An Advent daily devotional

wonderfully RESTORED



I'm certain I'm not the only one who strategises carefully before choosing which queue to join.

How many people are there in line? How many items do they have? Are they likely to be talkers who'll hold up the whole operation, or are they like arrows from a bow- short, sharp, and to the point?

And again, if you're like me it doesn't end there. Once you're committed, you take careful note of where you would be if you had joined one of the other lines, and you follow along either with barely concealed smugness, or very obvious dismay.

As a culture, we're not trained to wait. In fact, it's just the opposite- we are taught to prioritise speed, efficiency, and productivity. So order your fast food before you even leave the house; go to the self-serve checkout so you don't have to wait in line; do three things at once just to make sure you're squeezing everything you possibly can out of every single moment.

If we were responsible for the Story of God, it would have unfolded very differently. We would never have waited so long after the Fall before we sent the Rescuer. And when He finally came, we would never have waited 30 years before launching His public ministry.



Three days in the tomb? I don't think so. And almost two millennia and counting before His Second and Final Coming? Absolutely not!

What Christ said to His brothers in John 7:6, He could very easily say to so many of us- ***My time is not yet here; for you any time will do.***

And so, into this running and rushing; never-stopping and always moving; faster and faster; right here and right now culture, Advent explodes like a silent bomb.

Because in Advent, we're forced to just...wait. Not a passive and inactive waiting, but a nonetheless uncompromising waiting. Because no matter how much the shops try to make it otherwise, Christmas remains stubbornly, unchangeably locked in place.

And so, for the people of God Advent functions as a reminder to trust in the timing of God, which is perfect; the way of God, which is best; and the will of God, which is always for our highest good, because it is always for His most perfect glory.

But in this season we don't just wait for Christmas. It's not just a countdown to the 25th. We wait along parallel lines- in one, we wait for the day when we celebrate the first Coming, the first Advent of our Lord as the Babe of Bethlehem.



But we also look forward with even greater hope, peace, joy, and love to That Day when He returns in unveiled glory as the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords; That Day when every eye shall see Him, and every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father; That Day when this badly broken Creation is wonderfully restored, as all things are made new and right- once again good and very good.

And so over these weeks, allow yourself to enter into the waiting. Choose the long queue. Wait until you arrive at the restaurant to place your order. Learn to linger.

Because the greater our anticipation grows in the waiting, the greater our celebration when it finally arrives.



29th November- The Sunday of Hope

Isaiah was writing to the people of God at a time when their circumstances seemed hopelessly grim, hopelessly dark, hopelessly…hopeless.

Isaiah 64:1-9

They had returned home from exile in Babylon, but instead of a land of milk and honey, they find the walls of Jerusalem torn down and the temple razed to the ground. Is it any wonder they cry out for the Lord to do something?

To help as only He can help; to work as only He can work; to once again show that He truly is the living God, and He truly loves the people who are His very own.

Because they knew that they had nowhere else to turn. No one else could rescue; no one else could save. They knew the truth of the hymnist-

Other refuge have I none;
hangs my helpless soul on thee;
leave, ah! leave me not alone,
still support and comfort me.

If the Lord didn't rend the Heavens and come down; if He didn't move on their behalf and work for their good, then there was no way they could endure- ***How then can we be saved?***



How often have we felt this way? In a place of desperation; a place of loss; a place of despair. We're deep in the dark valleys of this world and everywhere we look we just see steep and unscalable cliffs.

And so there's great hope in this passage, but also a great warning. The warning is against seeking rescue anywhere but in the Lord our God. In concluding that He doesn't hear our prayers, or even worse- He hears but doesn't care and so doesn't answer.

And so we lean harder upon our own strength, or look to other avenues for deliverance. But the simple truth is that these other rescuers are liars, and they will only ever break our heart. There is no rescue but in the Lord our God, ***who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.***

There is no rescue but in the Lord our God, who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.

But there is also such great hope. Firstly, we are not alone in feeling the pain of this old world! We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have walked through this valley, and not just endured it, but emerged as more than conquerors.

But the greatest hope is that God answered the prayers and pleas of His people- He rent the Heavens and came down.



Not as they expected, but as they most desperately needed. Not to rescue them from Babylon or Rome, but from the tyrant of sin and the scourge of death.

In our place of discouragement, rescue may not look the way we want it to or think it should. But our true and eternal rescue has already come- God in Christ came down and did awesome things that no one expected.

And the climax and consummation of that rescue is coming, when our Lord returns in perfect, unveiled glory.

And until That Day, we can rest assured of His constant presence; His unfailing mindfulness; and His perfectly, constantly sufficient grace.

Our true and eternal rescue has already come.



Merciful and ever present God;
Thank for you the grace that rent the Heavens and came down
to rescue, to redeem, to restore.

In our dark valleys and deep disappointments,
help us to rest safe and secure in the promise that you will never fail us nor forsake us,
but are our ever present Help in trouble.
Through Christ our Lord,
Amen.



30th November

I grew up in a culture where the wrath of God was a fairly common theme in Christian circles. It was still a culture where street preachers would shout into their microphones about just how furious God was at the people passing by; and just how much they needed to fear His dreadful anger and His terrible fury.

Revelation 15:1-8

That great figure of the American Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, once preached a sermon entitled ***Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*** that had his congregation so terrified that they clung to the pillars of the Church because they could feel themselves sliding down into Hell.

And the Scriptures make it very clear- including our passage for today- the anger of God is very real. The wrath of God is very real. But we fundamentally misunderstand it when we think it is primarily focused at ***sinners***- the wrath of God is ultimately and primarily towards ***sin***.

NT Wright put it like this:

When God looks at sin, what He sees is what a violin maker would see if the player were to use his lovely creation as a tennis racquet.



When the God who is holy love and loving holiness looks at sin; when He looks at everything that's out of step with who He is and what He's like; when He sees anything in all of His Creation resisting and rebelling against His rightful rule, His rightful reign, His rightful dominion...

When He sees anything or anyone trying to spin out of their natural orbit around Him to an unnatural and twisted and decaying orbit around self; when He sees His dearly bought and deeply beloved children pouring their precious selves down the gutter when we were shaped and formed, moulded and made to be His royal heirs...

When the God who is holy, holy, holy sees the tyrant of sin, the slavemaster of sin, the unnatural parasite of sin; when He sees the damage done by sin and by sinners...

When He sees systemic corruption from the top of the system to the bottom; the victimisation and abuse of the innocent and the vulnerable; when He sees the damage His children are doing to one another and the pain they're inflicting on one another...

When the Lord God looks at sin, rest assured that He is angry.

How could He not be?



That's why the Final Judgment, when every son of Adam and daughter of Eve will stand before the throne of God and the books will be opened- it's not a doctrine of terror, but of ***hope***.

Because we anticipate the Day when true and perfect justice is finally done; because we trust in the Righteous Judge who cannot be fooled or bribed; because we trust that the crushing of the Serpent's head will finally be complete; and, in the words of *The Jesus Storybook Bible,* everything sad will finally come untrue.

The Final Judgment is not a doctrine of terror, but of hope.

And so we can echo the words of Dr King-

Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history into AD and BC, so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name. Yes, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.



Righteous God,
You do all things well.
You way is best
and your timing is perfect.

We confess that we can be impatient as
we wait for justice-
We believe, Lord, so help our unbelief.

And may our hearts beat with yours-
may we be grieved by what grieves you,
and may we work with you to see your
Kingdom come on earth,
as in Heaven.
Amen.



1st December

It's a simple truth that light shines brightest in the deepest darkness. As I write these words, my study is well lit on a sunny afternoon. If I were to strike a match, its light would easily be swallowed up.

Micah 4:6-13

But were I to light that same match in the same place in the middle of the night, the match would illuminate the entire room, all by itself.

In today's passage, Israel find themselves in a place of deep, oppressive, painful darkness. For the first three chapters, the Lord has been using Micah to rebuke His people for their sin and rebellion.

The entire system is just broken- kings, priests, and people, all have fallen so far short of who God has called them to be, and what He has called them to do.

And by chapter 4, it all seems **hopeless**. The people are facing defeat, conquest, exile. They have been struck *lame* and *brought to grief*; they have lost their *former dominion*; they *writhe in agony… like a woman in labour;* and worst of all, they *will go to Babylon.*

They will be taken into exile, far from home and, so they feared, far from God.



And yet into this intense and seemingly impenetrable darkness, the message of the prophet breaks like a clear and shimmering burst of light- there is hope in the worst of places, and for the worst of people

Hope in the worst of places, and for the worst of people

There is hope for the people who had fallen so low, so often; those people who time and time again had rejected their calling to be the people they were rescued to be; people who had made themselves the centre of their universe rather than the Lord they were created to orbit; people who had insisted that self must sit on the throne of their lives, rather than the King whose people they were.

Does that sound familiar? Because it should. All too often, **this** story has been **our** story. But that means **this** hope is also **our** hope. Even when we've got it so wrong, the Lord hasn't turned His back on us- He still gathers the exiles.

Even when we've been struck lame by all the wrong paths we've chosen, the Lord still holds us; and even when we cry out in pain of our self-inflicted wounds, He will still redeem us out of the hand of our enemies. There is still hope, even for the worst of people.



