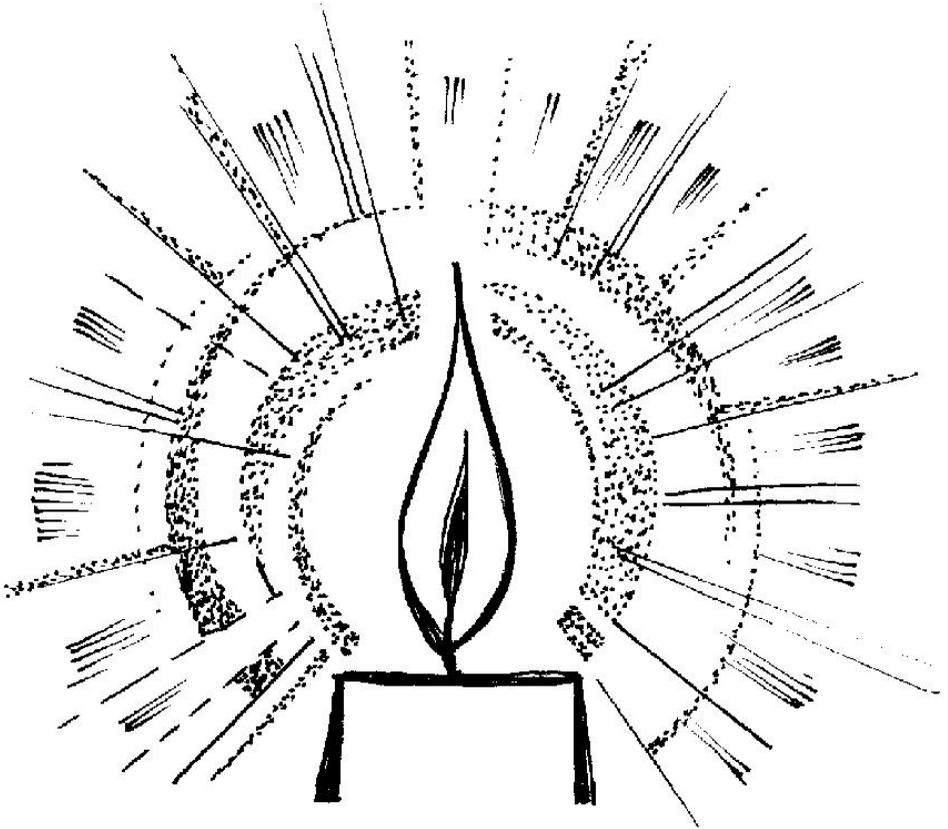


St John's Church Muxton &
St Michael's Church Lilleshall

Advent Daily Reflections



This programme of daily reflections has been written by members of our two congregations to help us use the season of Advent to prepare to celebrate Christmas. The reflections focus first of all on six advent themes: hope, waiting, expecting, proclaiming, repenting and hearing. Advent is both a time of preparing to celebrate Jesus coming into the world 2000 years ago, but also to prepare to welcome him into his world again. Our next six days look at why Jesus came, and why he will come again. After three days looking at the prophets Isaiah, Daniel and Jeremiah, our final set of reflections focus on Jesus and his earthly family.

Each day's reflection has a short bible reading, a brief comment on it, something to reflect on, and a prayer. It will only take a few moments, but we suggest that you might try to find a broadly similar time each day to make it a part of your routine. If it's appropriate, why not do it as a couple or as a family?

Thanks to those who have contributed reflections: Andrew Hamblin, Angie Vann, Barbara Bengry, David Lawrence, David & Dorothy Pierce, Heiko Capper, James Tagg, Jan Stackhouse, Jane Evans, Jenny Cresswell, Jo Lefroy, John Preston, Jon Rawson, Judith Myers, Kathy Tagg, Lisa & Nigel West, Matthew Lefroy, Paula Capper, Rich Cresswell, Robyn Evans and Sue Lott.

Sunday 3rd: Introduction

Happy New Year! Advent Sunday is the first day of the Church's year, and as with any New Year, it's a good chance to take stock and reflect. This programme of daily readings and reflections seeks to help you to do this.

Read: Matthew 11:25-30

Religion in first century Galilee was complicated. Very. Jews in Galilee were the most religious in the world, and many famous Rabbis had come from there. Their job was to teach people to learn to keep the Torah – to take "the yoke of Torah" or "the yoke of the kingdom of heaven".

