

Onslow Anglicans Advent Reflections

2018



Reflections for Advent 2018

Date	Reading	Reflection by
Sunday 2 December	Jer.33: 14-16	Flora McIntyre
Monday 3 December	Matt 8: 5-11	Ted Newport
Tuesday 4 December	Luke 10: 21-24	Jonathan Cobb
Wednesday 5 December	Matt 15:29-37	Jonathan Cobb
Thursday 6 December	Matt 7: 21, 24-27	Bridget Hodgkinson
Friday 7 December	Matt 9: 27-31	Bridget Hodgkinson
Saturday 8 December	Isa 30: 19-21,23-26	Monika Smith
Sunday 9 December	Malachi 3:1-4	Sarah Boyle
Monday 10 December	Isa 35	Sarah Boyle
Tuesday 11 December	Isa 40:1-11	Monika Smith
Wednesday 12 December	Matt 11: 28 - end	Deborah Olson
Thursday 13 December	Matt 11: 11-15	Tony Hooper
Friday 14 December	Matt 11:16-19	Tony Hooper
Saturday 15 December	Matt 17:10- 13	Deborah Olson
Sunday 16 December	Zeph 3: 14- 20	Monika Smith
Monday 17 December	Matt 1:1-17	Judy Haw
Tuesday 18 December	Matt 1:18-24	Judy Haw
Wednesday 19 December	Luke 1: 5-25	Lee Sheppard
Thursday 20 December	Luke 1: 26-38	Lee Sheppard
Friday 21 December	John 20: 24-29	John Whitehead
Saturday 22 December	Luke 1 46-56	John Whitehead
Sunday 23 December	Luke 1:39-45	Flora McIntyre
Monday 24 December	Luke 1: 67-79	Rosie Newport

Advent message from Rev. Rosie

Dear Friends in Christ:

Thank you to those in the Parish who participated in helping to make this Advent Reflection Booklet. Advent is a time to spend in spiritual preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas. Advent comes from the Latin word "adventus" which means "coming" or "arrival." Christians celebrate Advent not only as a way of remembering Christ's first coming as a human baby, but also for his continued presence with us today through the Holy Spirit, and in anticipation of his final return.

It is an opportunity to draw us into a deeper awareness of the truths we celebrate.

This meditation booklet is designed to assist the reader to undertake an Advent Journey, where one may discover God anew, who is the source of all life, all truth, all hope and all peace. May it be a season where we prepare for the Christ, so he may find a home anew in our hearts and homes.

We trust you will be blessed as you read the passage for the day and reflection that has been lovingly prepared. You may wish to light a candle before each reading and meditation.

An Advent Prayer

**O God,
as light comes from this candle,
may the blessing of Jesus Christ come to us,
warming our hearts and
brightening our way.
May Christ our Savior bring life
into the darkness of this world,
and to us, as we wait for his
coming**

Every Blessing
Rosie



2 December Sunday

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Reflection

By Flora McIntyre

Jeremiah sets out a clear prophecy about God raising up ‘a righteous branch from the line of David. A man who will do what is just and right in the land.

As I reflect on the idea of doing the just and right thing I wonder how Jesus must feel when he does the right thing by humanity and so very often he has to contend with people either completely missing the point or coming up with their own bright idea or interpretation.

Many of us have raised children or have managed staff and know only too well how very patient we have to be. I am, and continue to be in awe of God’s love and patience with me that he has raised up The Lord our Righteous Saviour. Thank goodness for divine love and patience.

3 December

Monday

Matt 8: 5-11

⁵ When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶ and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” ⁷ And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” ⁸ The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” ¹⁰ When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,

Reflection

By Ted Newport

Jesus has just been teaching the crowds on the mountain, reinforcing his message with signs and wonders. The people are recorded at the end of chapter 7 as being amazed at his supernatural authority. A Roman Centurion, the local symbol of authority and power, who no doubt had been watching the crowd for signs of lawlessness, came and pleaded on behalf of his servant. When Jesus agreed to accompany this 'gentile,' the Roman insisted that this obviously holy man should not stoop by coming to his house, but simply command the healing. Jesus was amazed at his faith and commented how he had not heard such faith expressed in all of Israel.

- What is our level of faith as we approach Jesus in prayer for the sick?
- Do we tend to pray only as a last resort?

