



Fourth Sunday of Advent 20th December

Father God help us to come to you this morning with open and thankful hearts. Fill us with the joy and peace that comes with knowing you. Be with us as we walk in your light, rejoice in your love and reflect your glory.

Amen

Hymn 4: A great and mighty wonder

Welcome

The Lord be with you,
and also with you

Prayer of Preparation

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayer of Confession

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: The first commandment is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself". There is no other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith, firmly resolved to keep God's commandments and to live in love and peace with all.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we have sinned against you and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault. We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins. For the sake of your son Jesus Christ, who died for us, forgive us all that is past and grant that we may serve you in newness of life to the glory of your name.

Amen

Lord have mercy

Lord have mercy

Christ have mercy

Christ have mercy

Lord have mercy

Lord have mercy

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in life eternal through Jesus Christ our lord. **Amen**

Collect

God our redeemer, who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of your Son: grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour, so we may be ready to greet him when he comes again as our judge; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Old Testament Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1 – 11,16

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.'

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

New Testament Reading: Romans 16: 25 - end

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.

Hymn 265: Hark the glad sound

Gospel Reading: Luke 1: 26 – 38

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke

Glory to you, O Lord

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

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ

Sermon: Revd Petra Shakeshaft

Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou among women

and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

The Gospel passage this morning is that familiar story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary; a story we have seen in countless paintings of the Annunciation and watched through tear-filled eyes as children lisp the words, "Do not be afraid, I come to bring you tidings of great joy." It is the beginning of the unfolding of the story of how God comes to earth carried in the womb of a young woman and born far from home in a borrowed stable; a story so familiar, that sometimes perhaps we stop asking questions, perhaps we take at face value the comfortable images of the Holy Family, influenced and coloured by paintings and sculpture, by the sweet singing of Christmas carols, Nativity plays featuring angels with wonky wings and shepherds in tea-towels or sugary Christmas cards with sentimental greetings. Mary is young, sweet and innocent, she is gentle and meek and mild.

Except that's not quite how the story goes.

Mary is a young, pregnant, unmarried woman in first century Palestine, a place divided, and oppressed by a tyrannical Roman regime.

The Jewish authorities were corrupt and often in the pay of the occupying forces.

When Mary learns the source of her pregnancy,

she receives the news first with surprise, then with grace, obedience and humility;

astounding, given that she is an unmarried mother-to-be in first century Palestine;

a situation which could have – should have - wrecked her chances of marriage,

even to Joseph, her betrothed,

leaving her without support; her character blemished for life.

A situation, by the way, that still exists today in Israel.

Mary doesn't break down and wail, 'Oh no, why me?' and run home to mum.

No, she sets off on a journey of over ninety miles

to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, also pregnant, unexpectedly;

her child also a gift from God,

a child who will *also* be killed by his opponents.

As Mary greets Elizabeth,

the child in the older woman's womb jumps for joy

and Elizabeth cries out,

Blessed are you among women,

and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why has this happened to me,

that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

The words that Luke then puts on Mary's lips;

the words of what we call the Magnificat,

My soul doth magnify the Lord!

are not the words of someone meek and mild.

They're not the words of someone

who simply sits back and accepts her lot quietly.

This is someone who recognises that God has acted

and this is a long-awaited, pivotal moment in the story of humankind.

Her words are radical, political, bold

and ringing with uncompromising justice.

Her words are pregnant with prophecy,

drawing on the ancient scriptures.

The proud will be scattered,

the powerful brought down from their thrones

and the lowly lifted up.

The hungry will be filled and the rich sent away empty.

Nor is this something Mary mutters quietly to herself

under her breath, safe in her home in Nazareth.

These are words she owns and declares publicly.

As a woman.
 In the house of Zechariah.
 A high priest.
 A man of power, authority and reputation at the Temple in Jerusalem.
 And Mary challenges all that that power and authority stands for.

He welcomes into his household an unmarried, pregnant woman,
 whose body is swelling with the glory of God;
 The glory of God incarnate, veiled in flesh,
 who will feed the hungry, lift up the lowly,
 challenge injustice and take God
 out of the confines of the Temple in which Zechariah holds high position.
 The story is full of uncomfortable irony.

Hail Mary full of grace.
 Mary's grace is not simply pretty, not meek nor mild.
 Mary's grace is the gift of God, which is powerful,
 awesome, rooted in love and justice.
 It is courageous and bold;
 bold enough to set out on a long journey to Judea,
 to make this declaration in Zechariah's house
 and to journey back again to Nazareth.
 Then again to Bethlehem with Joseph,
 and to give birth many miles from home.
 Courageous enough to travel yet again, to Egypt
 fleeing Herod's rage and jealousy,
 to live as a refugee; a stranger in a foreign land,
 and finally to make that most valiant and poignant of journeys
 to the foot of the cross, to stand beneath her son,
 watching his lifeblood drain from him
 as he is nailed to the cross.

Mary may well have been a gentle mother, prayerful and totally obedient to God,
 But she was also strong, she was courageous, politically aware,
 had strong convictions about justice and equality, determination and resolve
 and faith that sustained her to the end.
 Like every parent, from the moment of her son's conception
 Mary's life was made more complex, utterly transformed.
 Yet she received this gift from God on behalf of all humankind.
 This baby, like any gift, was not hers to keep, but hers to share.
 In his book on Discipleship, Rowan Williams suggests that,
*we should open ourselves lovingly
 to whatever gift God has for us,
 in whatever circumstance, or aspect of the world.*
*This, he says, is an unselfish approach
 accepting that the world should not just be what we want it to be,
 but what God has designed it to be.*

Mary opened herself up lovingly and gracefully to God's gift, understanding the cost to her and to the child she was carrying.

It is not easy to feed the poor,
to bring the powerful down from their thrones,
or bring about justice and peace for all.

Two thousand years later our need for healing is as great as ever.

Mary knew all this and yet was prepared to bear it all for the sake of the world.

Mary answered the call to do for God whatever she could
to make his kingdom come on earth.

The collect for this morning begins with,
*God our redeemer,
who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of your Son:*

God prepared Mary;
made her ready to receive the Christ-child,
filled her with his grace.

The gift of God's grace does not come sugar-coated.

At its centre is the sharp sword of truth,
clean, cutting, side-piercingly painful at times.

Yet we, like Mary, are called to open ourselves lovingly
to whatever gift God has *prepared* for us and prepares us for,
and to share it generously with open hands.

This is the gift of grace.

*Hail Mary, full of grace.
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Prayers

The Peace

Take a moment and offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for each other and our church family church community. Maybe call or text someone who would enjoy sharing the peace with you.

May the God of peace make you perfect and holy, that you may be kept safe and blameless in spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you.

Hymn 635: The angel Gabriel

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours.
Now and for ever.
Amen.**

Hymn 326: In the bleak midwinter

Remembering the Lord's Supper:

Take a moment to remember the final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. As we think about this meal - with the washing of feet and bread and wine shared with friends - we remember Jesus' offering of himself on the cross. We rejoice in his resurrection from the dead and look forward to the coming of God's Kingdom. While we cannot receive Christ in the sacraments in the usual way, we can be the presence of Christ in our homes and communities and we can be a praying presence wherever we are.

Hymn 480: O come, O come Emmanuel

Closing Prayer:

Lord God, we thank you for this time of worship; may your love and peace remain with us in the coming days. Be with us in all that we will think, say and do so that our lives may reflect your glory. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord
In the name of Christ. Amen