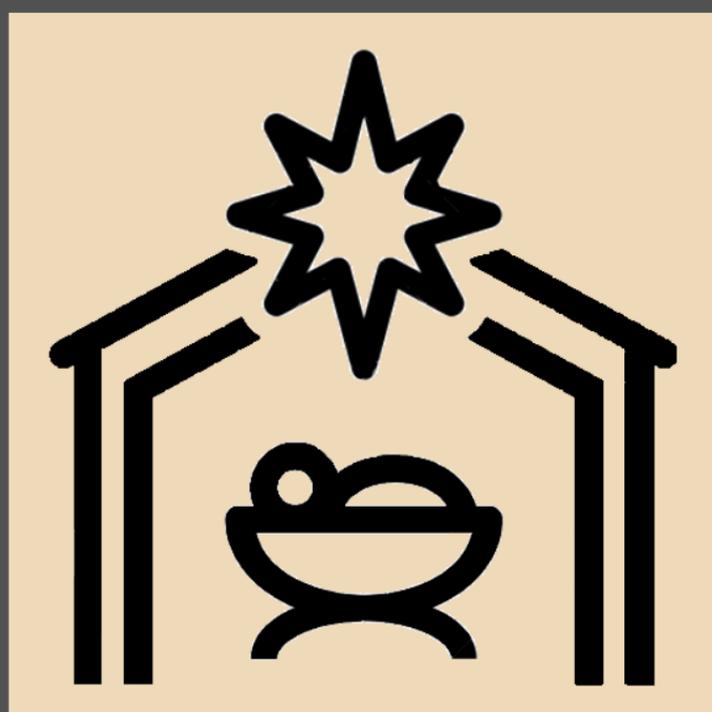

Advent Readings



Belhelvie Church 2020

Introduction

At the time of writing, in late October, Professor Jason Leitch is taking a bit of a hammering in the press for flagging up that Christmas is going to have to be different this year. In fairness to the poor man – who I think has done an excellent job as the National Clinical Director for Scotland – he’s only telling us what we already know. We just don’t want to hear it.

Here in the church, Christmas will have to be different too, but there’s no danger of Christmas not happening! More than ever we need reminded of the light that has come into the world in Christ, especially in this present darkness brought on by Covid-19.

Though there will still be opportunities to gather safely in worship in the build up to Christmas, I know that many folk won’t feel able to participate for a variety of reasons and we’ll miss not being together as we normally would at this special time of year.

With that in mind, I decided to try and pull together a resource that could be used by our whole church over the season of Advent – a series of short daily readings that will allow us to journey together spiritually, even as we have to stay apart physically. I’d love you to make use of this resource, even if it’s the kind of thing you haven’t done before. I’d encourage you to set aside a regular time, even if it’s just 10 minutes or so, and find yourself a comfortable space in your home where you’ll get peace to reflect on the readings for yourself.

There are four weekly themes in the readings – and rather than attempting to dovetail this with the usual church themes for Advent, I’ve gone where the Spirit’s led given the challenges we’re living through just now. The four themes I’ve landed on are: ‘Yes’, ‘Intimacy’, ‘Hard Times’ and ‘Gift’.

Most readings are fairly short, but I’ve included a few longer ones for weekends and occasional weekdays. Don’t fret if you can’t do them all. The best piece of advice I was ever given about prayer was *‘pray as you can, not as you can’t’*. Sometimes there are little practical exercises to do: again, sit lightly with that if you aren’t able or struggle to find the time. This is meant to be life-giving, not another chore. We all have enough of those already!

I’ve enjoyed putting these resources together for you and I hope that they’ll help you make connections between what was happening all those years ago at the first Christmas and what’s going on in your everyday life right now. It is the same God, after all!

Christ is with us!

Blessings and Peace – your minister, Paul.

Sunday 29th November

Before reading on, take a good close look at the painting.

What strikes you first? What is going on here? What do you read in the body language of the two figures in the painting?



This is 'The Annunciation' by Sandro Botticelli which hangs in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow. Though it was painted around 1490, the colours are still wonderfully vivid – especially the golden rays behind the angel's head which look like they might still be wet to the touch.

'The Annunciation' is the name given to the episode in Luke 1:26-38 where the angel Gabriel visits Mary to tell her about God's plan to send his son and to ask her to be his mother.