4 December

Tuesday

Luke 10:21-24

²¹ At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

²³ Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴ For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

Reflection

By Jonathan Cobb

Have you ever wasted 10 minutes of your life staring at one of those Magic Eye pictures and seeing nothing beyond coloured dots and a forthcoming migraine? Only for some 5-year-old to walk up, take a quick look and declare “it’s a dolphin, can’t you see it!”

“Unless you change and become as a little child you will not see/ enter the kingdom of heaven”

The wise and the learned often miss the reality of who Christ is but those to whom he reveals himself, who do truly see are called “blessed”.

May we afresh see through eyes of a child, as St Paul says “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened”.

5 December

Wednesday

Matt 15:29-37

²⁹ After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. ³⁰ Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, ³¹ so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

³² Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." ³³ The disciples said to him, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" ³⁴ Jesus asked them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish." ³⁵ Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, ³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ³⁷ And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

Reflection

By Jonathan Cobb

Compassion is much more than pity and intrinsically involves some form of action.

Jesus is fully aware of the reality of being human. We hunger. Without food we collapse. Jesus knows that man doesn't live by bread alone but is aware that the people who have been following him for three days, and seeing the miracles and hearing his words, are now at a point where physical feeding is required. Actions speak louder?

A question:

I wonder why the feeding of 4000 comes so soon after the feeding of the 5000, barely a chapter later. Repetition for emphasis?

To slightly misquote Flannery O'Connor "...to the hard of hearing you repeat (shout)...".

6 December

Thursday

Matt 7: 21, 24-27

21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Reflection

By Bridget Hodgkinson

In this passage Jesus is saying that only those who do God's will, will be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven and that not everyone who calls Jesus 'Lord' will be welcome.

Jesus uses a simile to demonstrate the difference between listening and obeying and listening but not obeying his word. He demonstrates this in the story of two builders of houses: the one who is wise builds on rock, and has a strong foundation while other, a foolish man, builds on sand, on a weak base.

Here Jesus is telling us that a person who listens to his words and obeys them has a strong foundation for life. He will be able to stand up to life's difficulties, and will survive because he has a strong base.

On the other hand, Jesus says that a person who listens to his words but does not obey them does not have the same strong foundation and therefore will not be able to withstand life's trials.

7 December Friday

Matt 9:27-31

27 As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" 28 When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." 29 Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith let it be done to you." 30 And their eyes were opened. Then Jesus sternly ordered them, "See that no one knows of this." 31 But they went away and spread the news about him throughout that district.

Reflection

By Bridget Hodgkinson

This passage is about the power of belief; how a strong belief in God can result in miracles. It is about Jesus healing two men of their blindness.

The two men followed Jesus as he walked along; they called out to him and they followed him when he went indoors. They persisted because they were absolutely sure that Jesus could heal them. When Jesus asked them directly if they believed he could heal them they answered 'Yes, sir!' without hesitation. And when Jesus put his hands on their eyes and asked that it happen, just as they believed, their sight was restored. They truly believed and so they were healed.

This passage reminds us that with persistence and a strong belief in God, anything is possible.

At the end of the passage, despite being exhorted by Jesus not to tell others about this, the men were so excited and ecstatic with what had occurred to them that they couldn't help telling everyone what Jesus had done for them.

8 December

Saturday

Isa 30:19-21, 23-26

19 Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. 20 Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. 21 And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”

23 He will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and grain, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plentiful. On that day your cattle will graze in broad pastures; 24 and the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. 25 On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. 26 Moreover the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

Reflection

By Monika Smith

Prophets! The holy land must have been teeming with them - human spokesmen for God, revealing his will through sermons, exhortations and teachings. Their concern was not the proper observance of sacrifices and ritual - that was the priests' job - but calling for direct obedience for God's laws and distinguishing their true God from the many false gods around. Of course, the false Gods, such as Baal, also had their own prophets and it must have been difficult for the people to figure out whom to follow. Disobedience and apostasy could explain any troubles occurring, such as famines, defeat in battle, or oppression by unjust rulers. According to the prophets, all those afflictions were sent directly by God as punishment for both specific rulers and the population in general. To improve their situation, people had to repent their selfishness and moral degradation, follow God's laws and then God would send help and remedy the situation. Thus the prophetic writings will be full of dreadful scolding's - "it's all your own fault!", lamentations over the fate of sinners (the prophet Jeremiah is especially good at those), and will also contain the most dire predictions of even worse troubles to come, exile, destruction of the city, the country, the end of the world. But to keep people listening, the scourge had to be complemented by the carrot. Thus the grim sections are sparingly peppered with promises of aid, better times and descriptions of the good times to come if the people follow the prophet's teaching and repent appropriately. The reading for this day is such a bit of light relief in the middle of a long section predicting catastrophes (such as the "Babylonian Exile" which is later seen as having been accurately predicted by the prophet) and lamentations. A helper is promised - Isaiah is the first prophetic book that mentions the Messiah - who will reinstate order and introduce a Golden Age.