Most Rabbis could only teach interpretations of the law that were commonly accepted. But a few Rabbis were perceived to have the authority to create new interpretations of the law, a new yoke.

In this passage, Jesus establishes his position as a Rabbi with who has a new yoke – a new interpretation that was easy and light (to understand not necessarily to do.) Matthew records Jesus saying that those who have overcomplicated their faith, the 'wise' and the 'learned' were not able to grasp the simple truths of his new interpretation, yet children could.

In those days, a few of the very best, most privileged students would manage to get signed up to study with a famous rabbi, leaving home to travel with him for some years. They were known as 'talmidim' in Hebrew, which we translate as disciples. A talmid is much more than a student though – a student simply seeks knowledge, whereas a talmid wants to be like the teacher, to become what the teacher is. This led to students being passionately devoted to their rabbi and noting everything he did or said. In selecting his disciples, Jesus chose a whole range of ordinary folk – folk just like you and me.

Pause for thought: Are you over-complicating your faith? How might this Advent allow you to draw closer to Jesus, becoming his disciple?

Lord Jesus, help me to use these reflections to draw closer to you. Send your Holy Spirit to make your word come alive to me this Advent. Amen.

Monday 4th: Advent themes: *A Living Hope*

Today we look at the first major theme of Advent, that of hope. Think of a sentence about hope. How many words is it? Peter uses 34!

Read: 1 Peter 1:3-5

This passage is part of a wonderful hymn of blessing and praise to God for what he has done for us. In his inspiring outpouring Peter tells us that it is by God's boundless mercy that he has given us a new birth into a living hope. Before we look at hope, we need to ask, 'Have we been given new birth?'

We have 'new birth' or are 'born again' when we give ourselves to Christ and receive the Holy Spirit. Correctly used, the phrase being 'born again' and being a Christian are the same thing. It's not a gimmick for the few, but part of orthodox belief (John Ch 3).

So, back to hope! In our English language we use the word 'hope' to express wishful thinking ... 'I hope we'll have a white Christmas'. This hope is not certain - on many occasions such hope has been dashed! But when the New Testament uses the word, 'hope' it means 'will be'. It speaks of the absolute certainty about what God has in store for those who have received new birth from him.

Peter is speaking with full confidence in the hope of the resurrection. As well as new birth, Jesus secures for believers the hope that they will be resurrected just as he was, and have an eternal inheritance – a secure home in heaven. This living hope encourages us to look, not just around at this present world, but ahead to heaven. And Peter rejoices because while we wait for this inheritance we are 'being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time'.

Pause for thought: In the light of this passage, what do you need this Advent?

- a joyful sense of God's boundless mercy?
- to know that you are born again?
- a living certainty of heaven?

Write a new (short!) sentence thanking God for his wonderful gift of hope.

Living Lord Jesus,
help us to set our sights on
the hope you have set
before us, even in times of
trouble and hardship.
Amen.

Tuesday 5th: Advent themes: *Waiting*

Yesterday we looked at the hope we have in Christ. Today we think about that hope as we await his return.

Read: Matthew 25:1-13

Ten Virgins invited to a wedding are to lead the Bridegroom to His Bride. It is evening and each has brought their lamps. Five young women are wise and brought oil with them to refill their lamps. The other five have been foolish and have come unprepared with just their lamps.

The Bridegroom is late and the young women have fallen asleep while waiting. At midnight a cry tells them the Bridegroom is coming! But only five lamps are burning in the darkness the remaining five have gone out. The five wise young women lead the procession the five foolish young women are left outside. The Bridegroom does not know them He did not see them in the dark.

Those young women must have remembered yesterday when there was much excitement and hope but today they are left with sadness their hope gone and they are left waiting.

Jesus of course is the Bridegroom He tells us to keep watch as we wait because we will not know when he will return.

As we look forward to Christmas and wait for Christ's triumphant return are we keeping our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus or are we distracted.

Ready or not He will come we must be wise and faithful and keep the light of Christ burning within us.

Pause for thought: Isaiah 60:1 says:
'Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.'

What does it mean to you today that the glory of the Lord is risen upon you?

Help us Lord Jesus to keep our eyes fixed firmly on you. Help us to shine brightly for you as we await your return. Arise shine for your light has come. Amen.

Wednesday 6th: Advent themes: *Expecting*

There are some passages in the bible that we may find hard. Today we will read of signs, warnings, fear and cosmic upheaval – but the more I become familiar with God’s words I just know there is always a promise that will bring comfort and hope – today’s reading is no exception!

Read: Luke 21:25-36

2017 has brought about some cosmic disturbance to our world – earthquakes, hurricanes, floods etc. and I have heard it said that this could be signs of the end of our world heralding the return of Jesus. However if we look at the beginning of this chapter (v8-11) it is clear that Jesus warns these things will happen but may be nothing to do with his return. When the signs mentioned in our passage appear it will be of truly cosmic proportions, such that we cannot imagine. The disturbance to the sun, moon and stars is deeply rooted in Old Testament scripture and until the time of fulfilment we cannot be sure if this description can be taken literally or figuratively. However in the same way that we can predict the seasons through nature so will we be given signs that the kingdom of God is drawing near.

What is clear is that we need to be in readiness and Luke guides us to how we should prepare ourselves for that time when Jesus returns and our redemption draws near. Wherever we are in our Christian faith there will be times when being a disciple can be a challenge because the demands of discipleship are vigorous and we will need to persevere even when the going gets tough.

Luke makes it clear that the attractions of sensual pleasures, drunkenness and preoccupation with the material aspects of living will be a source of distraction to us and we need to be alert to them creeping in the corners of our life.

But – the promise of what is to come is there and when I read these words from Luke my spirit lifts as I read of the Son of Man coming in the cloud and I can lift my face to him.

Pause for thought: Do I with all my heart and soul want to take my place alongside my saviour? Am I open to him showing me what I need to do to be a good disciple?

Heavenly Father increase my desire for you in every aspect of my life. Give me strength and wisdom in all I do. Amen.

Thursday 7th: Advent themes: *Proclaiming*

In this passage Isaiah describes the return of the Jews from exile to their own land. He sees in his vision the herald announcing their return to Jerusalem running on the distant hills. The herald came to declare that the long and painful captivity was closed and that peace and plenty and joy were to be spread over the land. The good news of what God has done, and continues to do, is too good to be quietly noted. We too must give voice in witness and praise such that everyone shall see God's acts of salvation.

Read: Isaiah 52:7-10

Who can't read this passage without bursting into song 'Our God reigns!' This popular worship song was written in the early 1970's by Leonard Smith, an American teacher. At that time he had lost his school job because of his enthusiasm for evangelizing to his pupils. Ending up stuck in menial jobs he was feeling miserable. Reflecting on this passage from Isaiah led him to a discovery that gave him renewed hope. Isaiah's prophecy showed him something that was happening centuries ago to a nation, and what they heard that caused them to re-think their despair. 'God reigns!' And, not only that, He comes with good news. Good news? It's amazing, breath-taking news. It was so powerful that Smith wept at reading it and was inspired to write his famous hymn.

How do we feel when each year we hear the good news of Jesus coming to the world to declare God's salvation plan? Are we too caught up in our own problems and issues to appreciate the amazing freedom we are offered. Or are we moved to sing with joy and proclaim with confidence the breath-taking news that our God reigns.

Pause for thought: Let's proclaim through our positivity and enthusiasm the joy and hope of our God being the one in charge this Advent.

Heavenly Father
Thank you for the good news
of saving us. May we trust that
You reign, and fill us with joy to
sing your praise and proclaim
your power in our lives. Amen.

Friday 8th: Advent themes: *Repenting*

Are we ready for Jesus?

Read: Read: Luke 3.7-18

Repent is a word that is not popular. It's often seen as old fashioned. Because it is linked with the word, "sin," which is about our faults and inadequacies it can make us feel uncomfortable.

When we repent we admit that, whether intentionally or not, we have been wrong (we sin.) In some way we have harmed others and offended God in the process. Repenting goes against our human pride and dignity.

We are also challenged to change our bad attitudes, habits and behaviour so that we do not continue in them. Many of us may willingly admit that we're not perfect but we are still content to say "I am who I am and I cannot or do not want to change." If this is our attitude then we are unable to repent.

If we are unable to truly repent, we cannot access the forgiveness and mercy of God. We cannot be saved by Jesus and we cannot therefore escape from the judgment and justice due to us for the harm and offence we cause. We face being considered like worthless chaff

John called the crowds coming out to him a brood of snakes because theirs was a half repentance. They wanted to escape from the coming judgment but showed no intention of changing their flawed attitudes, behaviour and habits. John challenged people to get ready for Jesus by demonstrating a willingness to change and to show evidence that they had repented in very practical ways; by sharing possessions, treating others fairly and not grumbling at their wages.

Changed character leading to changed behaviour is the mark of a truly repentant person.

Pause for thought: If we do not repent can we realise fully the life-changing importance of Jesus' birth at Christmas?

Heavenly Father, I'm sorry for my habits, attitudes and behaviour that offend you. Holy Spirit, this Advent, point these out to me where I cannot see them and give me the strength and courage to change. Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

Saturday 9th: Advent themes: *Hearing*

Hearing is a complex, God given gift that we take for granted daily. It is perhaps the most precious of all our senses because it keeps us in touch with those we love and the world around us. Sometimes we need help to make sense of what we are hearing. In the following reading, Samuel thought he heard the voice of Eli but was clearly mistaken.

Read: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

Samuel diligently served Eli, who had faithfully served the Lord, over many years. In verse 7 we read that Samuel `did not yet know the Lord` so he was unable to recognise the Lord calling him. Wise, old Eli had to help him to understand the momentous event that was taking place in his life. God`s voice is not always recognised and it may need someone else to make known, what He is saying to us. We may not hear God`s audible voice or experience his physical presence with us, however God does still draw close to us and speaks today when reading His Word and spending quiet time with Him, our conscience may prick us, a sermon may move us to action, a thought may not go away or by receiving wise council from a trusted friend.

We need to build our relationship with God each day so that we will become familiar with his voice. In today`s society we are bombarded with many `voices` making demands on our lives and we must learn to know which we can trust.

Samuel does as Eli suggests but it is interesting to note that he doesn`t use the title `Lord` in his response. Is this because he `did not yet know the Lord` but was nevertheless willing to listen, learn and begin to trust in the voice, above all others, that he would come to recognise and obey. When we know God and have a close relationship with Him, we will begin to.

Pause for thought: Are you listening to the voice you can trust above all others? If not what can you do to hear God speaking?

Speak your word to us Lord,
and open our ears that we may
hear you and recognise your
voice. Make us faithful to you
so that we can respond and
share what we hear, with those
we meet. Amen.

Sunday 10th: Why Jesus Came: *To bring Justice*

Justice is a central part of the heart of God, central to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and central to our calling as followers of Him.

Read: Isaiah 30:18-19

When things go wrong in our lives we often turn to other things instead of turning to God and waiting on Him to help us. Yet, God longs to be gracious to us and does not condemn us, point out our faults or give up on us. He longs for us to come to Him so He can show us His love and compassion.

Within our world today thousands of people are living in oppression, slavery and injustice. God's heart is for the broken, the oppressed, the marginalised, the refugee etc. and He chooses and calls His followers to be involved in bringing justice, love and compassion to the world. We cannot change the whole world on our own but we can make a difference to the lives of some who are in it. Jesus calls us to "Love our neighbours as ourselves. Who is our neighbour?"

Pause for thought: How will we respond to act justly in the world?
Whose life can we make a difference to today?

Lord Jesus we thank you for your love and compassion to us. Help us to show that love and compassion to others, even when it may be difficult to do so. Amen

Monday 11th: Why Jesus Came: *To forgive sins*

Jesus came to forgive sinners! So what? Can any more be said about this? Anyone who has attended church for even the shortest time knows this. It's, well ...obvious.

Read: Matthew 9:1-8

When Jesus tells the man to take heart because his sins are forgiven, the theologians and teachers in his audience were outraged. This charlatan is a blasphemer, a madman. Only God can forgive sins. The carpenter's son is claiming to be God.

By his actions and words that is just what Jesus is doing. He is declaring: I am God. As I've thought of the gospels' accounts about Jesus, I am more and more surprised about how extremely provocative Jesus's life was and what an affront it presented to the many 1st Century Jews who were expecting Messiah.

In this account he goes back to his hometown and scandalises its religious leaders and others. They were expecting God's Messiah to come and rescue them from their oppressors, the Romans: Messiah would cleanse and restore the temple, he would bring Israel's history to its climax and restore its monarchy as a world power (as in David's and Solomon's times) and, consequently, re-instate the Jews to their rightful place in history. The Messiah would come as a great warrior King.

Jesus does not do what they expected Messiah would do. He says things like, "Love your enemies." and, "Do good to those that hate you." He associates with the despised and marginalized of society. For goodness sake, this man was this town's former carpenter. He's obviously deranged.

However, Jesus shows he is God's Messiah and that he can and does forgive sins, vindicating his words by healing the man. The man walks and, as only God can heal, God's kingdom has come. Jesus has demonstrated he is indeed Messiah but not one like the leaders/teachers wanted.

Pause for thought: In this Advent season are we expecting the "same old, same old" Jesus who conforms to our preconceived and culturally affected images or will we be challenged and maybe even affronted by Him ushering in more of God's uncomfortable kingdom into our lives?

Lord Jesus, in Advent, may your kingdom come to me in fresh, exciting and (possibly) disturbing ways to your glory. Amen.

Tuesday 12th: *Why Jesus Came: To feed the hungry*

Hunger for most of us is an unpleasant thing; it creates short-term discomfort but is easily sated by the next meal. However, real hunger – a gnawing, unforgiving, unsatisfied, unrelenting need – is a horrible thing which is very painful to look upon in others, even remotely via the television or tablet.

Read: John 6: 35-54

This passage finds Jesus being pursued by one of those fickle crowds which so often latches onto him. He has just rebuked them for following him partly in the hope of being fed. He then declares, rather famously, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry'

This is a surely wonderful promise for so many. Jesus is apparently promising to take away the aching longing for food through the provision of that most basic and satisfying staple – bread.

In fact we already know from the Old Testament that bread is something God sends to his people when they are in danger of starving: for example, the manna from heaven which sustained the Israelites in the desert, and the ravens who brought bread to Elijah.

But is this exactly what Jesus is saying? By this stage in his life we already know his conviction that, despite 40 days of starvation, 'Man shall not live by bread alone'. Later in the passage we learn that the bread Jesus is offering to satisfy us is, perhaps oddly, his body. We are instructed to feed on him to have eternal life. This does not sound like ordinary bread for ordinary hunger!

The Bible tells us that 'deep calls to deep'. It is the hunger, the longing of our souls for God which Jesus promises to satisfy when we feed on him – when we look to him, pray to him, talk to him, draw strength from him, live in him.

Jesus cares deeply about the poor and the starving and the wretched, and he cares about the physical needs even of those who are full and satisfied - but he cares even more about our spiritual hunger – and he longs to satisfy it.

Pause for thought: How hungry are we for God? Can we pray both for a greater sense of spiritual hunger and for Jesus to satisfy it?

Lord, make me hungry for your bread of life – and then please feed me. Amen.

Weds 13th: *Why Jesus Came: To reveal the Father's love*

English, as a language, can often be very limited. One word can express so many different feelings and emotions, which often makes it hard to interpret and easy to misconstrue. The word 'love' is a perfect example. Where we have one word, the Greeks had six: Eros, Philia, Ludus, Agape, Pragma and Philautia.

Read: 1 John 4:13-16

In 1942, a group of Scottish soldiers were captured by the Japanese and taken as prisoners of war. As part of the detention, they were made to build bridges and railroads. One day, they stopped at a tool check point. On counting, the Japanese found that there was one shovel missing. They demanded that it be returned. They made the soldiers line up and the Japanese officer in charge drew his pistol and pointed it at the first prisoners head. He told them he would shoot him unless the thief owned up. One soldier stepped out of the line. The officer holstered his pistol and proceeded to beat the man to death. At the next tool check point, the spade reappeared. It had been a case of a miscount at the previous check.

In today's reading John (the author of the Gospel) speaks of God's love for each and every one of us. A love so strong, that he was willing to offer his son as the ultimate sacrifice, to himself, for the sins of everyone, in one go!

Verse 10 speaks of how the Father reveals his love to us. He so wants an intimate relationship with us that these are the lengths he will go to.

Just as that soldier stepped out of the line to protect his fellow soldiers when he had done nothing wrong, so Jesus will step forward from the line on the day of judgement, even though he has done nothing wrong, so that we can enter his kingdom.

Pause for thought: If God loves us this much and we have accepted that love, what should we be doing with it? In verse 11 John tells us. We are to love each other, because if we show love to each other, then God lives in us. How are you going to show that love with others today?

