

Onslow Anglicans Advent Readings & Reflections

2020



Readings and Reflections for Advent 2020

Date	Reading	Reflection by
29-Nov	Mark 13:24-37	Lee Sheppard
30-Nov	Matt 4:18-22	Lee Sheppard
01-Dec	Luke 10:21-24	Flora McIntyre
02-Dec	Matt 15:29-37	Evelyn Dawson
03-Dec	Matt 7:21,24-27	Jennifer Timmings
04-Dec	Matt 9:27-31	John Dawson
05-Dec	Matt 9:35–10:1,6-8	
06-Dec	Mark 1:1-8	Barbara Caudwell
07-Dec	Luke 5:17-26	Jennifer Timmings
08-Dec	Matt 18:12-14	
09-Dec	Matt 11:28-end	John Whitehead
10-Dec	Matt 11:11-15	
11-Dec	Matt 11:16-19	Eileen Barrett-Whitehead
12-Dec	Matt 17:10-13	
13-Dec	John 1:6-8,19-28	John Whitehead
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16-Dec	Luke 7:18b-23	
17-Dec	Matt 1:1-17	Tony Hooper
18-Dec	Matt 1:18-24	Tony Hooper
19-Dec	Luke 1:5-25	Evelyn Dawson
20-Dec	Luke 1:26-38	Tony Hooper
21-Dec	Luke 1:39-45	Flora McIntyre
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23-Dec	Luke 1:57-66	Bridget Hodgkinson
24-Dec	Luke 1:67-79	Judy Haw

Advent message from our wardens

Dear Friends

Thank you to everyone who took the time to write these reflections.

This year has been one like never before – this time of Advent will give us all a chance to prepare ourselves for the wonder of Christmas.

As Advent progresses, we will be lighting another candle in our Advent wreath and singing the words of the Advent song – a time to reflect and give thanks for all that we have and to remember those who have been affected by Covid-19.

Use this booklet as a way to take time out from your busy days, make time for a 'Coffee with God' and look forward to a new beginning centered on Christ.

Gracious God,
in this Advent of expectation
you call us to be awake and ready
to recognise the signs of your
kingdom in our midst
A kingdom of justice and mercy,
of joy and of peace.
May we be aware of your presence in our lives.
Through Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

God bless you, your families
and friends.

Flora and Lee



29 November

Sunday

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ “But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Reflection

By Lee Sheppard

Crash, bang, wallop – our lives are changed seemingly for ever. But wait – is that a light at the end of the tunnel? We have all experienced times in our lives when everything seems to be going wrong and we are in deep despair. This is what Mark is talking about in this passage.

He foretells that there will be a time when “the sun darkens, the moon does not give light, stars will fall from the sky and heavenly bodies will be shaken”. The whole scenario seems to me to be unthinkable – the world would not be able to exist – humankind would be obliterated. But then he tells of a shard of hope – new growth on the fig tree, light at the end of the tunnel.

We cannot change things that have happened – we don’t have a time machine. But there is that shard of hope – hope and belief in God, hope and belief that things will change and get better. This is, to me, what Advent is about – looking to the future, accepting things that have happened and moving towards the future certain and secure that God has our backs and things will get better.

But we need to be prepared for this, we need to be vigilant. We need to keep watch and trust in God to bring us through the dark, black times into the new growth of the future.

30 November

Monday

Matt 4:18-22

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Reflection

By Lee Sheppard

Fishers of men – it sounds so strange. And somewhat frightening as we all know that often fishermen can have a very hard life battling against high seas, winds, and cold weather and their catch may be small. But there are also times when the sun shines, the sea is still and the catch plentiful.

In this passage Peter and Andrew willingly gave up their livelihood to follow Jesus and were joined by James and John. The road ahead for them was to be one of challenge, perseverance and hope as it is for us here at Onslow Anglicans.

As we strive to grow our church, we all have a part to play in being ‘fishers of men’. The call of Jesus is for us to be local, lively and loving - sharing our faith and love of God with others.

This doesn’t need to be preaching on street corners but maybe an act of kindness, an invitation to come along one Sunday, a helping hand, even just a smile that lightens someone’s day.