I was a bit puzzled by the omission of verse 22 in this reading. It describes one of the conditions for bringing about the Golden Age, namely the defilement and destruction of false idols, which will be tossed out like menstrual cloths (or, in more mealy-mouthed translations, "like unclean things".) I don't know who sets the daily readings - where they unhappy about the mentioning of idols or couldn't they stomach the strong descriptive language?

9 December Sunday

Malachi 3:1-4

3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Reflection

By Sarah Boyle

I think this passage signifies that the people of the day were ready to welcome a new Lord, were open to suggestions about what this new Lord would be like, and be accepting to this new Lord. It also suggests to the people, that the new Lord would be everything they desired, but maybe not in the way they expected. The people of the time, thought that the Lord who will come, would be great and grand with lots of power! They were mistaken in that. Jesus's biggest lesson would be - to love others completely. Little did they know, that he would make the biggest sacrifice to save everyone. I think it says: look forward to the future – it may not be as you expect, but it will be great.

10 December Monday

Isaiah 35

35 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

8 A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,

20 and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Reflection

By Sarah Boyle

I really loved this passage : how it signifies that everything that is struggling will be restored. Whether that be the desert, the body, the highway or the animals. It signifies a time in Advent to me, that we should be joyfully awaiting what is to come. “Be strong, do not fear, your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution”. We need to just keep looking, keep believing, and joy will come.

11 December

Tuesday

Isaiah 40:1-11

1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Reflection

By Monika Smith

Again, here we have a hopeful message as a comfort in dire times. And the times were very dire and would continue thus for at least another 100 years.

This is my favourite chapter of Isaiah. The second author included in this book - biblical scholarship assumes at least three, if not many more prophets published under the name of Isaiah - is a wonderful poet and his language and imagery is unsurpassed. No wonder the words of this chapter have been set to music by many composers. While I read this excerpt, I can hear the music in my brain. Verses 1 to 5 open Handel's great oratorio "The Messiah" as a glorious tenor recitative and aria. Verses 6 to 8 form the most ravishing part of Johannes Brahms' "German Requiem". Then we go back to Messiah, where verse 9 is set as an alto aria and chorus, which I have sung many times. And the first Messiah solo I ever studied was the little aria quoting verse 11

12 December

Wednesday

Matthew 11:28-30

28 “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Reflection

By Deborah Olson

First-century Israel - or Judea as it was then known - was, of course under the rigours of Roman rule. Still, Judaism was accepted by Rome as the religion of the local people. By this time, Judaism was highly codified and ritualised, with the true wisdom of God only known by learned men such as the Pharisees. The ordinary Jewish people - the craftsmen, the tradesmen, the fishermen - were tied to the "yoke" of the laws and rules of the Jewish faith, and required to submit to certain practices and rituals without really understanding their faith.

Jesus sees the Jewish people as being weary and burdened, carrying the "yoke" of Moses' law and expectations of the Pharisees. And of course, they carry also the "yoke" of their own worries - financial, familial, their wrongdoings - all the things we recognise in our own lives. He invites his followers to throw off those burdens and come to him for rest. He will take their yoke upon himself. Through him, and his taking their yoke upon himself, their souls will find rest in the love and mercy of God.

Do we continue to carry our burdens on our own? Do we, followers of Jesus, really ask Him to take our burdens from us, and trust in God to give our souls rest? I know I am guilty of not always doing this, of not taking the time out to pray, let God's presence be known to me, to unburden my soul and to take up His offer of infinite love and mercy.

13 December

Thursday

Matt 11:11-15

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; 14 and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 Let anyone with ears listen!

