

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 20 December 2020 Fourth Sunday in Advent

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 20 December, the fourth Sunday in Advent, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Mandy for sharing in the preparation of this week's edition.

Lighting an Advent candle

This weekend sees the fourth and last Sunday in Advent. As candles are being lit in houses and churches among preparations for this abnormal or perhaps subnormal Christmas, we pray:

We light our fourth Advent candle for hope. Hope for a clear path and a strong vision to carry us forward.

May this candle flame light our way and show us our best next steps, on the final leg of our Advent journey. We pray for light to chase away the shadows of anxiety, uncertainty and doubt.

Amen

A Christmas tune without words, arranged by Rick Wakeman. As we listen, words come to us that tell of the wonder of what happened so long ago – Our God, heaven cannot hold him. And our response? What can I give him?

Musicⁱ – *In the bleak midwinter*
Arranged and played by Rick Wakeman
From the album *Christmas Portraits*

Call to Worship: Luke 1:46-55

Hear the words of Mary's response to God from Luke's Gospel in chapter 1:

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

'My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.'

Hymn: *Christ be our light* by Bernadette Farrell
sung by the Arundel and Brighton Diocesan Choir
from their album *Arundel and Brighton in Lourdes*

Prayers

We pray

Lord God, bringer of light, shine on us again now. As we make little plans amid this great international crisis. Plans that try to maximise our contact while containing risk and keeping each ourselves and each other safe. Help us to deal with this week's frustrations and regrets.

You are with us every day of the year. At Christmas, help us to put the story of the coming of your Son into context. Your Son, who came to an ordinary family in humble circumstances, was with you at the beginning of all things. The unrecognised child became a living sacrifice for all of your human creation, to offer all of us eternal life despite our shortcomings and selfishness.

Forgive us when we do not apply the lessons of Christmas all year long. Forgive us when we put too much effort into celebrating one day, when all days are yours.

Your Son's whole life on earth reflected your love and reassured us that you can be as close to all the human family as we are to each other. As we remember his life's beginning once again, may we remember all of it and live every day in imitation of him to show your love to all.

In his name, Amen.

As Jesus taught us, so we pray:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Luke 1.26-35 and 38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Reflection (1)

I make no apology for holding off till the last moment from concentrating on the fine detail of the Christmas story. We are still firmly in the season of Advent, and traditionally the fourth Sunday of Advent sees the turn of Mary to have her share of the limelight.

With other readings in the last few weeks we have looked at the prophets, we've looked at John the Baptist. I always find new insights in the long story of God and his people, and never regret not rushing towards Bethlehem.

Not that you need the words spoken in church on a Sunday morning or on a podcast to bring the nativity right up close. Christmas cards do it, nativity displays do it, even if they are each thinner on the ground this year.

Without Advent, Christmas is incomplete. For me it's as important to be looking back at Christmas as to be looking forward. And it's certainly important to be looking forward not just to the nativity stories, but looking forward also to the coming ministry of Christ. And even, dare I say, to the end of that ministry.

I shall miss opportunities to share in communion at church this year. I think it's so so appropriate to bring Easter and Christmas together, in one sense, like this. This year we are missing out on a lot of the togetherness of Christmas. The ultimate expression that the **Church** has of togetherness is the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. It is an activity that has been observed, albeit in many different ways, ever since the beginning of the Church. To be honest, the Lord's Supper has been shared since centuries before the observance of Christmas became a regular, structured thing in the Church.

In celebrating communion we are joining together with the family of the church all over the world, and are observing the celebration that links all Christians together, links us right back to that day, and yes in that sense it was an Easter thing, when Jesus first said "do this in remembrance of me".

But this sense of being a part of a continuing celebration, a continuing activity, that will continue in years to come, is also an important part of Christmas. And whether or not it happened on 25 December, we should realise that the first Christmas was part of a continuing activity, that of God's communication with his Creation. We can analyse the source and purpose of all the Old Testament references in the Gospel accounts of Christmas until we are blue in the face, but we cannot escape, wouldn't want to escape the story that John tells, of the Word made flesh, the Word that has existed since the beginning. His mission to humankind in the form of a man began at Christmas. It had its climax at Easter. Each is part of the story of Jesus, and the greater story of God and his goodness, that we hear in the Old Testament and continue to see unfold even today.

At Christmas we shouldn't look, with blinkers on, at the story of the child in the manger and forget about the man on the cross. Each event is part of the same whole.

I mustn't neglect Mary this week.. We've heard the story of her encounter with Gabriel. Here, in musical form is the response she later gave, rejoicing at her part in God's plans. The Magnificat in Timothy Dudley Smith's words: *Tell out my soul*.