Father, thank you that you show us your love in so many ways. Help me today to show love to all those around me, so that they may see your love too.

Thurs 14th: Why Jesus comes again: *for his Bride*

Over the last few days in our reflections, we've considered why Jesus came. Now, we turn our attention to the future and his coming again in glory.

Read: Revelation 19:7-9

In Matthew 9, Jesus appears to describe himself as a bridegroom. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25) and the words of John the Baptist (John 3:27-30) also imply something similar. In today's passage, offering imagery of the end times, we see that Jesus, described here as the Lamb of God, is finally ready for his marriage.

It becomes clear, through both this passage and Ephesians 5:25, that Christ's Bride is the Church - the people of God who have made themselves ready to meet him, through "righteous acts".

The Ephesians passage suggests those righteous acts are by Jesus, who cleanses and sanctifies the Church. However, today's passage from Revelation states that "the bride has made herself ready". Therefore, it seems that being made ready is not just the work of Christ or our responsibility alone - we must instead assume a partnership.

So, what's going on? Well, let's look at the example of Abraham, described by St Paul in his letter to the Romans - "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3). God, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, offers us someone in which to have faith. Our call, as the bride, is to demonstrate that faith and say "I will".

Pause for thought: If we are the bride of Christ, consider these marriage vows from your side and his:

To have and to hold from this day forward;
for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
till death us do part;
according to God's holy law.

Lord Jesus Christ, help me to prepare for your coming again as a bride should prepare for her marriage: with excitement, reverence and love.

Fri 15th: *Why Jesus comes again: to fulfil his promises*

God has promised us that Jesus will come again, that there will be a day of judgement (Matthew 12:36), and that there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17, Revelation 21:1). When will this happen? No one knows, not even Jesus (Matthew 24:36).

Read: 2 Peter 3:1-13

Firstly, we are reminded that God has not forgotten about us. People around us might be asking “where is the promise of his coming?” (verse 4) but we can trust that God keeps his promise and Jesus *will* come again. We are encouraged that God is not being slow, rather he is being patient (verse 9). He is giving us time to work on our own lives: to make them the holy and godly lives we should be living (verse 11). God is also giving us time to tell others of the good news of Jesus.

Secondly, there is the promise that on the day of judgement there will not be complete destruction of all things, instead it is a refining by fire. In the same way that gold can be held over a hot fire and any impurities removed from the surface, so the heavens and the earth will be refined. This may be literal or metaphorical, but all things will be tested, and those things that do not meet the test will be destroyed.

Thirdly, with the promise and hope of eternal life spent in the new heaven and the new earth, what are we to do with ourselves in the mean time? I have already mentioned working on our own lives and telling others about Jesus. These things matter, and they are not easy. There is a lot in the Bible to help us with these tasks, as well as meeting with other Christians for encouragement and support.

Pause for thought: Ask God to reveal to you an area in your life that needs to be changed, that you might live a more holy and godly life. Keep your eyes open for opportunities to tell others about Jesus.

Dear God,
Thank you for the promise that Jesus will come again, and for the promise of eternity with you. Help me to prepare for your return. Amen.

Saturday 16th: Three Prophets: *Isaiah*

Can you remember being encouraged when life seemed very tough and dark?... or when you encouraged someone else? On our Advent Wreath one of the candles represents the Prophets. Prophet Isaiah's message was for then, today and tomorrow.....

He was speaking to the Israelites, exiled in Babylon for 70 years. The people preparing to return home were discouraged and depressed, thinking their God had abandoned them.

Read: Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah spoke to them:

* **tenderly** (v 1,2), using words of deep comfort to their hearts. He told them of God's assurance that the sins of his people had been totally forgotten. Enmity with God had ended and God would bless them in abundance.

* **of being prepared** (v 3-5). The journey back home would be very difficult, through desert, deep ravines, difficult slopes and wilderness. They must be ready to travel back with God, who was to be the means and the end of their journey. In his presence the whole route would become an easy path. Mountains and obstacles would wither ...

* **of reality** (v 6-8) ... but changes needed to be made. Life is fleeting and uncertain. Flesh dies and flowers fade. Similarly humans fail but the Word of God remains. That is eternal and utterly reliable.

* **of God delivering them** (v 9-11). As they returned to Jerusalem, God would bring restoration, comfort and hope. He has the strength of the mightiest ruler and the gentleness of the tenderest shepherd. This message was to be shared as encouragement to each other and with the world around.