Reflection

By Tony Hooper

Early in chapter 11 of Matthew, the disciples ask Jesus if he is "the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Having recognised Jesus when he baptized him, John is having doubts. He has been thrown into prison by Herod, and clearly his deprivation and fear leave him wondering if his earlier prophesy about Jesus has been vindicated. To reassure John, Jesus instructs John's disciples to tell him what they have heard and seen - the prophecies of Isaiah 61 have been fulfilled – the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor receive good news.

Jesus then speaks to the crowds about John the Baptist. No one who has ever lived is greater than John the Baptist, Jesus says (11:11). He is the fulfillment of prophecy, the Elijah sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah (11:12-14). In this statement, Jesus is confirming for his own disciples that he is the Messiah. Now that the prophesy of Isaiah is being fulfilled through Jesus, even the least of the kingdom of heaven is greater than John (Matt: 11:11).

14 December Friday

Matt 11:16-19

16 “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

17 ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; 19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Reflection

By Tony Hooper

Jesus then goes on to say that the problem with this generation is that they have listened neither to John nor to Jesus. John's austere lifestyle led people to accuse him of having a demon, while Jesus' habit of eating and drinking with sinners earned him a bad reputation (11:18-19). This generation finds reason to take offense at both John and Jesus and thus to ignore the call of both. They are like children in the marketplace who cannot decide whether they want to play wedding games or funeral games and end up playing neither (11:16-17).

"Yet wisdom is proved right by her actions," Jesus says in Matt 11:19. Jesus' own deeds as described in 11:5 is the evidence that he is "the one who is to come," the one who ushers in God's kingdom. It is Jesus' coming that we await and celebrate at Advent. Christmas is the fulfillment of the promise.

15 December

Saturday

Matthew 17:10-13

10 And the disciples asked him, “Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” 11 He replied, “Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; 12 but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.” 13 Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

Reflection

By Deborah Olson

This is an enigmatic passage in Matthew, and I think it helps to read the preceding verses to understand its context. Jesus has taken his disciples up a mountain, and there they have seen him, along with Moses and Elijah, and heard the voice of God, telling them that Jesus is his beloved Son, that God loves what He's doing and instructs them to listen to Him.

It is as they are descending the mountain that the puzzled (and probably frazzled) disciples ask why the scribes (the calligraphers who produce Torah scrolls and other Jewish scripts) instruct them that they must listen to Elijah first. He is the one who will when things are going really badly (and they are - Rome is a brutal coloniser), come to the Jews' aid and prepare the way for the Son of God to deliver them. But now they are being instructed to listen to Jesus first, before Elijah has come? How can that be? Jesus says yes, Elijah does come first - and that in fact, he's already come. But he wasn't recognised as the new Elijah, and now he's gone, dead by the hands of the people, just as Jesus will also suffer and die at the hands of the people. It's then that the disciples understand that the latter-day Elijah Jesus talked of was John the Baptist.

I've really struggled with this passage and I'm not sure I still understand it. I think what it's saying is that we sometimes overlook important things. God stood by his promise to the Jews, but instead of Elijah He sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus. He stands by His promises to us. We need to see God's plan for us - by following Jesus in his teachings and being open to Him in prayer and contemplation. Our lives don't just tick on happily by. As much as we have joy, we experience sorrow, we have our achievements but we also experience deep disappointments. We even have our doubts about our faith. Nevertheless, in following Christ's teachings, and in being open to God's will, even in our darkest hours, it sometimes happens that not until later do we see God's work in our lives.

16 December Sunday

Zeph 3: 14- 20

14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

17 The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

18 as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

19 I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.

And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.

20 At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

Reflection

By Monika Smith

And here is a third joyful text from the prophets, this time a minor one. Zephania is generally pretty grim reading, warning about the destruction of Juda and Jerusalem, the "Dies Irae", the day of the wrath of the Lord when everything and everybody will be destroyed. Only at the very end of his book is there a glimmer of hope - "rejoice, daughter of Zion!" Again we have a wonderful setting of this text in Handel's Messiah and also in a lovely German hymn "Tochter Zion, freue dich".

What I'm wondering about, though, is why are we still reading the prophets today? And why are there still so many prophets around? The last and most important biblical prophets are supposed to have been John the Baptist and Jesus himself (according to Mark 6.4) but there were more prophets after that; from the Prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam, via a large number of Lutheran prophets in Germany in the 1600s, Joseph Smith of the Latter Day Saints, the Maori prophets such as Te Kooti and T.W. Ratana, also church leaders. Cooky modern Christian fundamentalist preachers also frequently set themselves up as prophets, explaining disasters and diseases as God's punishment for general moral decay and selfishness. Nothing has changed, really.