And there's still hope in the worst of places- because where does the Lord do His deep work of transformation for Israel? In *Babylon*- the least likely place they could have imagined; the place of exile.

The death and resurrection of Christ prove to us that even the deepest darkness is not and can never be God-forsaken. Whatever our Babylon looks like, and whatever form it takes, God is still present; He is still active; and His promise still holds true- *The Lord will rule over them in Mount Zion from that day and forever.*

God is still present; He is still active; and His promise still holds true



Ever-present God,
our Refuge and Strength,
Thank you that your children are never out of their Father's sight.

Thank you that you never give up on wayward children-
your heart is still for us.
And thank you that even in the darkest valleys,
your rod and staff will comfort us.

Amen.



2nd December

My favourite novelist writes about how, as a child, he was tormented by nightmares about monsters coming to kill him.

His mother brought him to a series of therapists who tried to help him understand that monsters weren't real and therefore couldn't hurt him, but the nightly torture continued.

Micah 5:1-5a

Finally, one night the child woke screaming. His stepfather came in to find out what was wrong- *Vampires*, said the boy, *They're coming to kill me!* Without missing a beat, his stepfather said, *I know, I saw them. I killed them. I won't have vampires in my house.*

The child lay back down, went to sleep, and never suffered from the nightmares again.

He didn't need an assurance that monsters weren't real- he needed to know that he had a defender who was stronger than any monster that could ever threaten him.

As we saw yesterday, in the book of Micah the people of God are facing their own monsters- military defeat and exile in a distant land. Enough for a lifetime of nightmares!



But the assurance of God comes- they have a Defender and Champion far greater than any enemy that could ever come against them. They have a Fortress whom no army could ever overcome. And they have a Ruler who will shepherd His flock against every wolf, lion, and bear.

In the face of armies and giants, floods and storms, the people of God have the assurance that we do not rely upon our own strength. And thank the Lord for that!

They have a Defender and Champion far greater than any enemy that could ever come against them.

As difficult as it may be for our pride to hear, we are simply not strong enough, not wise enough, not skilled enough- as we face the sheer weight of this old world's fallenness, we are simply not...**enough**.

We can't save ourselves or sanctify ourselves; we can't make ourselves clean or keep ourselves clean; our own straining and striving will never get us where we need to be, make us who we need to be, or enable us to live as we know we are called to live.

But this isn't a message of despair, and nor is it license to settle for so much less than what we are designed and build to be.



On the contrary, this is a message of unshakable **hope**! Because we have a God who is greater, and who has promised that His grace is always sufficient- the One whose every command is accompanied by the grace to obey it.

And this gracious God of all mercy is greater and stronger and mightier than the giants of sin that hold us captive.

A promise is implied in every commandment of God.

John Wesley

Our self control won't do it; our good intentions can't do it; our own resources and abilities, our habits and disciplines, they will always fall short; they'll always fall flat. We need a Champion who is greater- and in Jesus Christ, we have one.

He breaks the chains and sets captives free; He reaches down into death and leads us into life; He descends into darkness, and blazes like the sun.



Thank you, Lord,
for our good Shepherd,
our strong Defender,
our mighty Victor.

May we live in the full measure of His victory.

Amen.



3rd December

Paul says that the hope of the Thessalonians was inspired *by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*.

This is probably the oldest book in our New Testament, and it was written to a young Church that was facing persecution from their neighbours, but was nevertheless thriving.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-2

And the Apostle says that they were carried along by their hope in Christ- hope in all that He had done for them and given to them, and hope in all that He still held in store for them.

Most of us are not facing persecution like our sisters and brothers in 1 Thessalonians- although countless members of our family are. But we share with those early believers that same sure and certain hope in Christ. And like them, it will carry us through all the brokenness of life in a world that just doesn't work the way it should.

Someone once asked me about our use of the word *hope* in the Church. *Surely*, she said, *what we have is so much greater than just hope!*

And if we used that word the way it is so often used by our neighbours, then she would be absolutely correct. But we don't.



Christian hope is not a vague and changeable thing. We don't hope in the same way that lottery players hope. And we definitely don't hope in the same way that the lazy student hopes!

Our hope is what the author to the Hebrews calls *an anchor for the soul*. Christian hope is more solid than the ground beneath our feet, because that ground will one day pass away, but Christ will never fail.

> ***We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.***
>
> ***Hebrews 6:19***

Our hope is more real than the fact that the sun rose this morning, because one day it will rise for the very last time, but Christ will never fail. And our hope is even more real than death, because one day death will claim its very last victim, but **Christ will never fail!**

We don't hope in Christ in the same way that a child might wish upon a star. Our hope is ironclad, because the One in whom we hope is steadfast and true- the solid Rock in a world of shifting sands.

And in this season of Advent, we remember that our hope isn't just in all that He **has** done- it's also in all that lies ahead for us in Him.



We press on to what Paul later calls *the day of the Lord,* when Christ returns in perfect, unveiled, final triumph. But we need to be careful to learn from the mistake of our Thessalonian friends.

They were so eager for That Day that they forgot about their mission in these days. They were prepared to down tools and sit like the Apostles on Ascension Day, with their faces turned towards Heaven as they passively awaited the return of Christ.

They were so eager for That Day that they forgot about their mission in these days.

That is not our calling as the Lord's people. Our sure and certain hope doesn't stop us in our tracks- it propels us into a waiting that is active and engaged; a waiting that is unfailingly patient, but constantly on the move with Jesus.



Ancient of Days,
For you a thousand years are like a day,
and a day like a thousand years.

Enable us to remain faithful to you in our waiting.
Never rushing ahead,
nor lagging behind,
but staying close to the Master
who does all things well.

Amen.



4th December

Dr Luke says something fascinating in our Acts passage. Tucked away at the end of v26, he says that it was in Antioch that the believers were first given the name ***Christians.*** And the fascinating part is that they didn't take this name for themselves- it was given to them by their neighbours!

Jeremiah 1:4-10 & Acts 11:19-26

There was something in their lives that made it clear to those around them that these people belonged to Christ- it's not stretching the language to translate Christian as ***little Christ*****.**

Is this why the Gospel spread so powerfully and effectively in this pagan city? Is this why Antioch would go on to be ranked alongside Rome and Jerusalem as one of the great cities of the Christian faith?

Because the people of Christ made it so easy to believe in Christ! They were so faithful to their Lord that they were living, breathing testimonies to who He is and what He's like! Their neighbours didn't need to wonder what Jesus was like- all they had to do was look to His people in their midst.

And when we turn to Jeremiah, we see that this same calling is upon each and every one of the Lord's people- none of us are excluded from the commission to be a little Christ.



When the Lord called to him, Jeremiah walked in the footsteps of prophets before him, and prophets since- he offered excuses! He presented the factors which seemed to disqualify him and exclude him from the work of declaring the message of God to a lost world.

He was too young, and too slow of speech. He didn't have the qualifications and experience; he didn't have the gifts and graces. But the Lord reminded Jeremiah of the only qualification necessary- ***I am with you***.

And before we rush to condemn him, how often do we do the same? We offer one reason after another why we're not able to share the Good News of Christ with the world around us; why our lives don't present the beauty of Christ in the way they should.

The Lord reminded Jeremiah of the only qualification necessary- I am with you.

But by the grace of God we have all that we need to be His heralds and ambassadors- not only with our lips, but with our lives; to declare His lordship not only through our spoken testimony, but through the testimony of every aspect of our life, in every part of our life.



Some of us may be old enough to remember when DC Talk quoted Father Richard Rohr:

The greatest cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and then walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.

This season of Advent is a particularly appropriate time to invite someone to Church. Doubtless there will be special events and activities in your fellowship in the weeks ahead, and people are unusually open to attending them at this time of year.

But what a shame, if our invitation at this time of year was undermined by our lifestyle throughout the rest of the year!

A challenge: Identify one person whom you will invite to one of the special services in your Church. And ask the Lord for grace to live a life of such faithfulness that your invitation isn't undermined, but rather underlined by the beauty of Christ in you.



God who is always inviting,
always drawing,
always wooing.
Grant us all the grace we need to
partner with you in your mission to your world-
as we witness with our words
and with our lives.

Amen.



5th December

This passage has a place of special prominence in our tradition, as it reminds us of our great hope in this world- a life that is really and truly like Christ, through and through. A life in which our obedience isn't driven by external obligation, but from internal devotion. A life of rightly ordered, rightly directed love.

Ezekiel 36:24-28

This is the sure and certain hope for the people of God in this world- that we are not doomed to a life of returning to our sin like a dog to its vomit or a pig to its filth. That the slavemaster of sin no longer holds the whip, because the walls of our prison have been tor down and shattered to pieces by our conquering King.

By the deep and powerful sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, God reorients the compass of our heart. No longer does it spin naturally and irresistably towards self- and therefore towards sin. Instead, it spins towards our True North- Christ, seated where He belongs, on the throne of our life.

And this is truly a message of hope- for us, and for our badly broken world. It's a message of hope for us, because the assurance of God is that sin is no longer an unavoidable and inevitable necessity for us. We no longer need to resign ourselves to going back to that old way of being alive.



There is a higher life, a deeper life, a richer life- for the sanctified believer, there is a life that finally and truly deserves the name ***life***!