We can join together and be fishers of men. There will be hard times, stormy times and times when there seems to be no answer. But if we trust in God things will be easier and the sunny days frequent.

Let’s make the season of Advent the start of the time when we are all fishers of men.

1 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 Flora McIntyre

Chapter 10 starts with Jesus sending out 72 disciples to preach the good news.

When I reflect on the disciples I feel incredible affinity to their utter human fallibility. They get so much wrong, doubting and arguing about who gets what seat in heaven. They must, at times, like us all exasperated Jesus.

When I read versus 21 it almost feels like, for once, Jesus has time to be utterly present with God the father and this absolute joy fills him. Is it the same sense of absolute joy I feel when we are joined together, as a family of God singing out liturgy.

The recognition that our God reveals things in his own time, and in his own way and place reminds me to trust and wait upon his infinite purpose.

In the end, his purpose for us will be revealed and we are blessed.

2 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 Evelyn Dawson

This passage confirms for us that Jesus met people in ordinary situations and shared the Good News and healing with them, offering the fullness of life and ability to all the sick and those in need. He had compassion for people with different hungers in their lives. These people were broken people, and remind us that it is important to get in touch with that place in our lives in order to get closer to Him.

They in turn had great faith in Jesus, as they had been without food for three days. The second part of this story is that as well as the healings and sharing the Good Word, Jesus also cared for the crowd in wanting to feed them before their journey home. He saw beyond the practical questions of his disciples who were focused on the difficulty of finding food in a desert. The disciples did not realise that the little they had was enough for Jesus who offered thanks, broke and shared and there was much left over. We have a God of lavish generosity!

The question for us to consider is, do we get caught in thinking that the little we think we have is not worthy for us to offer it to the Lord?

Christ has no body now but yours; no hands but yours to bless the world; no feet with which he walks to do good on earth. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world.

3 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!”

Be determined? Or Deterred?

Few find the entrance, it is Narrow! Be wary of people asking for a Quick Fix, look to the results of their labours. Not everyone may enter but those who live and do God’s will.

Jesus gave us guidelines in The Beatitudes

This is Up Front Talking, but Jesus tried another way, By Stories, so this story is about two houses

1st builder had a fabulous site views over looking the ocean, sunrises, sunsets, sound and smell of the sea, he couldn’t start quick enough so he started to dig, 1st metre soft sand, what else would one expect from an inland sand dune. 2nd metre down. same. 3rd metre repeat. Exasperated, the builder said, I cannot give up this site! I will put in more reinforcements and cement; I am not giving up!

So, he continued his path of building a most magnificent home and he had the flag flying from the roof.

But the stormy season came, bringing gales and floods of such severity and in spite of all the careful preparations, the house did not stand up to these gales and floods and in no time at all, maybe a day only, this fabulous home was a wreck and totally uninhabitable.

Where had he gone wrong?

Let’s look at the 2nd builder.

Reflection

By Jennifer Timmings

He liked views and sunrises and sunsets too, but he found a site half way up a hill and when he started to excavate ,he broke his pic and he had to hire a digger to excavate but he wasn't going to give this site away. No Sir!

This where he was determined to build his home, it cost him a lot in fees from professional advisors and rates but he knew this is where he wanted to be and so his house was built looking over plains and valleys and it was just The Ticket!

And when the stormy season came, his house swayed a little and the wind tried so hard to lift the roof off and the rain tried so hard to weaken the structure and foundations , But it could not.

It was Rock Solid! No storm, no matter how severe, could shift this house, it was a Light and Monument for all to see, and it stood the test of time,

What a Story!

Can we learn from this analogy? Yes Sir!

Stand Strong in the strength and Power of God

Jesus shows us good instructions,

He is our Way, and the Holy Spirit our guide and we cannot fail to overcome any obstacle,

Jesus said, "Let us draw near in faith with thanksgiving."