The prophet Daniel is not regarded as a prophet in the Old Testament tradition but became popular as such with Christians, and today especially with groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and others which attempt to predict the end of the world. Their interpretations have to be updated and reinterpreted frequently, whenever a deadline passes without the predicted events coming to pass. But that is the nature of prophetic predictions in general. They can only be proven (or not) after predicted events have come to pass and it is easy to read anything one wishes into their predictions. So why do we still read them? It seems that the human condition demands both explanations for troubled times and messages of hope; and many find both in the prophetic books.

17 December

Monday

Matt 1:1-17

1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15 and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Reflection

By Judy Haw

Family connections give us a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves. Is that the motivation behind the current desire to have our DNA traced? Without that connection, there can be an emptiness we cannot otherwise explain.

The record of Jesus' ancestry gives credence to the importance of our own family history. It adds another dimension to our understanding of who we are and where we have come from. Think of the many children who were taken from vulnerable areas in Great Britain during World War 11 and sent out to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Many of them lost contact with their families back home. They were devastated!

In the list of Jesus' ancestors the mention of Rahab and Ruth opens a picture of these two women from the Old Testament who showed great compassion in times of need. The work of the Holy Spirit is evident in the other characters of those preceding the Messiah and is the expression of God's presence in their lives.

The ordered nature of the fourteen generations that separated Abraham from King David, King David from the Babylonian Exile and the Babylonian Exile from the Messiah leaves me with a strong sense of Design in the work of our God and Father. The same sense of order is inherent in my respect for nature and the created universe that scientists are still exploring.

18 December

Tuesday

Matt 1:18-24

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

Reflection

By Judy Haw

The story of Joseph and Mary shows how intimately God knows and cares for us. He anticipates our worries and concerns. When we put our trust in him he knows how to allay those fears. And how do we respond? Our reaction shows our condition - with gratitude or disbelief?

Mary yielded herself, her reputation, her relationships, and her destiny to the Holy Spirit. She would face shame, rejection, pain, and the intense agony of seeing her son die on a cross. Nevertheless, she said to the Spirit, " I am the Lord's servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants" (Luke 1:38).

Are we willing to be so yielded to the Holy Spirit? He desires to birth new life in us. What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore. for the old life has gone. the new life has begun. This is summed up in John 3:5-8 when Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus.

" The Holy Spirit desires to birth God's Word in you. The only time

19 December

Wednesday

Luke 1:5-25

5 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. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 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. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 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." 18 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." 19 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. 20 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."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 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. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Reflection

By Lee Sheppard

The foretelling of the birth of a child to a previously barren woman – the announcement made to the prospective father rather than the mother.

The angel came to Zechariah and indicated that God would bring his promise to pass, Elizabeth will have a child and his name shall be John.

All of this must have been very scary for Elizabeth and Zechariah but also a wonderful time for them – at last they will be parents. Their feelings were mixed - joy certainly but they were getting old, they would have to prepare themselves for this major change in their lives. They do what they know best and pray to God for help and the angel answers telling them that the child will be a joy and delight to them, he will bring the people of Israel to the Lord, he will prepare the way for the Lord.

There are many people in the world today who are unable to have children who would love this to be the case for them – a much longed for baby. Hopes to be fulfilled, prayers to be answered, the joy of a child to be given to them.

If we have the same trust that Elizabeth and Zechariah had our hopes may be granted or not – we just have to believe that this is God's will however hard it may be to accept. We can only pray that all children will be treated as a gift from God , a precious thing to be treasured and cared for – sadly for some this is not the case.

20 December

Thursday

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 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

By Lee Sheppard

Another foretelling of birth but this time it's to a virgin – the shock of this must have been enormous for Mary. When an angel comes and tells her that she will have a child, that he will be the son of God, she is to name him Jesus, she replies 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be according to your word'. Although she is only engaged to Joseph and knows there will be some who think this is wrong they face the world and carry on with life trusting that the Lord knows best.

She knows her cousin Elizabeth is expecting a child so she hurries to see her. I wonder how they got on comparing notes on what had happened to them both – surely both of them would have been in awe and in trepidation of the future. For themselves and their expected children.

