

## **Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 20 December – 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord' - by Revd David Cuckson**

'The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all mankind together shall see it; for the Lord himself has spoken' (Isaiah 40:5)

Today we remember how Mary first learned that she was to give birth to the Christ child.

### **HYMN Singing the Faith 187 (Sabine Baring-Gould)**

1. The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,  
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;  
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,  
most highly favoured lady.' Gloria!

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

2. 'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,  
all generations laud and honour thee,  
thy son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold;  
most highly favoured lady.' Gloria!

4. Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born  
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,  
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever  
say, 'Most highly favoured lady.' Gloria!

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, infinite and eternal in wisdom, power and love; we praise you for all that you are, and for all that you do for the world. You have shown us your truth and your love in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Help us by your Spirit to worship you in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us confess our sins to God and ask his forgiveness.

Lord God most merciful, we confess that we have sinned, through our own fault, and in common with others, in thought word and deed, and through what we have left undone. We ask to be forgiven. By the power of your Spirit turn us from evil to good, help us to forgive others, and keep us in your ways of righteousness and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And now, the collect for today:

God our Redeemer, you chose the Virgin Mary to be the mother of our Lord and Saviour. Fill us with your grace that in all things we may embrace your holy will and with her rejoice in your salvation; through Jesus Christ who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

### **Luke 1:26-38 (NRSVA)**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come

upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

## **Sermon**

Luke’s Gospel is the only one of the four in our Bible to include this story about Mary. Matthew includes a rather different story, Mark says nothing at all about the life of Jesus before his baptism by John the Baptist, and John begins his Gospel in a totally unique way. Luke seems to have had a copy of Mark’s Gospel in front of him, but he fills out the account of the life and teaching of Jesus with other material, some of which Matthew also knew. And Luke is the only one of the four to enlarge his story to tell of how the Gospel message was spread, as far as the capital of the whole empire, even Rome itself, in the Book of Acts of the Apostles. This, he sees, is all part of God’s providence working out through Jesus, and then through his followers. People think that Luke was writing round about 80 to 90 AD, so he is looking back and seeing a pattern of God’s acting in history. The timing is also significant in that it follows Nero’s decision to persecute Christians as the alleged cause (‘fake news’) of the great fire in Rome of 64 and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70. This is a message to Christians and nearly-Christians throughout the Roman Empire, and probably also a way of conveying to the authorities that Christianity is not some newfangled superstition or just a part of Judaism but is a world faith grounded in history and tradition. It is a call to faith and dedication.

And the key words of our story today come with the final response of Mary: ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ These are the words which we are being asked to remember and take to heart. She has been given the assurance, ‘The Lord is with you’, and this she carries with her as she enters into the whole commitment of giving birth and bringing up a child, in her case what will turn out to be a very special child. Commitment and dedication are going to be her watchwords from now on. Often she will not fully understand what is happening in her life, especially as Jesus grows up and sets out on his ministry. In Luke’s story of the childhood trip to Jerusalem Mary is mystified by her son’s behaviour as he stays behind to sit with the teachers and converse with them. Luke tells us that neither of his parents understood what Jesus was telling them by way of explanation, but Mary ‘treasured all these things in her heart’. Her commitment and dedication, expressed so vividly in our reading for today, continued throughout her life as she followed and supported Jesus even to his death on the cross. In this Mary is an example to us all.

It is so easy for us to complain about our lot in the world. Life can be tough, tragedies can strike, we can suffer hardship and loss, we face uncertainty. The Gospels do not spell it out, but it appears that Joseph died while Jesus was still alive – so Mary became a widow, with a family to care for, and worry about, on her own. And who knows what troubles she had to face. But Luke in the whole of his Gospel and the story of Acts is confident that in all of this we can see God working his purpose out. There is a providence that can be perceived acting in the whole story from the birth of Jesus through to the arrival of the Gospel in Rome. In the greater picture we see a pattern, which can often be hard to discern when we focus on a separate element within it. Faith, and the accompanying commitment and dedication, can carry us through the difficult times and enable us to see the working out of God’s purpose and providence.

And this is where we see the significance of Luke’s inclusion of the Magnificat as an element in Mary’s part in the birth of Jesus. All generations will call Mary blessed because the Mighty One has done great things for her. But this is part of God’s overall pattern, an essential element in his

nature – ‘his name is holy; from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honour him’. The plans of the proud, the earthly might of kings count for nothing in God’s providence. What really matters is that the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled with good things. Israel is here described as God’s servant. Much of the language is derived from the Old Testament, but its significance as Luke uses it in his Gospel, its meaning in the overall story of the life of Jesus and the response in the early Church, is very much New Testament. In Judaism the term, ‘the lowly’ had become almost a technical term for the faithful adherents of the Law. Now it applies to the men and women of faith who have dedicated their lives as followers of Jesus Christ. All this is part of the Advent theme, first, that ‘God came’ – the hand of God can be discerned in the life of Israel at its best, right through to the birth of the baby Jesus (hence too the significance of the inclusion of the genealogy of Jesus going back to Abraham), secondly, ‘God comes’ – we can discern the hand of God in our lives even today, and thirdly, ‘God will come’ – all this is part of God’s providence, which will continue until the end of time.

So our Gospel message for today is primarily one of reassurance. We today can experience the working out of God’s providence. Whatever troubles we may have to go through, whatever uncertainty we may have to face, whatever shocks may come our way – like Mary suddenly discovering that she is to give birth to a special baby – a response, like that of Mary’s, of faith and commitment can enable us to face anything. So let each of us echo Mary’s words, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord’.

## **Prayer**

In our prayers for others, let us think especially of those who are facing particular troubles at this time, or uncertainty in their lives, or the need to come to terms with unforeseen shocks. Under each heading please take the opportunity to fill out with concerns that come to you.

Let us pray for those facing personal troubles and difficulties, including those having to deal with health issues, or coping with poverty, or embroiled in a time of war and conflict....

Let us pray for the governments of the world, as they try to deal with current crises and as they face further uncertainty in the days ahead....

Let us pray for the Church, especially in those areas where witness and service have become difficult, and where there are new challenges to be addressed....

Let us pray for our own local community, including those whose livelihoods have been changed or lost, and those seeking ways of building a new future....

Let us pray for our friends and families, especially any in particular need of support at this time....

And a prayer for ourselves, that our daily living may be part of the life of God’s kingdom and that our love may be God’s love reaching out into the life of the world.

And let us offer all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

**HYMN Sing the Faith 186** (Timothy Dudley-Smith)

1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!  
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;  
tender to me the promise of his word;  
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!  
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has  
done;  
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;  
his holy name – the Lord, the Mighty One.

3. Tell out my soul, the greatness of his might!  
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;  
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,  
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!  
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.  
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
to children's children and for evermore!

### **The Blessing**

Let us conduct our lives during the coming days as bringers of love, as makers of peace, as messengers of hope, knowing that the blessing of God, the source of life, of Jesus Christ, the way to life, and of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of life, is with us today, tomorrow and forever. Amen.

*[Prayers taken and adapted from URC 'A Book of Services']*