Mary knew all the risks involved in saying 'yes' to that request: scorn, scandal and maybe even losing the man she was betrothed to, but she gave her assent all the same. Her 'yes' made everything else possible.

At the start of Advent, let's make this a time when we give our 'yes' to God – going against the flow and setting aside a little time each day to be with him and reflect on what it is he wants to do in us, for us and through us.

*Lord, even when time is busy I know I can still make time if I choose to.
Help me to make time for you this Advent.*

Monday 30th November

There's a long and honourable tradition of people saying 'yes' to God in the Scriptures, and Abraham (or Abram as he was then) is the grand-daddy of them all. God called Abram to leave his homeland – meaning everything and everyone he knew - and start a new life in far off Caanan where he didn't know a single soul. With the call there also came a promise; that Abram's descendants would become a great nation, and that all peoples on earth would be blessed through his family line. Yet for many years after leaving home he and his wife Sarai stayed childless and Abram started to wonder if God's promises would ever be fulfilled.

Knowing his heart, God took him outside and had him look up at the night sky in all its glory (Genesis 15:5). *'Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.'*

And so it was. In time, Sarai conceived and bore him a son called Isaac; and generations later, from the same family line, a child called Jesus was born – the saviour of the world who fulfilled God's promise and demonstrated His goodwill toward all the nations (Luke 2:8-14).

Weather permitting, wrap up well and go outside on a starry night and drink in the incredible paradox that the God who made such vastness knows our names, cares for us, and wants to be involved in our lives.

Lord, I thank you that in this vastness I am named, loved and known and that you – even now – are reaching out to me.

Tuesday 1st December

There are so many things to get done at this time of year and to make matters worse we're all having to rethink and replan everything in new ways because of Covid. It's wearisome!

Like Martha in the kitchen (Luke 10:38-42) we are distracted by many things, and the danger is we end up not enjoying any of them because we're too stressed and busy.

So think carefully about what you say 'yes' to this Advent, and when you've said your 'yes' try and do it with a cheerful heart as something you've chosen, not as something you're feeling obliged to do.

Lord, I know I find it hard to be thankful in the middle of all my tasks. Help me be discerning about what I say yes to, and then to do what I have to do with a clearer mind and a happier heart.

Wednesday 2nd December

The 3 or 30 or 300 Wise Men (we really don't know – check Matthew 2 if you don't believe me) also had to say a 'yes', even if – at that stage – they weren't 100% clear to whom they were saying it!

In choosing to investigate this new star that had appeared in the night sky they had to leave home to make a journey of hundreds, if not thousands, of miles to Palestine.

I don't imagine that their wives and kids, assuming they had them, were overly pleased. Friends might have tried to talk them out of it. Colleagues might have laughed up their sleeves at the very idea, or taken advantage of their absence to further their careers.



It was a wacky thing to do, following a star on a hunch that it might actually lead somewhere. But it did. It led them right to the one they'd been searching for all their lives, even when they didn't even know it was him they were looking for.

Faith is exactly that kind of a journey. Often it starts with a hunch, or a gut feeling or a restless longing and it's only as you follow it that the bigger picture begins to take shape and the truth reveals itself.

So if you're on the road of faith, stop for a moment and give thanks for how God's guided you on the journey so far. And if you're still swithering, why not ask God for enough of a star-sign to get you moving?

Lord, we live by faith and not just by sight. Give us the courage to follow the glimmers of light that are drawing us on and leading us to our hearts' desire.

Thursday 3rd December

Worcestershire

Milngavie

Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch

No

All words that are hard to say. Try (kindly) practicing the last one today in ways that will bless you and possibly even help others in the long run. Jesus said 'no' sometimes too, so there's good precedent!

Lord, teach me the discipline of saying a gentle but firm 'no' when I have to.

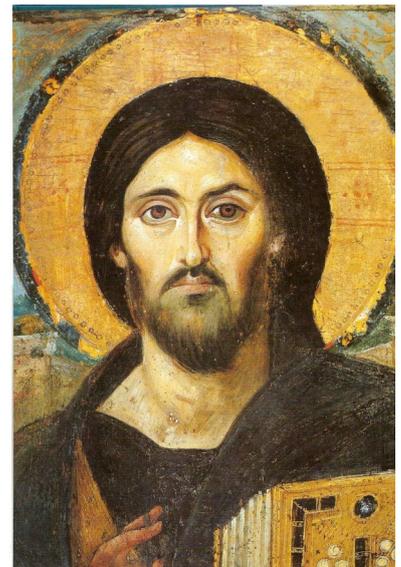
Friday 4th December

We've thought about Mary's 'yes', Abram's 'yes', The Wise Men's 'yes' and even a few of our own this week (not to mention a few red, shiny 'no's' as well). But long before any of that there was a prior 'yes' which made the whole project of restoration possible: the divine Son's 'yes' to his divine Father.

God's world needed saving. God's Son agreed to be the saviour, which meant stepping away from his divine rights and status to enter into and redeem our humanity *as one of us*. In terms of that 'step down' in being, CS Lewis suggested that an archangel becoming an earthworm doesn't even come close.

Take a moment today to reflect on this wonderful passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians which reminds us where Jesus' 'yes' took him – from heaven to earth, from the manger to the cross, from the sealed tomb to the very heights of heaven. Take time to remember that he emptied himself of all that was his by right and made these journeys *for you*: coming down to earth so he might lift humanity back up to his Father in heaven

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself and became obedient to death —
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*



Lord, thank you for the lengths you went to restore and reconcile your people. Help me receive with gratitude the divine forgiveness and friendship that are already mine in Christ.

Saturday 5th and Sunday 6th December

Before reading on, take a good close look at the image on the next page.

What strikes you first? What is going on here? What do you read in the body language of the figures in the painting? Who do you think they are?



This image is taken from a window in Pluscarden Abbey and it shows Mary visiting Elizabeth during her pregnancy (Luke 1). Elizabeth, her much older relative, was also expecting a surprise baby. She and her husband Zechariah had been trying for years with no success, but in time Elizabeth delivered her son John, who went on to become the Baptist – a remarkable man who would pave the way for his cousin Jesus’ ministry among the people.

When I first saw this stained glass window I was outside the Abbey on a dark evening, and by a quirk of fate a lamp inside the sanctuary was in exactly the right spot to light up the women’s faces. Everything else was dark. It was captivating. Look at them again. What do you read there?

I see trepidation in Mary; maybe that pale, wan look is morning sickness! But I also see gratitude – relief that she’s with someone who understands and isn’t judging her. She knows she’s safe with Elizabeth; and in the older woman’s face I see deep joy – the kind you only feel when you finally get what you’ve waited so long for – and a compassionate solidarity that wants to sustain and protect her young relative.

As I gazed on that window, one word kept coming to mind: the word ‘intimacy’. It’s what we are made for. The God who is three and yet one, the Holy Trinity, exists in dynamic relationship of Father, Son and Spirit; and we, who are made in God’s image, are made for relationships too. To know and be known. To love and be loved. To hold and be held.

Give thanks today for those with whom you share your life; and if that web of connections is smaller than you would like it to be, ask God to show you a step you can take to expand it.

Lord, thank you for the folk in my life who know me and sustain me, and for the overarching assurance that you are with me in all things. Help me develop the largeness of heart that enables me to reach out to others with your kindness and compassion.

Monday 7th December

Take some time today to re-connect with someone you haven't seen or spoken to for a while. Write a letter, send an email or message, pick up the phone. Find out how they're doing, and share something of your own story with them.

Lord, thank you for old friends and family; for all that we've shared together over the years. Help me, where I can, to keep these bonds of love current and strong.

Tuesday 8th December

Christmas cards! Possibly the bane of your life when it comes to sending, but lovely when they drop through your letter box! Why not 'faith' this practice by thanking God for the person you're writing to as you seal your letters, or ask for his blessing on them as you open them?

Lord, thank you for these cards that brighten our homes at this dark time of year, and for the love and friendship that each one represents.

Wednesday 9th December

*All who received the Word by God were blessed;
sisters and brothers they of earth's fond guest.
So did the Word of Grace proclaim in time and space
and with a human face, 'I am for you.'*

('Before The World Began' – Wild Goose Worship Group) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xt6jygmSc8>

There are so many images of God out there. The impersonal 'Force' popularised in Star Wars; the pantheistic (god-in-everything) notion of God 'being' the natural world rather than its creator; God as Heavenly Grandfather, Cosmic Policeman, Divine Therapist..... the list goes on and on.