Mary and Joseph were, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, devout people chosen by God for a very special purpose, their trust in the Lord was complete and without reservation.

Maybe we, in this season of Advent, should renew our trust in the Lord, put our cares and worries in His hands and wait and see what happens. Maybe we will be surprised.....

21 December

Friday

John 21:24-29

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Reflection

By John Whitehead

Rather counter-intuitively perhaps, the story of “Doubting Thomas” has always filled me with hope. Here is one of Christ’s closest circle of friends, someone who had spent most of the last three years in the company of Jesus, who finds that belief deserts him when it comes to the resurrection.

I thank God for Doubting Thomas. Which of us has not had moments of doubt, even longer periods when our faith seems to have deserted us? I don’t know how you find it, but I am always haunted by guilt after one of these sessions: the rebuke “oh you of little faith” keeps echoing at the back of my mind. Yet faith without doubt is not really faith at all: we cannot call something faith if we admit of no uncertainty.

Thomas then reminds us that to doubt is human. Yet we are called by Jesus to believe, not to doubt. Ever since I was a child I have found Advent to be such a special and blessed time: a time of waiting, yes, but a time of growing and palpable excitement. Thomas had to wait another eight days before he had his wish fulfilled and Christ came to him again. I wonder how he felt as those days passed. Did he have a growing sense that something was about to happen? Such periods of waiting are valuable opportunities for us to strengthen our belief. “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.”

22 December

Saturday

Luke 1:46-56

46 And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

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

Reflection

By John Whitehead

Luke is the most poetic of the Gospels, and in many ways the Magnificat is a high point of the poetry. This is the song of a woman of immense faith, a woman who surrendered herself fully to God's will, and whose feelings burst out in such a wonderful response to Elizabeth's salutation.

The term we often use when we refer to a pregnant woman as "expecting", carries with it the connotation of waiting for something, something momentarily important, the birth of a child. In a way, our own period of Advent is a metaphor, a necessarily foreshortened one, for Mary's pregnancy. We have that opportunity to feel that sense of anticipation, that excitement, that expectation of an imminent event (while fortunately being spared most of the downside!).

I don't normally get my inspiration from YouTube, but in this pre-Christmas season "A two-minute Advent" caught my eye.

"We all know Christmas right? Shopping for presents, decorating the tree, singing carols, making gingerbread houses, sending cards, enjoying holiday parties

Making a list...

There's a lot more to it

Christmas is Christ entering the world.

And Advent is: Expectant waiting

Hopeful anticipation

And joyful preparation

And God coming into our hearts and lives

Advent is not: Waiting in line to see Santa

Rushing around shopping

Or a race to December 25...

Remember Advent

Isn't about

it's about

Shopping

Expecting

Stressing

Waiting

Planning

Hoping

Or buying

and praying

If you're sick of Christmas by December 25, you haven't done Advent correctly."

23 December

Sunday

Luke 1:39-45

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Reflection

By Flora McIntyre

The wonderful story of Elizabeth, Mary and their babies shows that God carries out his divine purpose regardless of age or status.

Elizabeth, as an older woman, would have been overjoyed to have her prayers answered and to be pregnant. Imagine her joy when she realised she was in the presence of her Lord and Saviour.

Babies are such precious wee things and in the womb they are sensitive to their surroundings and particularly the mood of their mother. Imagine the adrenaline kick Elizabeth's baby got from Elizabeth's joy.

Our God will send us messages through a whole range of methods. Pray that we can be open to seeing them.

24 December

Monday

Luke 1:67-79

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

68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us

in the house of his servant David,

70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,

73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

78 By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Reflection

By Rosie Newport

Zechariah praised God with his first words after months of silence. Zechariah's spirit-empowered poem recalls God's promises. The words of promise to David that "he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" and "the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham." The promises of salvation from enemies, of redemption from danger, of freedom to love and serve God in holiness and righteousness.

And the song announces that these promises are kept in the arrivals of John and Jesus.

John's own role would be to serve as "prophet of the Most High." It was God's promise to Abraham to bless all people through him and it would be fulfilled through the Messiah.

And when the first Christmas morn was dawning, the tender mercy of our God broke into the darkness of this world for all. That light still shines in the darkness. And the darkness cannot overcome it. May we know the joy and peace that our Saviour brings as we await his birth.