Hymn: *Tell out, my soul* by Timothy Dudley-Smith
The Orchestra Choir And Congregation Of All Souls Church
from the album *The Hymn Makers: Timothy Dudley Smith*

Reflection (2)

Mary accepted her part in God's plan. It's great when a plan works out.

It's really good when some complicated arrangement that you have had a hand in setting up turns out to be just right.

Of course, plans don't always work out right.

When they DO work out OK, nobody notices. It's just another part of everyday life, when a train runs on time, when the post arrives in the morning, when the meal arrives on the table. You don't get terribly surprised when the ten o'clock news comes on TV at 10 o'clock.

It's a very human tendency, to take things for granted, and not to notice when your good fortune or peace of mind is down to someone else's planning, or because of another person's self-sacrificing hard work.

It's not just rail travellers who take things for granted. Parents know what it is to be taken for granted, most days. I know I have said this before, but we used to have a magic house, or at least Natasha and Charles and I thought so. The way it worked is this. You leave your school clothes in a heap on the floor when you go to bed, and when you wake up in the morning they are gone. Miraculously, two days later they reappear, washed and ironed, ready for you to put on again to go to school, or work, or wherever.

What's the point, here? I think that the point is, we all live (not just young children) in a world of little miracles that go on all the time, and most of us, most of the time, don't know how to show our appreciation. We take for granted the way God has looked after his creation through the history of time. If parents are used to being taken for granted, God must be used to it, too!

And this attitude has been the same, virtually since the Israelites were rescued from Egypt through God's intervention, through Moses' hard work. In the times of prosperity, the Jews are recorded as being uncaring and neglectful of God. In times when things went wrong, they were more inclined to turn back to him.

They rarely showed real appreciation. But when Mary was chosen, she showed her appreciation, and understanding.

At the end of Mandy's reading we heard her acceptance - "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

And later in Luke we hear her song, the Magnificat:

She showed appreciation that what was happening to her was a part of God's purpose for the world. God had "remembered" her, she said - not in the sense of bringing back to mind

something he had forgotten. She was a part of his thoughts, and she was amazed that God considered her – a young inexperienced woman - a partner in what he wanted to do.

And Mary shows her delight at being a part of God's purpose for this people. And speaks about all that God has done.

This summary of God's good work isn't some sort of manifesto for revolution, bringing down the kings from their thrones, sending the rich away, scattering the proud. It is more of a confirmation that God has kept to the principles that he established with his people in the desert, principles of fairness and justice, not just for the rich and powerful, but also for the poor and defenceless.

And this plan, that Mary feels is working out, is of course not some secret file hidden in a filing cabinet in some cosmic planning department. God has been very open about what sort of society he wanted his people to achieve, right from the start.

...**wanted his people to achieve.** He's not going to do everything for us. We need to play a part. Christmas is not a time to comfortably relax in the tradition. It's a time when God doesn't so much comfort the afflicted as afflict the comfortable. It's a challenge to look at the world around us and see where our tasks lie.

Mary knew how to respond. The Magnificat, her song of praise, can sound like something triumphant, something final. But it's not all celebration. There had to be dedication, too. We know that Mary's further experience led her to wonder at the adoration of the wise men, worry on the road home from Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem, feelings of rejection perhaps, when Jesus asked, "who is my mother?", feelings of despair at the foot of the cross.

But for the time being, Mary was content to celebrate her part in God's work. It is a curtain-raiser to our celebration of Christmas. She sums up what I hope we have been saying during Advent about God bringing to fulfilment his purpose which was first declared in the Old Testament. With Mary we can go forward now towards Christ's birth.

Prayers of Intercession

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

Lord God, shine a light this Advent

Shine a light on our world. Through the ups and downs of different people in different countries managing the pandemic in their different ways help us all to seek the right way. The right way to play our part.

May the example of Mary show us how we can react to your call, see in ourselves potential we never knew we had, to play a part in your purposes. Even if we find frustration in standing still for a while, unable this year to take our habitual role in announcing the birth of Jesus.

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

Lord God, shine a light on our Church. In a week that is often the most busy of the year but where the management of Covid risk means fewer things going on, fewer visitors to our churches – or none. Less music, fewer words read out loud.

Bless the leaders of our churches in decision-making, not just this week but as we prepare for what the New Year may bring. Strengthen those who are striving to communicate Christmas worship and to inject joy into sad times, light into spiritually dark places.