How can we know what's right?

The Christian answer is to say that we need God to take the initiative and show us, and that he's done so most decisively in the incarnation – moving into the neighbourhood in Jesus so we can understand more of what he's genuinely like. Christ both conceals and reveals the glory of God. We don't see the full immensity and wonder of the divine shining through (except maybe for a moment on the mount of transfiguration), but we do see God's *character* in Jesus as clear as day and in that sense he is, without parallel, *the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15).

Because God took a human face, we can say - in the words of Brian Zahnd – '*God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus. God will always be like Jesus. We haven't always known that – but we do now.*'

Lord, thank you that you haven't left us to wonder what you're like. You've come to us with a human face, and when we see Jesus and how he related to people, we get a clear sense of the love, compassion and justice that motivate you. Thank you that Christ's life, death and resurrection prove beyond all doubt that you are for us and in solidarity with us in the face of everything that stops us flourishing as your children.

Thursday 10th December

Relationships take time. Experiencing life takes time. And yet, time is the one thing many of us feel that we lack. So today I'm going to invite you to intentionally make time to savour God's world through your senses. I'm going to give you two options, one of which will take about an hour, the other just 10 minutes.

If you are fit and well, and have the time, go for a creation walk. It might be somewhere you know well, or somewhere further afield that's new to you. You might even want to take a flask of something or a bite of food with you if you plan to be out for longer than an hour. I'd suggest you go alone, or with one other person. The purpose of the walk isn't really to get somewhere; it's the travelling that matters.

Determine to use all your senses as you walk. Be leisurely.

Take the time to explore, touch, smell, listen, taste and watch.

Listen to the brook or the sea or the wind in the trees; study the leaves; watch the birds.

Become aware of the larger life we are living in all the time and are connected to, but race past in order to get somewhere else most of the time.

Let thankfulness rise within you as you savour the gift of this world, and take time to lift your hearts to God in thanks for being a part of such a wonderful creation.

If you have less time today, here's a shorter but no less meaningful exercise.

I've done this exercise with a satsuma, but with a bit of imagination you could replicate it with a raisin, a square of chocolate, a fine malt or a glass of wine. The choice is yours! I'll illustrate with the satsuma, but feel free to improvise your own version with something you love to eat or drink.

So often we bolt our food down to get on to the next thing. This exercise is about savouring God's good gifts for our bodies.

Hold the satsuma in your hand. Feel its weight, its shape, its texture.

Look at it closely – the colour, the pitted surface, the stalk.

Raise it to your nose and inhale its smell. How would you describe it to someone who'd never smelled a satsuma before?

Now open the satsuma, watching closely as you do so. Did you notice the spray of juice? The burst of scent?

Take a segment of the fruit and pop it into your mouth. Let it sit there for a moment. What do you taste? How does it feel?

Now sink your teeth into it, letting all the flavour flood into your mouth.

As you finish the satsuma, take a moment to reflect on how you feel having slowed this process right down. Give thanks to God for his provision of food, and the wonder of the natural world around us.

Friday 11th December

I leave you this week with one of my favourite Psalms.

We started this week with Mary and Elizabeth's faces – that lovely image of intimacy. We end it with another similar and very human image that's found in Psalm 131.

Psalm 131

*My heart is not proud, O LORD,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quietened my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, put your hope in the LORD
both now and for evermore.*



This is the peace God wants us to know – the simple trust of the well-fed child who despite whatever else is going on in the world is safe and content enough to lie back in its mothers arms and find rest.

We're adults, of course, and I'm not advocating we all curl up and go to sleep in God's arms. Life's not like that (though we might sometimes wish it were!). It certainly wasn't like that for David, who wrote the Psalm – an activist if there ever was one!

David's reminding us where he gets the strength and perspective to live his life and it doesn't all come from him. It comes from the intimacy of his relationship with God – the trust he has that God is with him and watching over him in all things.

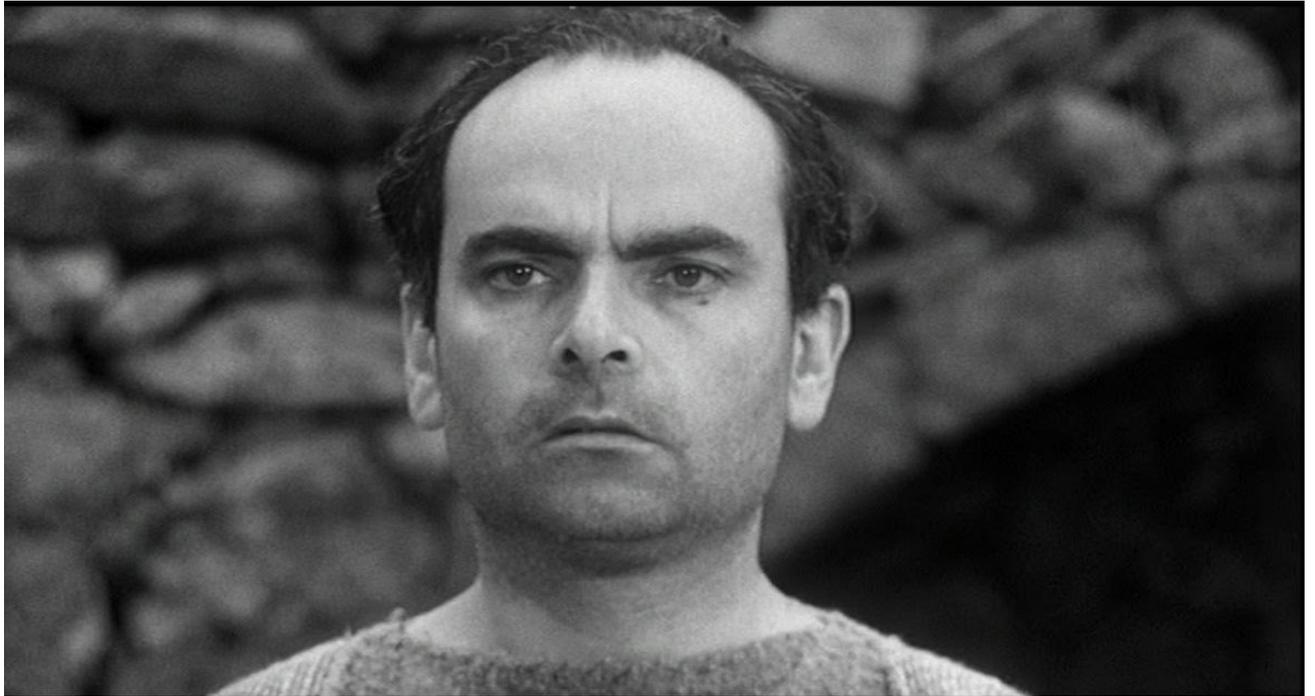
We were made for that kind of closeness with God. He wants to be the Elizabeth to our Mary. The mother to our weaned child.

Lord, thank you for your sustaining, compassionate love, which longs to draw us in and welcome us home. Rise on our lives like the morning sun, that we might come to see everything in the light of your love.

Saturday 12th and Sunday 13th December

Before reading on, take a good close look at the picture on the next page.

What thoughts does this man's face reveal?



This is Joseph as he's depicted in Pasolini's 'The Gospel Of St Matthew'. He's just discovered that Mary is pregnant with someone else's child, and it's not hard to read the anger, disappointment and confusion in his face. If you read on in the story (Matthew 1:18-25) you'll discover how God brought Joseph round to accepting what was going on and playing his part in it, and you can watch the clip from the film here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N94ldLiGFXo&t=222s> (3:12 into the film)

Mary's 'yes' to God is rightly celebrated within the church, but I sometimes think that Joseph's 'no' gets forgotten about, even though it's almost as significant. Joseph said 'no' to the voices, internal and external, telling him to ditch Mary because she was soiled goods, according to the standards of the day. He said 'no' to the easier life he could have had if he'd simply left her in her disgrace and taken up with a woman whose reputation was still intact.

He said 'no' to these temptations because God helped him understand that good that was going to come out of the messy, complicated situation he and Mary found themselves in. God was at work in all of this. Yes, Mary was pregnant with a child before her time and it wasn't Joseph's; but this child was from God and was destined to be the saviour of the world.

It takes faith to believe that God can and does bring good out of the difficult situations in our lives. But we need to take him at his word when he says '*in all things, God works for the good of those who love him*' (Romans 8:28). That doesn't mean that everything that happens to us in life is 'good' – what it does mean is that God can bring good even out of the bad or difficult things that come our way.

Lord, we're living in times where each week seems to bring a new challenge to our way of living and working and we know that it's taking a toll on many of us. Like a prospector panning for gold, help us discern the nuggets of blessing you bring us in the midst of so much anxiety, doubt and weariness.

Monday 14th December

Every year I find myself moaning subtly, or not so subtly, about how busy Christmas is and how much there is to be getting get through. Will this year be any different? With so many things having to be cancelled or simplified, is there a possibility that we might – for once – actually have a little more time to ‘wait’ in one of the seasons in the church year that’s supposed to be about waiting? Or will we try to keep doing everything we’ve always done and end up as frazzled as ever?

Lord, help me discern what’s really important this year at Christmastime and put my energies there and nowhere else.

Tuesday 15th December

Back in the olden days, especially among the wealthier families, it was customary for an expectant mother to go into confinement towards the end of her pregnancy. This could be for a few weeks, or even as long as the entire third trimester (3 months). It was a way of giving mother and child the very best chance of survival by keeping them both as safe as possible, but it could also be a lonely and boring spell away from all the people and interests that made life worth living.

All of us have undergone an involuntary form of confinement for much of 2020 and at times it’s been a lonely and boring experience to have our horizons so limited. Is there anything, though, that you can be grateful for in this confinement? New skills? Something you’ve finally managed to get done? Something you’ve realised about yourself? Something you’re now resolved to do once things return to some kind of normality?

Lord, it can be hard to stay optimistic when your way of life has become so confined. Help us to see beyond these present limitations and redeem this time for us. We would never have chosen it, but we believe you can still bring good out of it. Please show us how.

Wednesday 16th December

There’s an old saying that it’s better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

Life seems pretty bleak just now, politically, economically and socially. There’s lots to complain about and lots of uncertainty going forward and after half a year of privation it’s hard not to be consumed by it all.

Gratitude is one of the ways we can light a metaphorical candle in that darkness. A friend recently wrote that she’s set herself the task of noting down three things each day that she’s grateful for, and popping those little notes into a jam jar. That steadily filling jar is a powerful visual reminder that despite how it feels sometimes, life isn’t all bleak and there’s a lot we can still be thankful for.

Lord, it’s so easy to focus on the darkness in times like these. Help me notice and appreciate the blessings in my days just now, and take solace in the light that they bring. And if I can light a candle that helps someone else, so let it be.

Thursday 17th December

My headline for today's reading was 'weariness'. If you're not experiencing a little of that just now, my advice is to sit down and write a book about how you manage it because you're one in a million and we could all benefit from your wisdom!

This poem seemed ideal for today, so I'll offer it with no further comment and let it speak for itself.

An anxious note to baby Jesus - by Peter Thurston

Dear Lord,
I feel tired before it's even started.
The cards (should I bother?)
The presents (who to buy for?)
The decorations (real or artificial?)
The family... (enough said)
The crowds, the hassle, the weather -
Wake me up when it's all over.

I know I shouldn't feel this way
but if I'm honest,
Advent -
it makes me weary just thinking about it.

Which makes me wonder,
how was it for you?
Were you weary too?
Just thinking about it?
The call, the life-long challenge, to
hear God,
listen to God,
follow God?
For those with ears to hear
and eyes to see,
to be God?

All begun in makeshift circumstances.
(Sorry, Lord, we were not better prepared -
some things don't change.)
A sign of things to come,
of an uphill struggle
to make your voice heard.

Uphill towards Jerusalem.
Uphill to the Mount of Olives.
Uphill to the hill of execution.

Hoping we would understand you,

respond to you,
welcome you then,
welcome you now.

Lord, were you tired before it even started?
Or was your love your inner energy,
the love you received your support,
the love you gave a light in the darkness,
the love you give the strength I need?

Will you help me through Advent, dear Lord,
little one?

Give me the grace to greet you
without suppressed sighs of weariness.
Give me the generosity to invite you home
without thought to the inconvenience.
Give me the will to rise to your demands,
to share your love and to receive it.

It's not so much to ask, I know,
when you have faced it all -
the Advent task, the Christmas hope -
two thousand times before.