Isaiah's message gives us the comforting reassurance of sins forgiven and of God's presence in the difficult ground of our lives. Some 500 years later these words found their greater fulfilment when John the Baptist came as 'the voice' preparing the way of the Lord (v3), and in Jesus who called himself the Good Shepherd (v11). They will be totally fulfilled at Jesus' second coming.

Pause for thought: Do you have difficulties which seem like those the Israelites faced on their journey home?

Lord Jesus, please show me afresh what parts of my life need 'straightening out' and preparing for your coming. By your grace, please help me in doing this. Amen.

Sunday 17th: Three Prophets: *Daniel*

The Second Advent will be sooner than we imagine.

Read: Daniel 7:13-14 & Matthew 13:41

Jesus taught us to pray to God the Father that His is the kingdom the power and the glory, and so it is.

But today's passage taken from Daniel, telling us of his heavenly vision given about 500 years before Christ, speaks about the son of man (Jesus' preferred title for himself) being handed the kingdom, and having the power and the glory. And this strange paradox touches on the mystery, to our finite minds, of the Trinity. That Jesus so gentle meek and mild when he came and walked this planet in Palestine some 2000 years ago, is yet far more than the simple title 'son of God' might conjure up in our minds. As the creed puts it so well, making the subtle but profound change that we might have missed, he is correctly titled as God the Son.

Yet today he remains to our sight one like a Prince Regent, yet to be displayed in all his glory at the time of his final Advent. When shall that be?

I wonder if you are a bit like me, often burdened down with the troubles that beset us in body mind and spirit. Maybe you also long for Jesus to return and release us from the grip of sin that blights every aspect of our lives. His final encouraging words to us come in the very last verses of the bible. He says I am coming soon. Then, when returning in the clouds, he will complete his redemptive work, saving us as Matthew's reading puts it, not just from the power and penalty of sin, but also from its presence once and for all.

Pause for thought: the final words of the bible by John are 'Amen come (soon) Lord Jesus'. Let us daily live in the light of this truth.

Father thank you for sending Jesus your son. Thank you for your promise through his words to send him soon again to reign as King and stay for ever. Amen, come Lord Jesus.

Monday 18th: Three Prophets: *Jeremiah*

‘True religion begins when we ask, how may I get rid of my sins? And it exists only in those who know the answer: not by seeing what I can do for myself, but by putting my trust in Jesus, and in what he did for me.’ J.I. Packer

Read: Jeremiah 33:12-16

The bible teaches us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. How can we therefore ever get right with God’s law?

For until we are right with the law we cannot be right with the God whose law it is. While the law condemns us, true worship and fellowship with God are impossible. But God in his great love and mercy has made a way for us to come back to him. He sent his Son the Lord Jesus Christ to die in our place.

He took the penalty for our sin, he took our punishment into his own sinless body. In exchange for our sin he gives us his righteousness. This gift of Christ’s righteousness is made by God to all who believe.

If you were asked whether you were sure of a place in Heaven, what would your answer be? Would you feel a slight uncertainty, a sneaking suspicion that you might not be quite good enough?

The truth is, we can never be good enough. But Jesus has done all that is needful. If you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour, rejoice, because he is your righteousness. When you pray the Father sees his own dear child approaching. He does not see your sin, he only sees the righteousness of his son Jesus Christ. The father hears, answers, and takes delight in you, and your place in heaven is secure. You, and all who trust in Jesus can approach the Lord with confidence, secure in his love. He is our righteousness and our salvation.

Pause for thought: This love, this gift of righteousness is mine, at this moment in time and for all eternity.

Lord Jesus, thank that you are my righteousness and that you have become my salvation. Let this truth sink into my soul and transform my life. Amen.

Tuesday 19th: The Family: *Elizabeth*

Can you really trust the promises of God? Zechariah and Elizabeth received a promise that seemed humanly impossible. As v7 tells us “they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years”. Elizabeth and Zechariah waited patiently, and faithfully trusted in God’s promise.....

Read: Luke 1: 23-25, 39-45

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s regulations blamelessly (v.6). This is not to say that they had no problems. Can you imagine the intense stigma attached to childlessness especially for an upstanding couple in the community and the wife of a Priest! Whilst Elizabeth may have been righteous before God, some of their friends probably suspected some serious secret sin to be behind the cause of her barrenness.