Jesus says My burden is light and my yoke is easy,

Come, come to the waters and I will fill you with Joy,

Don't be like the five virgins who wanted to join with the five wise virgins who had prepared themselves and they had not, and they had left it too late,

Be encouraged, all readers, Don, t waste a day or moment. Be. Ready! One never knows when our day is coming to be invited to The Great Feast where we may join the heavenly throng of Angels and Praise and Worship our Triune God

Hallelujah!

Let your light shine and reflect God's Glory

A Joyful Christmas to all

Jennifer Timmings

4 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 John Dawson

This is only a little, short extract. But, unfolded, it has much greater significance than its physical size would offer.

There are two things at play.

The first is Jesus' reluctance to publicly be seen to helping the blind men.

The men had been following him, begging loudly for his intervention to cure their blindness. That would have attracted a lot of crowd attention, a crowd undoubtedly extremely eager to see another miracle performed in front of them.

Possibly to limit the degree of attention their begging was getting, Jesus elected to move the men indoors away from the public scrutiny.

The second point is the issue of faith. Jesus asks, "Do you believe I am able to do this?"

The critical word in the question is "believe". Effectively he is asking, "Is your belief in me strong enough that you think that the problem can be fixed?"

When they answer yes, he responds "According to your faith, let it be done to you." Your faith that it can happen will allow it to happen.

For seeming miracles to work there has to be faith and belief. I can't help thinking that, if the faith and belief of the blind men had not been strong enough, there might not have been restoration of vision.

5 December Saturday

Matt 9:35–10:1,6-8

³⁵ Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

10 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Reflection

Reflection

6 December Sunday

Mark 1:1-8

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Reflection

By Barbara Caudwell

Mark gets straight to the point in these first few verses, no messing around. He quotes from the book of Isaiah; John appears in the wilderness, baptising those who turn away from their sinful life and have asked for God's forgiveness; he baptises with water but preaches that someone far greater will follow him and will baptise with the Holy Spirit. This must have been the subject of great debate, "the Holy Spirit? What can this mean?", "who is this person greater than John?".

Returning to that phrase from Isaiah, "Prepare a way for the Lord"; it takes me back to the musicals "Godspell" and "Jesus Christ Superstar", and I now have the song going round and round my head, such an earworm! Preparation in this strange year of Covid-19 - it's a challenge for us to find a way forward this Advent (and as we look to the New Year) when we're uncertain whether Alert Levels will change, whether there will be more/fewer restrictions, whether our borders will open eventually.....but, with God's guidance through the Holy Spirit, perhaps we should take each day as it comes, a daily clean slate where we can start afresh.

7 December Monday

Luke 5:17-26

¹⁷ One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. ¹⁸ Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. ²⁰ When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." ²¹ Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ²² When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? ²⁴ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home." ²⁵ Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. ²⁶ Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."

Reflection

By Jennifer Timmings

The Power of God Manifested.

Jesus used healing as a way of showing God's supreme power so that God may be Glorified, although he often restrained the healed person to not publicise their healing but often, they could not contain their joy.

Well in this story the sick man's friends had faith in Jesus to heal their friend and they were not going to give in to defeat from the crowd.

So, they found an alternate way, and dramatically appeared before Jesus, through the roof! Jesus must have been impressed!

But instead of the expected healing Jesus forgave the man his sins. Why?? Is it because sin makes a barrier between man and god and Jesus, with fore knowledge, knew he had to heal his soul first before a physical healing could take place, which he then proceeded to do.

Jesus was showing everyone around that he the power to forgive sins since he was one with the Father.

Then he commanded this young man

Rise Up! Take up your bed and walk!

Imagine the commotion!

But for the faith of his friends he may never have been healed, no wonder he departed Glorifying God and the bystanders were amazed and also joined in praising God, but with fearful hearts knowing they had been witness to the Power of God and He who

started these phenomena was the very Lord Himself

Praise God for your unending compassions, they are new every morning.

A Joyful Christmas to all

Jennifer Timmings.

8 December

Tuesday

Matt 18:12-14

¹² What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Reflection

Reflection

9 December Wednesday

Matt 11:28-end

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 John Whitehead

I started this reflection at the end of a long and difficult week, feeling very tired. My first reaction, if I'm honest, was one of frustration. Do you ever have one of those moments when it all feels too much? I know I do, and this was close to being one such occasion. And of course, a yoke is something you put on a beast of burden – hardly a promise of rest.