*Lord, rest when I'm weary is like sunshine on
snow. Melt my tiredness away, warm my bones,
and renew my soul, even now.*



Friday 18th December

Today's offering is a well known prayer called the 'Serenity Prayer', though it's often just the first few lines that are quoted. These are helpful words for our times, with all the rethinking and reworking we're having to do to keep some semblance of normality going.

*God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.*

*Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.*

Amen. (Reinhold Niebuhr)

Saturday 19th and Sunday 20th December

A friend once told me about a woman he knew who was presented with a beautiful, Nepalese blanket by her parents on her 21st birthday. It was a lovely gift, but there was also a unique story to it. The young woman's parents were working in Nepal when she was born and they bought this blanket on the day of her birth with the intention of keeping it until she'd reached the age of 21. For years they kept it apart and hidden so that when the big day finally came they'd be able to give it to her not just as a wonderful surprise, but as a powerful symbol of how much she was anticipated and loved from before she was even born.

When the angels appeared to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth they sang of good news of great joy which would be for *all the people* and a blessing of peace to *humankind* on whom God's favour rests.

God's gift of Jesus is universal, in that sense – he is given to everyone; but what we often don't realise is that all of this - all that God did and does for us in Christ - was known and planned before the very beginning of time. In the book of Revelation John calls Jesus '*the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world*' (Rev 13:8) and in Ephesians Paul says that God '*chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*' (Eph 1:4).

From the very beginning, before we could do anything to earn his love, God made it his business to restore and redeem his people; to show unmerited grace towards us. And Christ – God among us – is the outworking in time of that eternal intent.

Lord, thank you for your commitment to all that you have made and your desire to see it made whole and restored. Thank you that you moved to bless us, in grace, before we could do even one thing to earn such an incredible gift. Help us receive you into our lives with gladness.

Monday 21st December

For many of us, decorating the Christmas tree with lights and baubles is one of the highlights of the season. In the Northern hemisphere there's a long tradition of using light and greenery in the home to lighten the darkness and gloom of winter and though that was the custom long before Christianity, the early Christians wisely adapted those traditions and gave them new emphases.

'In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has never overcome it.' (John 1:5).

Take a moment or two this evening to sit in the darkness with only your Christmas lights, or a candle, illuminating the room and thank God for the light which the darkness can never overcome.

Lord, for your eternal light, coming to us in Christ, we give you our heartfelt thanks. May his light bring us life in all its fullness.



Tuesday 22nd December

'Joy To The World' is a much loved carol and chances you've heard it while you've been out shopping, or perhaps watching TV or listening to the radio over the last few weeks. But what is joy, and is it the same thing as happiness?

Somebody once remarked that joy is a disposition towards life that tends to stay, while happiness is an emotion that comes and goes. There's certainly a lot of overlap, but the two are not the same. A few years ago one of my heroes, the writer and pastor Eugene Peterson, passed on after living a full and generous life. Though he left a huge gap in the lives of his family and friends, and they mourned his passing, there was a sense of deep joy and gratitude as they committed him back into the care of the God he'd served so faithfully all his days. That joy was founded in their trust in God.

Eugene's son Lief spoke at the funeral and joked that every sermon his father preached had the same core message, one that he'd whispered into his children's ears at night as he tucked them into bed. *'God loves you. He's on your side. He's coming after you. He's relentless.'*

Happiness will come and go in life – that's natural. But when you have that degree of confidence in the goodness of God, joy can never be far from your heart.

Lord, I ask you for happy times in the days and weeks ahead as we celebrate Christmas as best we can. But more than that, I ask for the closeness with you which brings an abiding peace and joy, whatever the circumstances.

Wednesday 23rd December

Towards the middle of last century, experts from around the world gathered in Britain for a conference on comparative religion. One of the questions they'd met to discuss was *'what, if anything, is unique about the Christian faith?'*

The debate went on for hours until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room and asked what all the fuss was about. When they told him the question under discussion, he said *'Oh that's easy. The answer's grace.'*

After some more discussion, the delegates came to agree. The idea of God's love coming to us unearned seems to go against every instinct of common sense and many religions suggest that that we can only earn God's love through our works – the good things we do. Only Christianity dares to believe that God's love is already ours.

The gospel Jesus came to bring us, and embody, doesn't say *'sort your life out and then God will love you.'* It says *'God loves you. So let him help sort your life out.'*

No-one in the ancient world had ever heard anything like it.