Now, please understand- this is not to say that it is impossible for us to sin. But rather it is possible for us not to sin- sin is no longer natural for us.

Instead, it is exposed for what it is- the most unnatural thing in the world, because we are shaped and formed to orbit Christ, and sin is the parasite that would knock us out of that orbit so that we spin, destabilised, around self.

Sin is the parasite that would knock us out of that orbit so that we spin, destabilised, around self.

How many times have we gone back to that old way of doing life? How often have we prayed, ***Never again***, only to go back all over again?

The promise of God through Ezekiel is that there is more for us- there is a life of genuine Christlike holiness. But this is also a message of hope for our world- and again, this is a particular calling for our particular branch of the Christian family tree. Because so many of our congregations are planted in communities that desperately need to hear that it doesn't have to be this way!



Our friends and neighbours don't just need the message that there is a God who forgives them for their brokenness- they need the message of the God who can heal their brokenness!

The God who can make them right, and then keep them right; the God who breaks the chains of addiction and leads His children into glorious liberty; the God who reaches down into the darkness and takes the captive by the hand and brings them into wondrous light.

That's our hope in this world- not just salvation in our sins, but salvation from our sins.

Our friends and neighbours need the message of the God who can heal their brokenness!



Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord Almighty!
Thank you that you invite your people to
share in your own holiness,
like planets warmed and enlivened by
the sun.
Amen.



Questions for Reflection

1. How would you define Christian **hope**?

2. Which of this week's readings struck you in a particular way? Why?

3. Was there anything that surprised you?

4. What might restored **love** look like for you this week?

5. As we prepare to move into the week of **peace**, what are you expecting?



6th December- The Sunday of Peace

This chapter marks the beginning of the second main section of Isaiah. The people are in exile in Babylon- far from home and, so they feared, far from God.

Isaiah 40:1-11

Their persistent rebellion; their generational defiance; their wiful returning to their sin like a dog to its vomit; it had all culminated and climaxed in defeat, conquest, and exile. The Lord refused to allow them to continue in their slavish addiction to idolatry, and so He acted radically and dramatically to break the cycle.

But instead of telling them He was through with them; instead of turning His back on them once and for all; instead of washing His hands of His wayward and rebellious children, what is His message?

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

And it isn't the comfort of burying their heads in the sand. It isn't the peace of pretending that everything's fine and that everything's ok. The Lord isn't telling His people, *Don't worry, be happy!*

No, He's inviting them into the matchless peace that comes from knowing things aren't ok, things aren't fine, things are a mess- but God is present, and God is active, and God is good.



Because just look at what the Lord says through His prophet. All the reasons for joy, for celebration, for peace- they are things that only God can do.

They can know peace and comfort because the Lord will make highways in the desert; He will raise up valleys and bring low mountains; He will reveal His glory in such a way that all people will see it, and no one will be able to deny it.

God is present, and God is active, and God is good.

And it's not because the people have earned it or deserve it. It's not because they're worthy of it or have worked hard enough for it. After all, just look at what the Lord says about them- their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field, which are here one day and gone the next, without any hint that they were ever present at all.

But the faithfulness of God isn't dependent upon the faithfulness of His people- He is the Good Shepherd, and His steadfast love endures forever.

And so even in this place of exile; even as they see the consequences of their sin writ large every time they look out their windows; even as they begin to build a brand new life in a brand new world; even then and even there, they can know a peace that transcends understanding, because it isn't built upon their circumstances.



The peace that can only be enjoyed by the people of God isn't about our situations. It's not dependent upon smooth sailing on untroubled waters.

No, the people of God can know comfort even in the midst of hurricanes, because our peace is dependent upon the God who has covenanted to be with us to the very end of the age.

Our peace is dependent upon the fact that the One in the boat with us is the same One who spoke the winds and waves into existence, and they still recognise His voice- and are swift to obey it.

Our peace is not dependent upon smooth sailing on untroubled waters.

And so wherever we find ourselves today; in all of the turbulent seas of life; even in the very heart of Babylonian exile; the message of God comes to us- He tends His flock like a shepherd; He gathers us in His arms and carries us close to His heart; He gently leads us through the darkest valleys; and He whispers, ***Comfort, comfort my people.***



And so, merciful God,
May the peace of our Lord Christ go with us,
wherever He may send us.
May He guide us through the wilderness,
and protect us through the storm.
May He bring us home rejoicing at the wonders He has shown us;
May He bring us home rejoicing once again into our doors.
Amen.



7th December

If you could only ask one thing of the Lord, what would it be?

Psalm 27

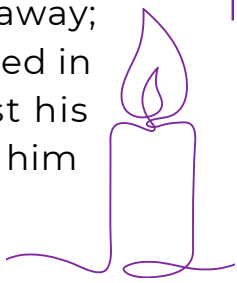
For David, it doesn't seem to have been a hard question-

One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.

All he wanted was to know God, and to live in intimacy with Him. All he wanted was the prayer of St Richard:

O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may I know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day.

If we read the whole psalm, David actually goes on to make other requests of the Lord. He asks for mercy; for the Lord not to turn His face away; to know the way of the Lord and to be led in straight paths; to be protected against his enemies and the lies they spread about him and against him.



But all of these requests fall under the primary one; these prayers are all in relation to the ultimate prayer. Because everything else- all other worries and concerns, all other burdens and troubles, they all come a distant second to knowing Christ, being His, and living in ever deepening fellowship with Him.

It's not that they no longer matter. It's not like the chorus many of us have sung- *In His presence, our problems disappear*. We can all testify to the fact that this just isn't the case!

All of our burdens are seen in light of the fact that we are in Christ, and He is in us

Our problems remain real; our issues and burdens, our worries and troubles- they remain real and even painful. But they are seen in light of the steadfast, unfailing, intimate presence of God.

One of the great gifts given through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is that His people really can experience for themselves the answer to David's prayer. This isn't something reserved for the pages of Scripture; it's not something locked away for the spiritual elite.

Like David, the cry of every heart is, ***Seek His face!*** And by grace, we are enabled to do so- and in seeking, find!



One of the Articles of Faith of our denomination says this:

We believe that regenerate persons [those who are in Christ] *need not return to sin but may live in unbroken fellowship with God through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God.*

We can live in unbroken fellowship with God through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit!

What an awesome privilege! What a gift of grace! To walk with God, as did Enoch; to abide in Christ, as our Lord commanded and promised; to pray with Paul, ***I want to know Christ*** [Philippians 3:10] and have that prayer answered in ever increasing measure, every single day until we cross our finish line and behold Him face to face!

That is His gift to us- His gift to each of us and all of us. So pray boldly with David today- seek His face, and His alone, because when we seek we will find, and when we knock, the door will be opened for us.



Gracious Heavenly Father,
Our hearts say of you,
'Seek His face!'
Your face, Lord, we will seek.
So most merciful Redeemer,
Friend and Brother,
may we know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly,
day by day.

Amen.



8th December

One of the great scandals of the Gospel is the boundless breadth of its reach.

Acts 11:1-18

The Good News of rescue; that God in Christ stepped down into His badly broken world to make all things new; that He is unwilling that any should perish, but desires all to come to abundant life; that there is healing from the disease of sin, and liberation from the tyranny of sin- this Good News comes to any and to all.

This radically inclusive welcome was shocking to the Jewish mindset in the first century, and to those Christians who came from a Jewish background.

The idea that Gentiles had a place in the New Creation that had erupted in the heart of the Old? The idea that there was a place at the Table for those not born into the house of Israel? The idea that Abraham's family was much bigger and much broader than they had ever imagined? Incredible!

And so when they heard that Peter had fellowshipped with these non-Jews; that he had entered their home and sat at their table; that he had been so bold as to share the message of Christ with them; when these believers learned of it, what was their reaction?



When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him.

This begs two questions of us. Firstly, how often do we put a border around the Gospel of Jesus Christ? How often do we take upon ourselves the authority to declare who's in, and who's out? Who has a place, and who's doesn't? Who gets a seat at the table, and who gets left behind?

Because we can never afford to forget- we don't get to make that decision. The Lord of the Feast has already extended the invitation, and it is **universal**. He has already opened the doors, and they are wide open. We don't get to try to close them again!

The Lord of the Feast has already extended the invitation, and it is universal.

And that means there will be people whom we wouldn't choose to invite. There will be people who stretch us, people who challenge us, people whom we find to be hard work (and who might even find us to be hard work? No, surely not!).

If there is no one in our congregations who need us to exhibit what I call *special grace*, then we have to ask ourselves is it really the Church that the Lord wants it to be- because He is building a Church for difficult, broken, messy people.



But that's just the first question our passage demands of us. The second is this: When were we last criticised for those whom we welcome?

When did people last condemn us for extending the welcome of Christ to people who don't seem to fit, those who don't seem to belong, those who are too messy and too difficult?

When were we last criticised for those whom we welcome?

Because, whether we like it or not, those are **our** people. Those are the ones to whom this tribe called Nazarenes have a particular and special calling- the least, the last, and the lost. Those whom no one else wants, in whom no one else sees any value.

Perhaps it's time we sought out the kind of company for which others- even the religious- will criticise us.



Thank you, Lord, for your boundless love;
Love that welcomes even us.
May we embody that love and share it with the world.
And may we have the grace to endure the criticism that will always come to those who follow the One who is the Friend of sinners.
Amen.



9th December

Elizabeth and Zechariah are the first examples in the Gospel of Luke of *faithful waiting*. They are not the last- in just the next chapter we will meet Simeon and Anna, two more prime examples.

Luke 1:5-17

One of the striking things about Elizabeth and Zechariah is in v6 and the first words of v7- *Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly*. ***But they were childless.***

And this reminds us of two essential, but difficult, truths. Firstly, *obedience does not always lead to the blessing we desire*.

Sometimes it does, praise God. It eventually did for this couple- like Abraham and Sarah, like Hannah and Elkanah, in their senior years they were blessed with a miracle child.

But this isn't always how the story ends. Again, all we need to do is turn a few pages and meet Anna- a woman of remarkable faith and faithfulness, but who lived as a widow for decades after just seven years of marriage.

And for every Elizabeth and Zechariah reading this, there will be an Anna- perhaps **many** Annas.



Because we've had faith and been faithful; we've observed the Lord's commands and decrees; we've sought and prayed and waited, and the answer hasn't come in the way we wanted it to.

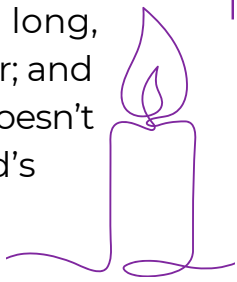
The healing didn't come. The relationship didn't recover. The child didn't return. And it can be so easy for us to wonder where it all went wrong. Why hasn't life worked out the way we wanted it to, and the way we prayed it would?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if a life in Christ and with Christ and for Christ meant a life of uninterrupted happiness? If, the second we recognise and embrace His Lordship, we put on those rose-tinted glasses and just glide our way through life until we coast into Heaven?

Obedience does not always lead to the blessing we desire.

But setting aside whether that would actually be wonderful, it is simply not the case.

But even when the prayers aren't answered the way we thought they would be and think they should be, the ironclad hope of the Church is that God is still God, and God is still good. And so, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we remain faithful through the long, hard years of seemingly unanswered prayer; and like Anna, we trust that even if the answer doesn't come when we want or how we want, God's way is still best, and it's still beautiful.



Because here is the second truth we need to remember- *blessing is not the goal of obedience.*

This Christian faith is not a *quid pro quo*, in which we earn obedience points that we can exchange for gifts from God, like a divine arcade. Even if God never gave a single good thing; even if He never helped and never blessed; and even if we didn't have the certain assurance of eternal life, God would still be worthy of our obedience, simply because He is God.

Blessing is not the goal of obedience.

He doesn't need to earn our devotion- He is worthy of it by His very nature.

And so, may we learn from these faithful and faith-full saints- may we live in obedience to the will and way of God, regardless of the 'results.' Because we know that our God is worthy- worthy of it **all**, even when the healing doesn't come.



Wonderful and worthy God,
We thank you for every good and perfect gift that you give.
But may we be good and faithful servants
even in the darkest of valleys,
because you are who you are
no matter where we are,
what we face,
and how we feel.
Amen.



10th December

Philippians 3:7-11

Our passage directly follows an impressive spiritual resume. Paul has been listing all the things that seem to be religious assets- a lineage that stretches back to Abraham; membership of the strictest and most pious sect in Judaism; a firm defender of orthodox faith; in human terms, absolutely flawless!

And yet, not only does he refuse to boast in these things- he actually counts them as ***loss***. It's not just that they're a lesser good; and it's not even that they're spiritually neutral. Anything and everything that would lead him to trust in something other than Jesus Christ is a ***loss***.

In fact, the word the NIV translates as ***rubbish*** or ***garbage*** in v8 could even be translated as something that I couldn't possibly type in a work like this!

That's how utterly and completely Paul has rejected these old ways of doing life; these old ways of trying to earn God's favour; these old ways of trying to be holy and whole, perfect and complete.

Because he knows that Jesus Christ is not the **best** option on the menu- He is the **only** thing that isn't toxic. Life in Christ isn't the **best** way to live- it's the **only** way that we can truly and fully live; the **only** way to be truly and fully human.



It's a mistake for us to imagine or present this Christian life as being one option amongst many. It's dangerously wrong for us to think that spirituality is like window-shopping, and we choose Christ because He seems to be the best value for money.

Make no mistake- life in Christ is the only life that deserves the name. Anything and everything else is radioactive, and it will ultimately and eternally leave us empty, adrift, and less than human.

Life in Christ is the only life that deserves the name.

That's why Paul could count it all as loss and recognise it all as rubbish- because there's no life to be found anywhere else. It's like tying to quench our thirst by guzzling down salt water- not only does it make us thirstier than ever, but it will ultimately kill us.

But to know Christ; to be His and to call Him ours; to know that we are in Him and He is in us; to know that we are drawn into the eternal and perfect community of the Holy Trinity- that's life in all its fullness.

To know that we are saved, not only for Heaven, but for abundant and flourishing life here and now and forever; saved, not only from the guilt and shame of sin, but from its dominion...



To know that we are invited to partner with God in His work of pushing back the borders and boundaries of the New Creation until it has flooded every single inch and corner of the old...

To know that we are invited to participate in the very life of God, so that the most true and most real thing about us isn't our nationality or our family or our past or anything else, but rather that our name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life- and even carved upon the hand of God...

How could anything else compare? How could anything else even come close? And how could we possibly see every other empty promise and false idol as anything but what it is- loss compared to knowing Christ and being His; rubbish, fit for nothing but absolute and final rejection.

The most true and most real thing about us is that our name is written in the Lamb's Book of life



And so Lord,
We confess that nothing compares to knowing you and being yours.
Forgive us when we try to replace you in our hearts, our loves, our priorities.
Take your rightful place as Lord of all, and give us undivided hearts to love and serve you.
Amen.



11th December

In the final book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan's subjects have arrived in the New Creation. They're staggered by the sheer beauty and magnificence of what they see- they're surrounded by sights they've never imagined, and they're tempted to stop and stare in wonder.

Philippians 3:12-16

But when they do, one of the Great Lion's servants urges them, *Come further up, come further in!* Because, *The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside.*

In yesterday's reading, Paul cried out, *I want to know Christ.* He wanted to live in constant intimacy with the Lord; he wanted to enjoy the unbroken fellowship that was his birthright in Christ.

And in today's passage he reminds us that the inside is larger than the outside- however closely we're living to God, we can always draw nearer; however well we know Him, we can always know Him better!

We are not saved to be stale; we are not sanctified to be stagnant. The call to the people of God is always, *Come further up, come further in!* The invitation to the people of God is always to know Christ better and love Him more.



And Paul reminds us that this ever greater, ever deeper intimacy is worth pressing towards. It's not a nice bonus to the Christian life; it's not an optional extra; it's not something we should feel we can take or leave.

No, to know Christ in an ever deeper, constantly richer way is worth straining for. It's worth forgetting where we used to be, and even who we used to be, and setting our eyes unblinkingly upon our divine Goal- Christ Himself.

We are not saved to be stale; we are not sanctified to be stagnant.

The hymnist put it like this:

My goal is God Himself, not joy, nor peace,
Nor even blessing, but Himself, my God.

And in this season of Advent, it can be so easy to forget that truth- to forget what it is we're pursuing, what it is we're straining towards. Because the world around us is answering that question for us in a very particular, very intentional way.

We're pressing towards presents! We're pressing towards food! We're pressing towards a few days off work! We're pressing on to the ultimate festival of consumerism. And if we're not careful, we can buy into that narrative and very easily lose sight of our true goal, our true prize, our true purpose:



To know Christ; to be found in Him and known as His; to take hold of Him as He has taken hold of us.

Because here's the hard truth- we know Christ just as well as we want to know Him. We live just as close to Him as we're willing to live.

Because He has invited us to abide in Him; to enjoy constant and unbroken fellowship with Him through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit- the very life of God in the people of God!

We live just as close to Christ as we're willing to live

And so if we're not enjoying that intimacy, it's not that God has hidden Himself from us- it's that we are straining toward something else; it's that we're pressing on toward the wrong goal to win the wrong prize.

But as long as there is breath in our lungs, there's time and grace to forget those other things, and turn wholeheartedly and unreservedly towards our true Prize.



Gracious God,
forgive our divided hearts;
Forgive us for chasing the wrong goals
and the wrong prizes.
And set our gaze resolutely towards you,
and you alone.
Because when we seek you,
we will find you.
Amen.



12th December

As we begin to prepare ourselves for the Sunday of Joy, Habakkuk reminds us of the difference between **joy** and **happiness**.

Habakkuk 3:13-19

It's often been observed that **happiness** depends on **happenings**. If it's plain sailing on smooth waters, we can be happy; if everything is going the way we thought it would and think it should, we can be happy; if our circumstances and situations are everything we want them to be and had imagined them to be, we can be happy. But if not, we can't!

Because how could we possibly be happy when things are falling apart? When the bottom has fallen out of our world? When the fig tree doesn't bud and the vine bears no grapes; when the crops fail and our livelihood crumbles...

When the doctor brings the news we dreaded; when the employer has to let us go; when the relationship breaks down; when the child goes off the rails...

How could we possibly be **happy**? The very idea is absurd- it would mean completely disengaging with reality and trying to live in a fantasy land. But that is not the response of God's people. We don't depend or rely upon happiness- because we are a people of **joy**.



And joy is immeasurably deeper and richer and firmer than happiness could ever be. Because the joy that comes from being in Christ is a **nevertheless** kind of joy. It's a joy that isn't determined by circumstances, and therefore cannot be shaken by circumstances.

We don't depend or rely upon happiness- because we are a people of joy

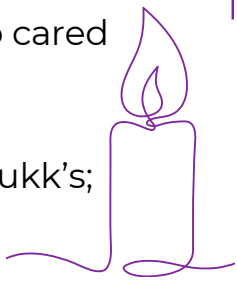
That's why the prophet can rejoice in the Lord; that's why he can be joyful in God his Saviour. Because he knows that he is held safe and secure in the hands of the One who is far greater than our circumstances, and so he can echo the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:17-

Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

I love how Luke begins his Nativity account. ***In those days…*** [Luke 2:1] Those days, when God's people were once again living in captivity and bondage. Those days, when the worship of God was openly mocked by the faith systems of imperial Rome.

Those days when Abraham's children were dominated by emperors and governors and kings who cared nothing for the Lord or His people.

Those days seemed very much like Habakukk's; and perhaps very much like ours?



And yet the Lord was still at work in those days, just like He is at work in these days. He was and is still present; He was and is still active; He was and is still speaking, still moving, still calling, still sending.

And He is still the only true Giver of joy- because when everything else falls apart, He remains our solid Rock; when everyone else falls away, He remains our ever present Help in trouble.

The Lord was still at work in those days, just like He is at work in these days.

And so the people of God don't need to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that everything is fine in the attempt to drum up some shallow and artificial happiness.

No, we acknowledge just how deep is this present darkness, but testify with great joy that our God is greater, and He is with us.



Beautiful Saviour,
Wonderful God,
thank you that you are who you are,
no matter where we are
and what we face.
So help us to rejoice in you
in the midst of every storm of life.
Through Christ our Lord,
Amen.



Questions for Reflection

1. How would you define Christian **peace**?

2. Which of this week's readings struck you in a particular way? Why?

3. Was there anything that surprised you?

4. What might restored **peace** look like for you this week?

5. As we prepare to move into the week of **joy**, what are you expecting?



13th December- The Sunday of Joy

Whatever else it is, the message of God to His world is ultimately, fundamentally, and foundationally **good news**.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

It is a message of liberation for those who have been subject to tyranny- the tyranny of fear, the tyranny of addiction, the tyranny of loneliness, the tyranny of guilt- as they are drawn into the glorious freedom of the Lordship of King Jesus.

It is a message of light for those who have been stumbling around in the darkness of a rootless, rudderless, directionless life without the purpose and meaning that can only be found in Jesus Christ.

It is a message of comfort for those who have been damaged; those who carry wounds that no one else can see and no one else can understand, but that are so real and so raw, and re bound up by the One who is close to the brokenhearted.

It is a message of redemption for those who look around at the rubble of a life that has fallen apart and come undone; a life that is so mixed up and so messed up with the sharp edges and broken pieces of tragedy- only to discover that God brings beauty from ashes, and joy from mourning.



It is a message of consolation for those who have been wronged, who have been injured, who have suffered at the hands of those who should have known better and loved better; for those who will never get the apology they deserve, but who can trust in the perfect justice of the perfect Judge.

It is a message of hope for those in places that seem hopeless and devastated and ruined; places that seem to be utterly devoid of life; because we discover that our God is making all things new, and nothing and nowhere and no one is off limits to His renewing power.

In short, the message of God to His world is one of joy! Is it any wonder that the characters of the Nativity most associated with this third Sunday in Advent are the shepherds?

The message of God to His world is one of joy!

These social pariahs; these overlooked and undervalued workers; these people who had been left out and left behind by so many for so long- they are the very first to hear the news that the Saviour had been born- it's ***good news that will cause great joy for all the people*** [Luke 2:10], but before it reaches **all** the people, it reaches **these** people. Before it comes to the rich, the wise, and the mighty, it comes to peasant shepherds.



Before it comes to the qualified and the clever, it comes to those who couldn't be more undeserving. Before it comes to those at the centre of power, it comes to those on the outskirts.

And that means it's a message of joy for **us**. Wherever we find ourselves, with all of our baggage and all of our mess; and whomever we find ourselves, as people who have got it so wrong so many times; nevertheless and through it all, we can rejoice in the fact that God's message comes hand-delivered and personally addressed to us.

Before the good news reaches all people, it reaches these people.



Ever faithful God,
We lay before all the things that should
give us reason to despair,
and testify that in it all
and through it all,
you are present,
you are active,
and you are good.
So we rejoice.
Amen.



14th December

Sir Isaac Newton famously said, *If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.*

Ephesians 6:10-17

For all of his brilliance, for all of his genius, for all of his gifts, Newton nevertheless recognised that his accomplishments and achievements were rooted in others. He hadn't reached where he was independently, but through partnership.

We see something similar in our passage for today. The life of the child of God is neither one of autonomy and independence, nor one of passivity and inaction. Instead, it is one of partnership.

The Apostle clearly calls us to action- look at all the doing words in these few verses! We're to be strong, we're to put on the armour, we're to stand, we're to take up. We're called and commanded to take part in what God is doing- not just to receive it, but to participate in it.

But at the same time, how do we do so? How are we strong? In what are we placing our trust and reliance? ***Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armour of God.***



We are not strong in our own strength, and nor do we put on our own armour. It might remind us of the words of the prophet in Isaiah 7:9- ***If you do not stand firm in your faith, then you will not stand at all***.

If we were to trust in our own resources and rely upon our own reserve; if we were to build upon our own foundation and pursue our own course; if we tried to go it alone and handle it by ourselves, we would be utterly and hopelessly lost.

Any life that truly deserves the name life is utterly unachievable by ourselves. Genuine flourishing, genuine thriving, genuine abundance- it can only be found in Christ. But He isn't calling passengers- He is calling partners.

Christ isn't calling passengers- He is calling partners.

And this is true both for His work in His world, and for His work in each of us.

He is constantly and powerfully at work in His world- His Spirit is already moving in the heart and life of everyone, everywhere, all the time. But He invites us to be His hands and feet; to be His heart and mouth; to be living, breathing embodiments of the New Creation, making the very real presence of God evident and undeniable.



And He is constantly and powerfully at work in us. We can neither save ourselves nor sanctify ourselves. We cannot make ourselves who He wants us and commands us to be. We are born again from above, not from below- by grace, not by works.

But God never forces Himself upon us. Saint Augustine famously wrote, *He who created you without you will not justify you without you*. His grace is not irresistible- Christ woos us as our Lover; He doesn't not take us as a conqueror.

He who created you without you will not justify you without you.

And just as He doesn't save us against our will, He doesn't sanctify us without our active participation- not just passively receiving it, but actively partnering with Him through faithfully engaging in the rhythms and habits and practices of life that make us more and more like Christ.

So ***take up*** the full armour of God- be an active participant! But remember that you are only ever strong ***in the Lord***- the One who is the first and prime Mover in every aspect of our salvation.



Thank you, Father,
that you step first,
speak first,
reach first.
But that you are the God who is love,
and love never coerces.
Grant us the grace needed to partner
with you in your work,
in us and in your world.
Amen.



15th December

Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?

I wonder, was this a rhetorical question, asked only to give the Lord the opportunity to demonstrate His glory?

2 Kings 2:9-22

Or was it, perhaps, something much more real and much more raw? Was it, instead, the very authentic question of a disciple who had just lost his master; a student who had said goodbye to his teacher; a prophet who was suddenly left carrying all the weight and responsibility that had previously been borne by another?

And yes, Elijah had promised that his God would be Elisha's God; that the Lord would be with the latter just as he had been with the former. In fact, Elijah had already assured his protege that he would receive a double portion of the Spirit as long as he kept his eyes focused on Elijah as the Lord took him away.

But even so, we can't help but relate to Elisha in his doubt; in his questioning; in his uncertainty; and in his desire for some measure of confirmation and assurance from God. Because, after all, there was still so much work to be done! In spite of Elijah's ministry, idolatry was still rampant; pagan worship was still rife.



As the next chapters show, the faithful prophets of God would look to Elisha for leadership and direction. Even the King of the Northern Kingdom would take guidance and counsel from him. This was a heavy load for him to bear, and Elisha was very aware of what we saw yesterday- that without the Lord's help, his own resources would be painfully inadequate.

He surely knew the truth sung by Solomon- ***Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.*** [Psalm 127:1]

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.

After all, Elisha surely knew all that the Lord had done through his mentor- how the fire had fallen at Carmel; how a boy was raised to life for the very first time in all of Scripture...again, surely we can't blame Elisha for wanting some measure of assurance that the Lord was with him as He had been with Elijah?

And again, can we perhaps even relate to him? Do we resonate with his recognition that the things we're facing and the things were carrying are just too much, too big, and too heavy? That unless God is in this, there's just no way? Unless He moves and works, we'd be better off just packing up and going home?



But the Lord would assure us, just as He assured Elisha, *I'm still present! I'm still active! I'm still with my people and for my people! I haven't give up and I haven't let go!*

And surely Advent is a wonderful season to remember this truth- because, like us, the people of God had been waiting for a breakthrough. They had been yearning for a shift, for a transformation, for God to work in their day as He had worked in the days of their ancestors.

The Lord would assure us, just as He assured Elisha, I'm still present!

And then He did! He spoke in a way no one expected, but that everyone needed; He moved in a way that no one could have imagined, but that was exactly what was required.

Like Elisha, bring God those honest questions- even those painful doubts. But trust that He has already answered- He is with you and for you, even if He's not working in the ways you had expected, the ways you had wanted, and the ways you think you need.



Lord,
we bring before you our questions
and doubts
and insecurities.
Thank you that Jesus proves your
presence;
He proves your work;
He proves your faithfulness.
Give us eyes to see your work,
and hearts to trust in it.
Amen.



16th December

Today's passage is from a group of psalms called *the Songs of Ascent*. They were pilgrimage hymns, sung by those making the journey up to Jerusalem to worship at one of the great festivals.

Psalm 125

And as we read these words, we can almost find ourselves with the pilgrims as they draw ever closer to the Holy City. They can see the mountains that surround Jerusalem and are struck by their strength, their endurance, their immovability.

And they are struck all over again at how utterly safe and secure they are- not because of their own strength, but because they are held firmly in the hands of Almighty God, the One who carved those mountains and set them in place.

Even as they continue on their journey, with all of its uncertainties and anxieties, with all of its dangers and challenges, they can still rejoice. They can still lift up their heads. They can still press on, knowing that they have One who fights for them; One who journeys with them; One who goes ahead of them.

As we journey through this season of Advent, we can cling to the same certainties, and therefore know the same joy.



We know that in all of the storms and troubles and trials of life, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. It can be easy to feel that there's no way out and no way through. It can be easy to feel that we're just not going to make it because of all the ways that the brokenness of this old world is trying to break us.

There are times and seasons in which, if we're being truly and fully honest, we feel that we're not going to make it. That our pilgrimage through this old Creation is going to come to a premature halt.

There are times and seasons in which, if we're being truly and fully honest, we feel that we're not going to make it.

But those are the times in which we claim the words of another psalm, and we go to the Rock that is higher than we are [Psalm 61:2]; the One who surrounds us like a mountain range; the One who is a firm foundation in a world of shifting shadows and sinking sand.

And we need to remember, our hope is as sure and certain and real as those mountains. Our hope isn't something vague or abstract; it's not something uncertain or metaphorical. In fact, our hope is even more real than the mountains, because there is coming a Day when they will pass away, but our hope will never fail.



For the Christian, feelings are a beautiful part of our true and full humanity, but they must always remain a carriage in the train and not the engine. When we **feel** like it's all coming apart and it's all coming undone; when we **feel** like we're not going to make it; even when we **feel** like God is distant and inactive, we need to know that those feelings are valid- they don't make us a bad Christian!

But we need to remember that those feelings are not driving the train, and they're not the final and ultimate truth.

Our feelings are not the final and ultimate truth.

Because just as really and truly and literally as the mountains surround Jerusalem, so does the Lord surround His people. And those mountains will **literally** move and fall away from their place before the Lord would fall away from us.



Steadfast and true are you,
O Lord;
Faithful, unchanging, and unfailing.
We believe; help our unbelief.
Help us to rest securely within your unending love,
and your constant presence.
Amen.



17th December

Have you ever tried to describe something to a person who has no frame of reference for what you're trying to communicate?

Hebrews 1:1-4

A number of years ago, our family travelled across the Canadian Rockies. And no matter how hard we tried, when we attempted to explain the experience to our friends and family back home, our words always fell short and fell flat- the Rockies cannot be explained; they can only be experienced.

How much more is this the case with the Lord God Almighty? How could we ever hope to explain Him? How could we ever hope to define Him? How could we ever hope to nail Him down into a tidy little box, or squeeze Him into a pill small enough for us to swallow?

And even if we could, why would we want to? Because any god we can figure out is not a god worthy of our worship.

As so many of us sing, He is literally indescribable. Even the Scriptures, which perfectly reveal the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation still operate within our human frame-work- they can only ever be like a mirror rather than a face to face encounter; they can only show us in part, never the whole.



And so at Christmas we celebrate the fact that God has spoken perfectly, completely, and conclusively; He has shown Himself to us perfectly; He has given Himself to us fully, and He has done so through His Son, our Lord Jesus.

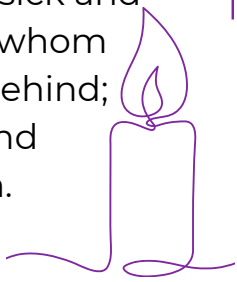
We give thanks for the Bible, the written Word of God- but we remember that its purpose is to point us and draw us to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God and the exact representation of His being.

The purpose of the Bible is to point us and draw us to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God.

And so we never again need to wonder what God is like- because Jesus shows us. We never need to wonder what God would do- because Jesus shows us.

And what does Jesus show us about God? He shows us that God is strong- the winds and the waves are swift to obey Him. Water rushes to transform into wine at His command.

He shows us that God cares- He heals the sick and feeds the hungry; He draws near to those whom everyone else would leave out and leave behind; He shares His life with the least, the last, and the lost, and He shares their life with them.



Jesus shows us that God is at work making all things right and whole- He drives out demons and sets the oppressed at liberty; He raises the dead to life and places them in families.

Jesus shows us that God is love- He goes all the way to death in order to take us by the hand and lead us into the light. He pours Himself out without reserve or retreat, because He considers us worth it.

Jesus shows us that God is for us; He shows us that God is with us; He shows us that God knows us by name and is deeply and personally involved and invested; He shows us that God is patient with those who get it so wrong, so often.

Jesus shows us that God knows us by name.

And Jesus shows us that God is utterly, perfectly, unfailingly good- and good all the time.

Because Jesus is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of His being.



God of revelation,
we thank you that you make yourself known.
Through your Creation,
through the Scriptures,
through your Church,
and most truly and fully and perfectly
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.



18th December

The author to the Hebrews emphasises one truth over and over again in the first chapters of this sermon-letter: ***Jesus is better!***

Hebrews 1:5-14

In yesterday's reading, we were told that He is better than any other way that God has spoken in the past- better than prophets, priests, and patriarchs.

In today's reading, we learn that He is greater than the firstborn angels- these beings so great and so glorious that again and again throughout Scripture their greeting needs to be ***Do not be afraid!*** These heavenly messengers and warriors of light- even they fade into insignificance next to the grandeur, greatness, and glory of the Son of God.

In chapter 3, we read that Jesus is better than Moses- this servant of God unlike any other; the one through whom God led His people out of bondage in Egypt, the one through whom God gave the Law, the one through whom God transformed a subjugated people into a nation with their own homeland.

But even in light of all of these achievements and accomplishments, regardless of the greatness of his leadership and godliness, Moses was nothing more than a building, whereas Christ is the Builder.



Later we read that Jesus is better than the Sabbath- because no matter how many days of rest we might enjoy in this world, we will never know satisfaction, we will never know wholeness, we will never know peace until and unless we find it in Jesus Christ.

We go on to read that Jesus is better than the priests who offered endless sacrifices in the temple, because the sacrifice that He offers is eternally sufficient, as He is not only the perfect Priest, but the perfect Sacrifice. And His sacrifice not only frees us from the **guilt** of sin, but also from the **power** of sin.

We will never know peace until and unless we find it in Jesus Christ.

Again and again, this anonymous author drives home the wonderful truth that Jesus is simply **better**.

These other things were good gifts given by God- prophets, the Law, the priesthood- they were all graciously given to allow the people of God to live in close proximity to the One whose holiness is like the blazing fire of the Sun.

When we compare them to Jesus, we can say that He is **better**. But when we compare Him to the trophies and trinkets of this old world, we need to use different language. Because Jesus isn't just better than what this world offers us- He is the only true choice.



Because anything and everything that is offered instead of Christ or as an alternative to Christ- it's poison. It's toxic. It's radioactive.

Jesus is not the best option on the menu- He is the only choice, because everything else break our hearts; and it will ultimately and eternally kill us. Saint Augustine put it like this-

I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are very wise and very beautiful. But I never read in either of them, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden.'

The greatest that this world can offer us will always fall short; it will always fall flat; and if we put our ultimate and final trust in it, we will find that we are doing nothing but chasing after the wind.

Jesus is not the best option on the menu- He is the only choice.

Jesus is utterly, perfectly, and exclusively sufficient, and nothing else compares. Nothing else can even come close.



All sufficient One,
forgive us when we've tried to find life in anything, anyone, anywhere but you.
Be our Alpha and Omega we pray.
Amen.



19th December

The religious folks knew exactly what kind of Rescuer they were expecting; they knew exactly what kind of Saviour they wanted.

John 7:40-52

In many ways, they wanted the Saviour that the Enemy tempted our Lord to be in the wilderness- a Saviour who would rescue through shows of strength and piety and miraculous abilities; one who would topple Rome and elevate Israel to take its place.

And most certainly one who didn't come from a nowhere place like Galilee. It might remind us of Nathanael's words in John 1:46 when he learned about Jesus' hometown- ***Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?***

And it can be so easy for us to criticise these folks for their flawed and faulty expectations and demands. But how often have we fallen into the same trap? How often have we expected God to be whom we tell Him to be and do what we tell Him to do?