What really made me feel frustrated though, was that the passage seems to contradict other things Jesus says. Take the previous chapter, Matthew 10, for example:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34)

That does not sound like rest to me. Or read on a few verses later:

“...and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

I think we can take it for granted that “taking up the cross” does not represent a light burden either. Losing your life for Christ's sake sounds like no walk in the park.

A few weeks ago, I went alone into our church to pray, pleading with God to give me guidance. “I want to do the right thing, Lord”, I prayed. “I'm not asking you for a sign, just some guidance please.” And then as clear as can be, I heard the words: “But I've given you guidance: you are to love one another as I have loved you.” At that moment, the turbulence in my soul was stilled, and the most restful feeling came over me. My burden was lifted.

If we look at today's reading carefully, it is easy to see that Jesus does not promise our burden will be light – in fact he is appealing to those of us who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. He is not promising an easy life to believers, whatever those who preach the prosperity Gospel may say. The rain really does fall on the good and evil alike. But as believers, we have the opportunity, if only we will take it, to sit quietly in Christ's presence and talk directly with Him. The answer may not come as quickly as it did on the day I prayed before the altar, but hear Him or not, Christ walks with us. Our burdens really can become lighter if only we will share them with Him.

10 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

Reflection

11 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 Eileen Barrett-Whitehead

My first reaction to this passage was that it speaks to our tendency to find fault with things.

First we are given the example of a group of children rejecting the overtures of another group who are trying to involve them in a shared activity, perhaps in an attempt to make friends. The first proposal is to do something fun and cheerful together - dancing to happy music - but that is firmly rejected. Okay, so perhaps the group is feeling down and not in the mood for a happy activity. Maybe singing some sad songs together might help then? But no, that suggestion, too, is rejected. The children just "don't want to play ball"! Nothing pleases them.

Similarly with the second half of the passage, this time using an example from adult society. Many of the people of John the Baptist's time found fault with his austere and reclusive lifestyle, but when Jesus came along and behaved in the opposite manner, they complained that was wrong, too! Again, nothing was going to please them.

Then another thought came to me: aside from all the people who are being negative in the passage, there are those - less the point of focus perhaps, but there nevertheless - who are trying to take action and do something useful.

How about us? Which camp do we fall into? Are we among the complainers? Or are we among those trying to look for ways to improve things? (And if the latter, how do we react when people reject what we are trying to do?)

Last but not least, though, comes that important final sentence. It tells us that whichever camp we fall into at any given moment, we need to remember to involve God. Okay, so I'm an introvert and I really don't want to go to such-and-such event because I know I will find it totally draining. But what if God has something in mind for me or for someone else I meet there, meaning that something positive will come of the encounter? Rather than instantly finding fault with a new idea, invitation, or suggestion and closing my mind to it, I need to remember to pray about it and ask God to show me what He wants. Similarly, before I launch enthusiastically into a new project that seems (to my mind) exactly what the world needs, I need to remember to involve God. Is what I am contemplating really in accord with what God might want?

The proof of the pudding is not in the contemplation of it, or even the making of it, but in its eating. God is asking us to remember that it is results that matter - His results. So before we find fault with what others are doing or proposing - or, conversely, launch into action with our own bright ideas - let us ask ourselves: what is it that God wants? What might be the results that He is seeking?

12 December

Saturday

Matt 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

Reflection

13 December Sunday

John 1:6-8,19-28

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing

Reflection

By John Whitehead

Those of us who are old enough can probably remember royal visits for which a huge amount of activity went in beforehand to make places as spick and span as possible. It would not do for their Royal Highnesses, let alone her Majesty, to be exposed to a pothole in the road, an unpainted fence, or a rusty roof. Every detail had to be attended to so that the royal progress occurred as smoothly as it was humanly possible to make it.

I have to admit to a tendency in this regard myself. I'm inclined to give the house its most thorough cleaning just before we have visitors arriving. To my shame, my attentions at other times are somewhat more cursory in nature. Fortunately, Eileen tends to be much more thorough.