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

Lord God, shine a light on us, our families and friends. Keep us safe.

We pray for those who are ill, those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. For those who are anxious and whose self-management of risks means they will experience little or no Christmas contact with friends and family this year.

May we all deploy all that we have to become beacons shining for you – sharing the hope that the Christ child represented, reminding the world of your eternal love and pointing the way to you. Like Mary may we accept your call and sincerely say, we are the Lord's servants, may it be to us as you have said.

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

In the name of Jesus we pray

Amen

Here is a Basque carol, purpose-built for our scripture today. [Paraphrased by Revd Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924), originally based on *Angelus Ad Virginem*, Anonymous 13th or 14th Century Latin]

Hymn *The angel Gabriel from heaven came*
sung by the St. Michael's Singers and The Coventry Singers
from the album *The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... ever!*

The angel Gabriel from heaven came
His wings as drifted snow his eyes as flame
"All hail" said he "thou lowly maiden Mary,
Most highly favoured lady," Gloria!

"For know a blessed mother thou shalt be,
All generations laud and honour thee,
Thy Son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold
Most highly favoured lady," Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head
"To me be as it pleaseth God," she said,
"My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name."
Most highly favoured lady. Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ was born
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say:
"Most highly favoured lady," Gloria!

Blessing

May we like Mary open ourselves to the amazing possibilities of God's power, and the amazing possibility that we can share in channeling his love to the world.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever

Amen

A pre-retirement word...

It was Palm Sunday, the end of March 1985, when I first came to lead worship at Keresley. Anyone who has only known the church since after the Distribution Centre development was completed has missed out on the amazing experience of approaching the church from the south to see the looming machinery of the Homefire Plant looming up to the right. It was quite a sight especially on a dark night, when parts of it seemed to glow.

This is a church that always valued its music, and usually there were more of the congregation sat in the choir seats than elsewhere. It was always great to have a special contribution from the choir in the services. The church was notable in seeking out and using a new hymn book – Hymns and Psalms – before other churches in the Area took a step away from Congregational Praise.

It's always been a very friendly church and as well as the musical focus I always remember the after-service chat which went on longer than in any other church I'd been to. As often as not I headed out of the building before anyone in the congregation. I didn't realise at first the number of members for which this was a weekly family reunion!

As a minister in our Group it's been good to see the church at Keresley on other days of the week than Sunday, and Erica and I have valued being welcomed into the church family, to the socials we could get to and to the annual Christmas meal which would probably have been during this past week. I will always link Beetle Drives with Fish and Chips now. Last year there was a musical evening that even enticed me into getting my flute out, no easy task.

The church welcomed those from the Brownhill Green church who wanted to continue the evening service tradition, to the benefit of both sides – and so I got to keep up with old friends.

With everyone else I miss having Beryl and Reg Bicknell in the church now they are so frail. In past times Beryl would pass me a list of people to pray for, as I arrived in the church. More members of the family, and part of the mutual care for which Erica and I will always be grateful.

Here's Sergei with some jolly Christmassy music. Not the meerkat. Sergei Prokofiev.

Music: *Lieutenant Kijé Suite, Op. 60: IV. Troika* by Sergei Prokofiev
performed by Paavo Järvi & Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra
from their album *Prokofiev: Lieutenant Kijé Suite, Symphony No. 5*

Thank you for listening to our podcast.

The next podcast will be uploaded by lunchtime on Christmas Eve and will be a special edition featuring nine lessons and Christmas carols. There will be a short edition uploaded on Christmas Morning. The last in this series will be on the weekend of Sunday 27 December.

The archive on our website will remain available until Easter, and after that depending on licensing conditions.

Credits

In the bleak midwinter was arranged and played by Rick Wakeman and taken from his album *Christmas Portraits*.

Christ be our light by Bernadette Farrell was sung by the Arundel and Brighton Diocesan Choir and is on their album *Arundel and Brighton in Lourdes*

Tell out, my soul with the Orchestra, Choir And Congregation Of All Souls Church Langham Place comes from the album *The Hymn Makers: Timothy Dudley Smith*

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark was sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community and taken from the album *Heaven shall not wait*.

The angel Gabriel from heaven came sung by the St. Michael's Singers and The Coventry Singers and is from the modestly entitled album *The Best Christmas Carols Album in the World... ever!*

Lieutenant Kijé Suite, Op. 60: IV. Troika by Sergei Prokofiev was performed by Paavo Järvi & Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, from their album *Prokofiev: Lieutenant Kijé Suite, Symphony No. 5*

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ⁱⁱ Bible passages are taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition.