, a king, a servant, a messiah, a miracle)

...and perhaps they didn't all live happily ever after, but because of that child all of humanity might live, now and forever.

Prayer

Lord of Song and Story,
Inspire us to be storytellers, narrators, bards.
Inspire us to tell our story and share our good news,
to tell of the Christ child who came to end divisions,
who came to share love. Amen

[Monday 24th December Zechariah's Prophecy](#)

The Rev'd Elizabeth Welch, minister, Clapton Park United Reformed Church, Hackney, London.

St Luke 1: 67-80

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour[g] for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,