Today we are interrupting our flow through Advent readings from Matthew, Mark and Luke for one brief encounter with the Gospel of John. John's Advent story is very different from those of Matthew and Luke. No archangel announcing the coming of the Messiah; no baby in a manger; no singing choirs of angels here. Instead, it is a hairy, probably smelly and dirty man in the desert making the announcement. And a strange man too – as the son of the Priest Zechariah, he would be expected to have been a Priest, which is presumably why the Priests and Levites were sent out to check up on him. His behaviour and lifestyle could hardly have been further from that expected of a Priest.

Yet this is unmistakably an Advent story: "...he came to testify to the light...which...was coming into the world." John is channelling Isaiah when he explains who he is:

A voice cries out: *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*(Isaiah 40:3)

If this sounds like the announcement of a royal progress that is because it is precisely what it is. Isaiah goes on to say: *"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.*

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Isaiah 40:4-5

John the Baptist is not over-burdened with ego. When asked, he seeks to diminish his own importance; he points always to Christ. John's job is to prepare the way.

In one of the thanksgivings in the New Zealand prayer book we repeat the words:

*"Glory to you Lord Christ;
Your death we show forth;
Your resurrection we proclaim;
Your coming we await;
Amen! Come Lord Jesus.*

What are we doing to prepare the way?

14 December

Monday

Matt 21:23-27

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Reflection

Reflection

15 December Tuesday

Matt 21:28-32

²⁸ “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ ²⁹ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Reflection

Reflection

16 December

Wednesday

Luke 7:18b-23

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples ¹⁹ and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ²⁰ When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” ²¹ Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. ²² And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Reflection

Reflection

17 December

Thursday

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 Tony Hooper

Matthew's genealogy spans the whole of Bible history, from Abraham, through David and Solomon. It comes in six groups of seven names – seven being the perfect number to the Hebrews. Matthew is telling us that Jesus is the pre-destined culmination of over two thousand years of human history, created for a divine purpose.

Commentaries tell us that there are some surprises in this list of Jesus' ancestors. Not only are there five women in Matthew's genealogy, but four of the women were gentiles. There were also some sinners of note, including Judah and King David. The intention is to highlight the inclusivity of Jesus' mission.

Paul says in Galatians 3:28-29: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

In the run-up to Christmas, Mary and Joseph are cast as the culmination of generation after generation of notable participants in the history of the Hebrew nation.

18 December Friday

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 fulfill 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 Tony Hooper

Although our knowledge of the physiology and mechanics of human reproduction has taken huge strides in the last two thousand years, even to Joseph, the angel's explanation was hard to believe. Dreams might have been accepted as the way that God spoke to ordinary mortals, but like Joseph, I too find this explanation quite challenging. I am surprised by both Mary and Joseph's apparent ready acceptance of the angel's message. But it does help to explain to me the meaning of the word faith – a willing suspension of disbelief in the expectation that the reality of God's love will also be revealed to us individually.

While I accept that the story is intended to show the exceptional nature of Jesus as the Messiah, the Promised One, like countless millions of people before me, including Joseph himself, I find it unconvincing and unnecessary. To me, Jesus can be the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah and the Promised One without the story of the Immaculate Conception.

So why is this supernatural account considered so essential? Maybe through the responses of both Mary and Joseph, we are shown the nature of faith. We need faith to understand the new relationship between God and His creatures. Faith is the expectation that acceptance of whatever comes, for all eternity we are loved and cherished by God. If Jesus was the Son of God, and proclaimed himself to be the Son of Man as well, then we are also, like him. Through the birth of Jesus we too are divine in nature. That is the nature of faith.

19 December

Saturday

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 Evelyn Dawson

This passage speaks to us of the draconian weight that was placed upon people in Jesus' time with society's expectations and judgments, but also of the depth of some people's belief in God and living their lives according to the laws that were passed down from Moses and their dedication to celebrating that way of living with dedication.

Reflecting on the difference of acceptance by both Zachariah and Elizabeth of their blessing of a much wanted son is not just a reflection of male on female, but could be a sign of the different way people hear the same message. Zachariah seemed to concentrate on their age and inability – he did not reflect that God had been listening to him all those years and this was now the answer. Elizabeth who perhaps had carried the burden of the title of 'being barren' accepted the gift immediately, no questions asked and gave thanks 'this is what the Lord has done for me', and praise to the angel.

They were blessed with John, and even though he came with pre-conditions, they were immediately going to love, cherish and nurture this little one.

Do we remember to give thanks to the Lord for the great things that happen in our lives?

Where has He intervened on our behalf?

20 December Sunday

Luke 1:26-38

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

The Archangel Gabriel was busy that year. First, he spoke to Zacharias (Luke 1: 11) and later to Mary (Luke 1: 28). But Matthew tells us that Gabriel also spoke to Joseph (Matt 1: 20), to reassure him after they found that Mary was pregnant. Both Zacharias, the priestly, educated, elderly male, and Joseph, the carpenter, are, understandably, I think, shown to be skeptical. It is the women who seem to have greater faith and obedience. What is the message we need to take from this? God uses those that the world would not - a barren elderly woman and an unwed teenage girl - to emphasise that women are equally and vitally important for God's purposes.

The overall picture that is revealed is that God is at work - intervening in human history for a purpose. John is not just for Zachariah and Elizabeth (the privileged and honored) nor Jesus for Mary and Joseph (insignificant and despised but honored). They are for all Israel. The people chosen to receive Gabriel's message are symbolic. They, and the communities they represent, are both the source and the recipients of the blessing to be brought by Jesus.

21 December

Monday

Luke 1:39-45

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

Reflection

By Flora McIntyre

We all started our journey to life as a miraculous bundle of cells. This reading, yet again, reminds of the infinite possibility of God's wisdom and work. Here is the beginnings of a world changing event and God chooses two ordinary women to tell his story through their pregnancies.

Mary the unmarried mother to be and Elizabeth the elderly mother who had possibly given up hope of ever being pregnant.

Elizabeth's baby leaps for joy at the presence of his Lord.

A timely reminder that God greets us in many ways and through many different people.

22 December

Tuesday

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

Reflection

23 December

Wednesday

Luke 1:57-66

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ 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

By Bridget Hodgkinson

This passage follows on from Luke 1: 5 – 23 when Zechariah was rendered silent by the angel Gabriel because he questioned what the angel told him: that he and his wife in their old age were going to have a baby boy, who was to prepare people for the coming of the Lord's son and that they were to call him John.

So for nine months Zechariah could not speak. However, he had obviously communicated with Elizabeth about the baby's name because soon after the birth when he was to be circumcised and named, not Zechariah, as was expected, she said, 'His name is to be John.' Zechariah was then asked. He wrote on a tablet, 'His name is John'.

I think it is interesting to note the difference between Elizabeth's, 'His name is to be John' and Zechariah's definite confirmation, 'His name is John', showing, now, Zechariah's belief in the angel's promise. Immediately he was able to speak again and he began praising God.

Twice, then, Zechariah had been under God's power: first when he was struck dumb and later when he was able to speak because he did what the angel commanded and believed what Gabriel had told him.

The news of this event spread far among people, in wonder at the Lord's power, preparing the way for John's future ministry.

24 December

Thursday

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 Judy Haw

This prophecy by Zechariah is in complete contrast to his earlier attitude of fear (v12) and disbelief (v18). He was overwhelmed when the angel spoke to him. What made the difference? He had learned to TRUST God, through his own experience .

The anointing of the Holy Spirit allowed him to recognise God's Hand in redeeming Israel throughout the ages.

In vs (76-79) he is prophesying, speaking of the life of John the Baptist, his own son, and his part in the life of Jesus (his cousin).

Where does the Spirit need to increase its influence in our lives? Below is a pie chart representing your life. Shade each segment to the degree that God is completely filling that area of your experience.

Ask Jesus to help you decrease and give him permission to increase in those areas that are not completely shaded.

Then, the anointing on your life will increase to the degree that your self decreases and praising God increases.



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