Small wonder the herald angels called it 'good news.'

Try to practise grace today – do something for someone that they aren't expecting and haven't earned. Leave a chocolate bar on their car window or in their handbag. Leave a box of biscuits by their front door. Show your thanks to someone serving in your community. Be creative and have fun doing it!

Lord, thank you for your indescribable grace. Help me never to take it for granted, but to live my life as a response to the kindness and acceptance you have first shown to me.

Thursday 24th December – Christmas Eve

*'What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would play my part.
Yet what I can I give him.
Give my heart.'*

And here is the heart of the mystery of faith. The one thing God desires from us is the one thing that he can never coerce from us. Our loving response. More than anything, God wants us to know and love him because we're his children. But that love has to be given freely or it ceases to be love.

And so God's grace reaches out to us in a million different ways, most especially in Christ, in the hope that moved by his kindness we might change our minds (the literal meaning of 'repent') and make a response to him.

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And that's what this stanza from *'In The Bleak Midwinter'* is saying. We know enough about gift giving to know that every gift invites a response, and when we give something valuable and precious to someone we long to see the look of joy and delight on their face when they open it. It shows that they've understood and appreciated what we've done for them.

Christmas is when the maker of the universe handed us the most precious gift that he had to offer: *'the body of Christ, given for you.'*

How will we receive him?

Lord, so many doors were shut in Bethlehem that night. As you knock on the door of my life, even now, may you find it open, and a welcome inside.

Friday 25th December - Christmas Day

Happy Christmas and bless you for making it this far!

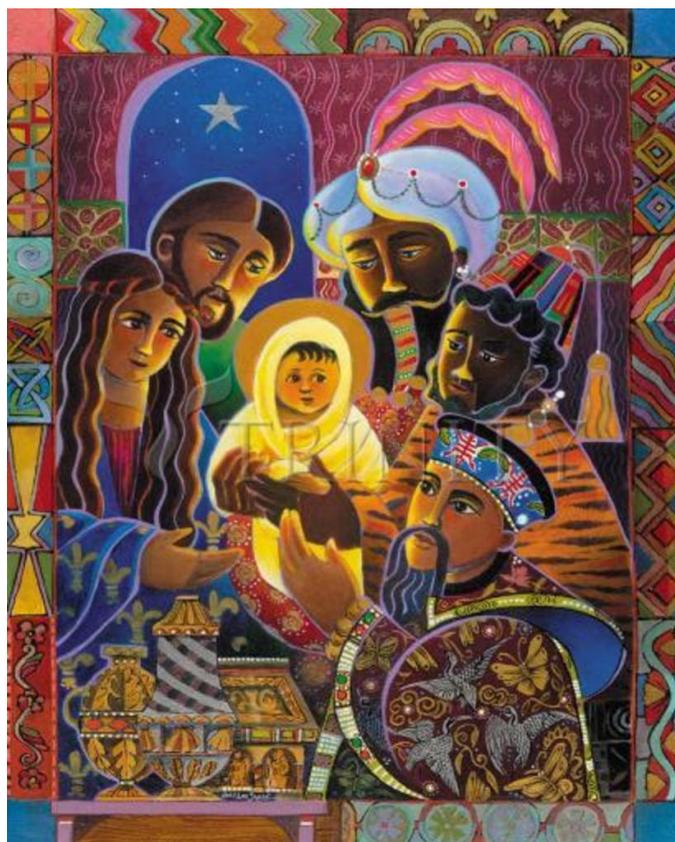
We finish this journey together with a short prayer from Pat Bennett

*This Christmas, Lord,
take a corner of my life
and steal in....
invade the busyness of my doing
with the quiet of your coming.*

*This Christmas, Lord,
take a corner of my mind
and steal in....
illuminate the darkness of my thinking
with the brightness of your seeing.*

*This Christmas, Lord,
take a corner of my heart
and steal in....
infuse the coldness of my loving
with the warmth of your Being.*

*This Christmas, Lord,
as at Bethlehem's stable,
come and steal in....
take the unprepared places of my life
and make them fit for your dwelling.*



*And may the peace, power and presence of the Child of Bethlehem be yours,
this Christmas day and forevermore. Amen*



Sieger Koder
"The Nativity"