We celebrate the Babe of Bethlehem, but push back against the One who tells us to take up our cross and follow Him all the way to Calvary. We delight in gentle Jesus, meek and mild, but resist the King who demands (and is worthy of) our absolute and exclusive allegiance.



We give thanks for the One who came to save us from our sins, but fight so hard to keep ahold of the very sins from which He came to save us.

We praise the One who came to meet our deepest needs and heal us at the point of deepest brokenness, but question His wisdom and even His love when He doesn't work the way we think He should or thought He would.

But our God seems to delight in subverting expectations. He delights in showing up in the places no one ever thinks to see Him; He loves to choose those whom no one else would ever pick; He loves to work in ways that no one else would ever imagine.

Our God seems to delight in subverting expectations.

And even when He doesn't move or speak or work in the way we had hoped, we can rest assured that His way is always best, and His will is always good, pleasing, and perfect.

We may not understand it- not even until we cross our finish line and enter into our rest- but He makes no mistakes; He wastes no time; and He gets nothing wrong.

The religious establishment couldn't imagine a Rescuer who saved through death.



They couldn't conceive of a Saviour who triumphed through a cross. They couldn't grasp a King, born in a manger and honoured by shepherds.

But the divine reality infinitely and immeasurably exceeded their hopes and dreams. His victory wasn't over anything as small and trivial and temporal as Rome, but over the powers and principalities of this dark world.

He didn't rescue His people from their political opponents, but from the tyranny of sin, death, and Hell. He not only fulfilled the Law of Moses in perfect obedience, but became the new and living Way to the Father.

The divine reality infinitely and immeasurably exceeds our hopes and dreams.

The simple fact is that God does not always follow either our plans or our timetables. But He does all things well, and our Galilean, Nazarene Saviour- our unexpected and subversive Rescuer- He is trustworthy and true, and His way is always immeasurably greater than we could ever ask or imagine.



Good, good Father,
We thank you for your will and your way,
and we recognise that it is always
greater than ours.
Help us to submit to you,
and to do so with joyful trust.
Amen.



Questions for Reflection

1. How would you define Christian **joy**?

2. Which of this week's readings struck you in a particular way? Why?

3. Was there anything that surprised you?

4. What might restored **joy** look like for you this week?

5. As we prepare to move into the week of **love**, what are you expecting?



20th December- The Sunday of Love

Have you ever felt unseen? Unheard? Unvalued?

Luke 1:46-55

Have you ever felt like you're the one who's continually overlooked? The one who's left out and left behind? Perhaps that no one would notice if you weren't even there?

This revolutionary hymn from Mary affirms for all eternity that you are seen; you are valued; you are precious. Mary declares that you matter and you count.

Mary would tell you that you have a voice, and it deserves to be heard; you have hands, and they deserve to be about Kingdom work; you have feet, and they deserve to follow Jesus along the way.

Mary testifies that even if no one else sees you, the Lord does; even if no one else recognises you, the Lord does; even if your name is known to no one on earth, your Father in Heaven has carved it upon the palm of His hand so that He can never forget it.

Mary assures us that the Lord is mindful of His servants, however humble they may be in the eyes of this world. It doesn't matter that we're weak and small- because our God is the Mighty One and He has done great things for us.



It might remind us of the words of Paul to the Corinthians-

Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? [1 Cor 1:26-29, *The Message]*

Or perhaps it might call our thoughts back to the very first time God is ever given a name in Scripture. Before He reveals the divine Name to Moses in the burning bush, an overlooked and despised slave girl is given the incredible privilege of ascribing to Him a name- *You are the God who sees me.* [Genesis 16:13]

You are the God who sees me!

This is how the Lord loves to work- not with the rich, the wise, and the mighty; not with the qualified and professional- not, in short, with those whom we might choose!

Instead, He chooses a peasant girl, from a oppressed race in a backwards region of a pagan empire.



Instead of a palace surrounded by courtiers, He arrives in a stable surrounded by animals. Instead of receiving homage from the greatest in the land, He is given tribute by shepherds.

And, later in life, He chooses fishermen and tax collectors and high school dropouts; He gives the best of Himself to the least, the last, and the lost. And instead of conquering at the end of a sword, He triumphs through defeat and transforms the cross of execution into the throne of glory.

He gives the best of Himself to the least, the last, and the lost.

This is how He has always worked; this is how He still works. In and with and through those who don't deserve it and could never earn it.

In short, through people just like us.



Thank you, Lord,
for your extravagant love towards the least of these.
Thank you that you see us,
you hear us,
you value us,
and you count us as infinitely precious.
Amen.



21st December

As we finally draw close to Christmas, it's important that we deliberately and intentionally remind ourselves that the Christ Event isn't limited to Bethlehem. The Story neither begins nor ends with the Incarnation- with God becoming flesh and making His dwelling amongst us.

Hebrews 9:1-14

The author to the Hebrews reminds us that Bethlehem by itself, taken in isolation, simply isn't enough. If the Story began and ended in that stable in Bethlehem, we would still be lost, hopeless, and helpless.

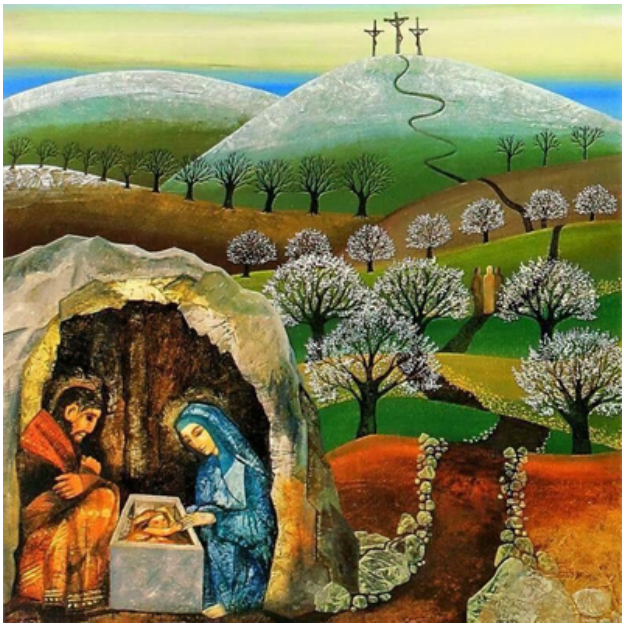
The author reminds us that Christ came, not to remain the Babe of Bethlehem, but to serve as our perfect high priest, who cleanses our consciences through His own blood.

When our friends in the Eastern Church depict the Nativity, they intentionally present the manger in a very particular way. Instead of the rustic wooden crib that most us imagine, they present it as an angular stone box that looks more like a coffin than a feeding trough.



But it doesn't end with the manger. The stable itself looks like a cave- almost like a tomb.

The Infant is wrapped in what could easily be mistaken for burial linens.



The Manger and the Cross
by Beate Heinen

They go out of their way to link Bethlehem with Calvary; the manger and the cross. Because, as the author to the Hebrews reminds us, Christ didn't just come; He came and offered Himself up as the perfect sacrifice. He didn't remain a Baby, but grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.

I love Christmas. I love its joy, its light, its celebration. I love the opportunity it gives for kindness and generosity; for people to gather together and enjoy genuine, meaningful community.
Christmas is beautiful, and it's a gift.
But by itself, Christmas is simply
not enough.

It's often said that we should 'keep Christ in Christmas.' And in one sense, I completely agree. But the danger is keeping Him there and refusing to journey with Him to Easter.

Every part of the Christ Event is utterly essential- His birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return. To try and keep Him as the Infant is to rob ourselves of the full measure of what He came to do and give; what He came to be for us- the perfect Priest offering the perfect Sacrifice- Himself.

Christ is the perfect Priest, offering the perfect Sacrifice- Himself.

So yes, celebrate the King who came at Bethlehem, and do so with great joy. But remember that this same King reigned from the cross so that He might obtain for us eternal redemption through His blood.



Babe of Bethlehem,
Crucified Lord,
Risen, conquering, and returning King,
we give you thanks and praise for the
fullness of love displayed in Christ.
Amen.



22nd December

I have a confession to make:

I love gifts.

Hebrews 8

Giving and receiving- I just love it. And it doesn't matter what the gift is- whether it's a shell or a bag of sweets or a picture drawn by a child. A gift is a tangible expression of love- a way of saying, 'I saw this and thought of you; and when you see it, I want you to think of me.'

But a gift that remains unopened can never be fully enjoyed, either by the giver or the recipient. A gift that remains wrapped and sealed and tucked away on the shelf- it's not a blessing to the who gave or the one who was meant to receive. In fact, it's more of an insult than it is a gift.

The author in our passage is quoting the prophet Jeremiah, who is describing the incredible gift that God gives us through Christ- a new covenant, not carved on stone but written on hearts that have been transformed by His gracious offering of Himself.

Hearts for which holy love is no longer something unreachable, and for which holy living is no longer something unattainable.



God in Christ has moved Heaven and earth to purchase this gift, and He has done so at immeasurable and unimaginable cost.

At this time of year, countless families across the world have spent fortunes to purchase gifts for those they love- money they can't really afford to spend, but that they nevertheless give without hesitation as an expression of their love.

God in Christ has moved Heaven and earth to purchase this gift.

But however extravagently we demonstrate our love through the giving and receiving of gifts, it can't even begin to come close to the height and length, the width and depth of the love displayed in Christ- the love that paid this price without hesitation or regret, because He considers us worth it all.

This gift is freely and lavishly given- and yet all too often we leave it unopened, unwrapped, unenjoyed. We settle for so much less than the full measure of our birthright in Christ- we keep on living as though driven by that old covenant carved on stone, instead of offering God the joyful sacrifice of our heart so that He can make it new.

And not just in rescuing us from the guilt and shame of sin- but from its power and tyranny.



That's the full measure of what God promises through Jeremiah- not just saved in part, but saved to the uttermost; saved to the fullness of life; saved to abundant, flourishing, thriving life- the life of genuine, through and through holiness.

Anything less than this is leaving the gift underneath the tree. It's entering through the door of the mansion, but never going any further. It's dipping our feet in the ocean of His blessing, rather than plunging headfirst into the unfathomable depths of what God longs to give us.

We're not just saved in part, but saved to the uttermost!

We have been given a gift of all-surpassing value- God forbid that we should leave it to gather dust! Rather, may we tear into it with both hands and receive the full measure of what our Father has for us.



Giver of every good gift,
Source of every blessing,
Thank you!
All praise,
all honour,
all glory be to you
through Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.



23rd December

What a strangely perfect Scripture reading for today! Technically, today is the final full day in the season of Advent- the Christmas season begins after evening prayer tomorrow.

Mark 11:1-11

And so, as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the arrival of the King at Bethlehem, and as we look further ahead to anticipate His second and final coming on That Day, it's fitting that we look back in time (but ahead in the story) to Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

This is the closest He ever came to the public recognition of His Kingship; the highest earthly glory He ever received. And it begs the question of us- how will we receive the coming King?

Because remember, the next time a crowd gathered because of Jesus, it was outside Pilate's palace; and they weren't shouting *Hosanna*, but *Crucify Him!*

The only way to fully, truly, and genuinely celebrate Christmas is with a complete submission to the kingship of Jesus Christ- not just for a day, like the Palm Sunday crowd, but with all of our life, for the rest of our life.



It's to allow the King to be born, not just in Bethlehem, but in us. To enthrone Him not only with our lips, but with our lives. To worship Him, not just with carols and candles, but with all that we are, and have, and do.

Otherwise, we're just like the Palm Sunday crowd- singing out our praises for all to see, but either denying Him when it counts, or just not showing up at all.

We must enthrone Him not only with our lips, but with our lives.

Part of our problem with kingship is that we have so many bad examples of it. We look at earthly kings throughout history- so often tyrants or fools- and just dial that up to eleven and assume that the Lord must be the same, but more so.

But just look at this King- the King of kings. Look at how He humbled Himself to take up flesh- leaving the realm of eternal and inexpressible glory for our sake and our salvation.

Look at the grace of this King who entered our world when He didn't need to; who came to us and for us when He didn't have to; who descended all the way into the muck and mire of a badly broken world, and emptied Himself of all but love.



Look at the humility of this King, who condescended to be born of a peasant girl, in a stable, and laid in a feeding trough.

Look at this King, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor; who was tempted in every way as we are, yet was without sin; who went about doing good and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Look at this King, who became obedient to death, even death on a cross; who was dead, and is alive forevermore; who has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all who will trust in Him, and who sits at the right hand of God in the glory of the Father, and will soon return to be our Judge.

He emptied Himself of all but love.

When we see Him in all of His beauty, in all of His brilliance, in all of His lovingkindness, how can we hesitate to welcome His rule and reign? How can we withhold any part of us from the One who gave everything for us?

So may we truly celebrate Christmas this year. May we truly welcome in the King.



And so King of all kings,
Lord of all lords,
we welcome your rule and reign.
Not only today, but in all of our days,
for the rest of our days.
And not only in part, but in the whole.
Come, Lord Jesus.
Amen.



24th December- Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

We simply cannot overestimate the monumental significance of the birth of Christ. No matter how important we may think it is, it is always more so. No matter how significant we might imagine, it is always greater.

The fact that God Himself stepped down into His world- in the words of CS Lewis, the fact that the Playwright wrote Himself into His play- is always higher and deeper, always has a weight and a significance far greater, always has an impact that far outweighs anything we could even begin to grasp.

Isaiah says it's the contrast between utter, absolute darkness, and the sudden explosion of light that brings perfect illumination.

It's the contrast between the intolerable and unbearable burden of slavery and oppression, and the glorious liberty of broken chains and shattered bars and broken-down prison walls.

It's the difference between the terror and chaos and bloodshed of war, and the still, calm, rest of perfect peace.



That's the difference that the birth of Christ has made in His world for all who will receive Him.

Even if, just for a moment, we could set aside the fact that His life, death, and resurrection has changed the very nature of reality...

Even if we could set aside the fact that His New Creation has erupted right in the midst of the Old...

Even if we could set aside the eternal significance of all that He has done and given, all that He has achieved and accomplished- even without all of this, the Man Jesus of Nazareth is still undoubtedly and undeniably the most significant figure in human history.

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ has changed the nature of reality

No other single life has had such an impact on art, politics, literature, philosophy, law...we could go on and on.

Dr King put it like this:

Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name.

But we know that Jesus Christ is so much more than a peerlessly significant historical figure. We know that He is the Light that has come into the world to illuminate our darkness- even to defeat that darkness forever.



At some point, all of us will journey through places of darkness. Places that are hard, difficult, painful. But we remind ourselves, we remind each other, and we remind God's world that the Light has dawned- and that means the days of darkness are numbered.

The Light has dawned, and it is unstoppable. The Light has dawned and its rays are spreading, and nothing will be able to hold it down or hold it back; no darkness can withstand its radiance- not even the darkness that we're facing right now; not even the darkness through which we're journeying right now.

To us a Child is born; to us a Son is given- and He has changed everything and changed it forever.

The days of darkness are numbered.



God of Glory,
We thank for Jesus Christ,
the Light of the world.
Shine in our dark valleys,
and enable us step by step
to walk in the light of the Lord.
Amen.



25th December- Christmas Day

When our friends in the Eastern Church celebrate Christmas Day, the priest will announce with joy and gladness, ***Christ is born!*** And the people will respond, ***Glorify Him!***

John 1:1-14

After all of the waiting; all of the anticipation, all of the patient (or perhaps not so patient) expectation, Christmas has finally arrived!

Out of His extravagant and boundless love, God has stepped down into the world He never stopped loving. He has moved to conclusively and perfectly restore and renew His Creation. He has moved to rescue and heal and redeem His people.

And soon, all the presents will be opened. All the wrapping paper will be thrown away. All the food will be eaten. In a couple of weeks, the decorations will all be moved back into the roofspace for another year. In fact, it won't be long before the shops have their Easter eggs on display!

But we know that the significance of this day long outlasts this day. We know that God has moved and worked in an eternal way- we know that Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not and can not overcome it or snuff it out.



Unlike the other Evangelists, John's Nativity doesn't mention the Holy Family; there's no census, no Bethlehem, no shepherds or angels.

Instead, John the Theologian pulls back the curtains of eternity and gives us a glimpse into the very heart of the Holy Trinity. We are allowed to listen in as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conceive of the plan of salvation. We are the fly on the wall, watching the very dawn of what the Jesus Storybook Bible calls *Operation: No More Tears*.

Operation: No More Tears

And in His grace, He has drawn us into that story. He has made us a part of what He has done, is doing, and will do. We are not just adopted children; we are not just co-heirs with Christ Jesus; we are not just beneficiaries and recipients of salvation- we are co-workers!

We are partners with Him in His ongoing, unfolding work of redeeming His entire universe.

So may the wonder of Christmas not be thrown out with the wrapping paper. May we launch out into God's world, on His mission, walking in His light and allowing it to shine through us and burst out of us to all those whom we encounter along the way.



Christ is born- glorify Him!

O God,
Who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature,
and more wonderfully restored it:
Grant that we may become
sharers in His divinity
who humbled Himself
to become a sharer in our humanity.
Amen.



Questions for Reflection

1. What have you learned about Advent through this devotional journey?

2. Has anything struck you in a particular way? Why?

3. Can you name one thing that has encouraged you? What about one thing that has challenged you?

4. What difference will this devotional journey make in your life moving forward?



British Isles South District is a part of the global family known as the Church of the Nazarene.

Although we stand in unity with all of God's people across time and space, wherever they are in the Christian family tree, we recognise that our particular branch has been raised up for a particular purpose- to proclaim the wonderful truth that God in Christ has triumphed, not just over the **guilt** of sin, but over the **power** of sin.

Resources like this one are an expression of our passion for cultivating a healthy, humble Nazarene identity in our District and across the world.

God in Christ has triumphed, not just over the guilt of sin, but over the power of sin.

This resource was developed by Rev. David Gilmour, an Elder in the Church of the Nazarene. It is part of a wider resource named *A Worship Toolkit*, aimed at whole-Church discipleship.

If you wish to learn more about our District, or about the wider resource, David can be contacted at dgilmour@nazarenebisd.org.uk. You can also follow along with the life of our District on our social media.



a daily devotional for the season of ADVENT

