

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 18 December 2022 – 'A Sign of Hope' - by Revd David Cuckson

Advent Liturgy

It's Advent. Not yet Christmas. It's not yet time for you and me to prepare. It's time for all the world's different people to prepare. It's time to see God's message in all living created things, the environment around us. It's time to make room in our lives for all ages and genders, people who are overlooked as second class citizens ignored or put upon. Time to be grateful for Mary who was one of these.

Let us think, without Mary, young, pregnant and unmarried, where would we be?
Without that young woman who put her trust in God, what would we believe?
Without that commitment, that vision and faith, what faith could we have?
Without Mary saying yes to God and mothering Jesus, would the Saviour be ours?
Let us ask ourselves if we scorn and shun because of age or gender.
When God reigns there is room for all ages and genders. [Perhaps light a candle]

HYMN Singing the Faith 171 (Philip Doddridge)

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| 1. Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
the Saviour promised long;
let every heart prepare a throne,
and every voice a song. | 3. He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor. |
| 2. He comes the prisoners to release,
in Satan's bondage held;
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield. | 4. Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name. |

Prayer

We greet your coming, God, with wonder: You come to be with us; yet you remain far greater than we can imagine. You are near; yet your wisdom sets you apart from us. You appear among us; yet we cannot describe your glory.

We greet your coming, God, with repentance: We are more or less satisfied with ourselves; but your presence exposes our sin and failure. We are self-confident; but you challenge our confidence in ourselves. We are proud of our understanding; but you show us that we do not know everything.

We greet your coming, God, with joy: We had no true idea of what you are like; but you have shown yourself in Jesus Christ. We felt our human life could be of no importance to you; but you have shown its value by appearing among us as a man. We are aware of the gulf between us and you; but you have bridged it with love.

God, we greet your coming in Jesus Christ our Lord! **Amen**

Merciful God, we confess to you now that we have sinned. We confess the sins that no one knows and the sins that everyone knows; the sins that are a burden to us and the sins that do not bother us because we have got used to them. Father, forgive us. Send the Holy Spirit to us, that he may give us power to live as, by your mercy, you have called us to live. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The story of Christmas is so familiar to us that it is easy to take it for granted so that we fail to let it touch our hearts, so we pray now that we may be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to enable us to understand and accept its truth and to come to see the way of Christ for us today. **Amen**

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSVA)

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: *'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel'*, which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had not marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus.

Reflection

Matthew takes many opportunities to underline the continuity between his gospel story of Jesus and the history of the people of Israel enshrined above all in the pages of what we call the Old Testament. Here he quotes a prophecy of Isaiah, over seven hundred years previously. This prophecy dates back to the time of King Ahaz, and a time of great threat to Jerusalem from foreign armies, a time of crisis for the whole nation. Isaiah offers a sign of hope from God – look, he says, at the birth of a baby to a young woman – her son should be given the name, Emmanuel. This is a symbolic name, a name that contains a message. It means, 'God is with us', and that is the truth that the king and his people should hold dear. Whatever troubles lie ahead, they should not despair but should maintain their trust in God. Have faith in God and the people will survive whatever troubles and hardships come their way. Isaiah in his prophecy is giving the king and his people hope for the future.

So, back to Matthew's Gospel. Here we see the supreme sign of hope for the future, in the birth of a baby boy to a young woman. 'Echoing' or 'fulfilling' the prophecy of Isaiah – it does not really matter how you express it. Let us just rejoice in the story we have before us. The four Gospel writers introduce Jesus on to the scene differently. Mark has no birth narrative at all (which suggests that for many of the early Christians this was not a fundamental part of their core beliefs), Luke has a different account from Matthew (probably because he is writing for a different audience, including converts from outside the

Jewish tradition), and John takes a more philosophical approach. But now, in the Advent season and so close to Christmas Day itself, let us rejoice in the birth of baby Jesus and celebrate this marvellous sign of hope for the whole world.

The festival of Christmas is important as a pointer to the future, to what Jesus will achieve as he grows up and especially in his ministry to the people of his day and, even more, for what his teaching can say to us today and what his life, death and resurrection can mean for the faith of those who put their trust in him.

First, in his lifetime Jesus was seen to embody the hopes of the people of Israel and those who sought to follow the God first acknowledged by them and recorded in the books of the Old Testament. You can find continual references to promises for the future, to covenants with God, to signs of hope like that in the prophecy of Isaiah quoted by Matthew, to references to the Messiah, a saviour of the people. Those who came to know Jesus and who followed him, saw in him everything that they could wish for, one who could reveal the true nature of God to them in his teaching, and one who showed through his life what complete faith in God can mean. The birth of Jesus is a sign of all this, which would lead so many followers to put their faith in him and discover salvation for themselves.

Secondly, and more importantly for us, the influence of Jesus did not end with his death. It has continued down the centuries, it continues now in our time, and we believe it will continue into the future. To put our faith in him, to commit ourselves to following his way, to living his life, opens the door to a whole new understanding of the world and our place within it, and our relationships with other people. This is the power of Jesus at work in the world today.

And all this began with a birth, a birth that we are already anticipating celebrating again this Christmas time. Isaiah talked about the birth of a baby as a sign of hope. So we too can now share our Christmas greetings, a sign of hope for our own time.

HYMN Singing the Faith 330 (*Isaac Watts*)

1, Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her Kin;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

2. Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

3. He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

Prayers

Father, you do not create us to live alone and you have not made us all alike. We thank you for the varied society of mankind, into which we come, by which we are brought up, and through which we discover your purpose for our lives. In gratitude we pray for everyone in the world.

We pray for our families, with whom we live day by day. May this most searching test of our character not find us broken and empty, By all that we do and say help us to build up the faith and confidence of those we love.

We pray for the communities to which we belong, that we may be good citizens. Make us willing to accept responsibility when we are called to it; make us willing also give place to others, that they too may have their opportunity. Grant that our influence may be good and not evil.

Father, into whose world we come and from whose world finally we must go; we thank you for all those people, great and humble, who have maintained the fabric of the world's life in the past and left us a great inheritance. May we take up and encourage what is good, and hand it on to those who come after, believing that our work in your name will not be wasted. **Amen**

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 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.**

The Blessing

Let us go out into the world 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 the Methodist Church's Advent Liturgy and Contemporary Prayers for Public Worship published by SCM]