But what did Zechariah and Elizabeth do? We learn from verse 13 that they had prayed, most probably faithfully for many years. After many years of continued devoted service and faithful prayer, Elizabeth became pregnant. Note how Elizabeth responded in verse 25 – “The Lord has done this for me”. She recognised this to be from God and she responded in gratitude and praise. In the midst of our problems it can be so easy to become disheartened, so easy to quit and run away from difficult circumstances. God wants us to take our difficulties to Him in prayer, no matter how impossible they may seem, and to wait patiently for Him to work.

In vs 39-45 we read about Mary’s visit to see Elizabeth. On hearing Mary’s voice, Elizabeth’s unborn child leaped for joy and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognised the child that Mary was carrying was her Lord. Elizabeth utters these amazing words “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

Elizabeth, older than Mary and who had waited for so many years to become pregnant, could have envied Mary whose son would be even greater than her own. Instead she was filled with joy. Elizabeth showed humility, and recognised her own blessing and rejoiced together with Mary.

Pause for thought: ‘Patience is not simply the ability to wait – it is how we behave while we are waiting.’ – Joyce Meyer.

Father God, we thank you for your promises. Help us to be faithful in prayer and worship as we wait, and to trust that you will answer in your perfect time. Amen

Wednesday 20th: The Family: *Zechariah*

The first person mentioned in Luke's 'orderly account' of the life of Jesus – his Gospel – is Zechariah. Verse 5 records him as a priest, and whilst ministering in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth had been chosen by God to have a son. They were to consecrate their son as a servant of God and were to name him John.

But Zechariah did not initially believe the angel (and by extension, God). He objected that this could not be possible since he and his wife were too old. So he became mute.

Read: Luke 1:57-79

This passage reveals when he fulfils God's call, and writes that his Son is to be named John, his mouth is opened and he can speak again.

Immediately there flows a wonderful hymn of praise – which has formed part of Anglican worship for centuries. It's known as the Benedictus from the first word in the Latin version, and is focused on the coming of Messiah. The coming of Christ was an exciting and longed for event – one which had been prophesied and taught to God's people for centuries. But for the last few centuries, they had endured silence. No word from God, but still the remnant awaiting a Saviour to rescue them. This is the first glimmer of hope that has come in generations. And Zechariah is excited, and gives this amazing, Spirit-inspired commentary on the significance of the birth of his son and the soon to be birth of God's Son who would bear the sins of the world and set His weary, oppressed people free!

Note that verse 79 uses a beautiful quotation from Isaiah 60:13 to carry forward the imagery of light (the sun) to offer hope and peace to those who were then outside the Jewish people.

Lord Jesus, shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, and bring them to know you. Guide their feet, and ours, into the path of peace. Amen.

Pause for thought: Do you know the hope and peace that Jesus brings? Who do you know that doesn't yet know that hope, and the peace that comes from reconciliation with our loving Father?

Thursday 21st: The Family: *John the Baptist*

What is family? Is it: a group of people related to each other by blood; descendants of a common ancestor; or a group of people united by their political or religious beliefs? Today, we are challenged to think what this might mean for us.

Read: Matthew 3:1-12

Our reading today finds John the Baptist, who was the older cousin of Jesus, performing his ministry of Baptism in the river Jordan. He was the first prophet for 500 years, since the days of Malachi and Ezra. Whilst performing his ministry the Pharisees and Sadducees come to see what is going on. On seeing them John tells them that they have to repent of their sins in order to produce fruit. He tells them that just being a descendant of Abraham is not enough.

The Pharisees were legalistic and strictly kept the laws of Moses, thinking that this would be enough for them to reach heaven. However, salvation is not a birth-right. Being born and raised in a Christian household, or going to church every Sunday doesn't mean we will be allowed to enter heaven when Christ returns.

The Pharisees placed too much emphasis on following the rules and would often say and do one thing in public, but do something different away from the public gaze. The same is true of us. If we want to enter heaven, we have to be part of God's family. That means repenting of our sins, trying to live the way Jesus teaches us to and not just keep it to a Sunday.

There is a church in Birmingham that has the sign 'You are now entering a time of worship' above the door. Not on the way in, but on the way out!

Pause for thought: Family comes in many shapes and sizes. We should be thankful for our families, whatever form they take, but remember that the most important family we can belong to is God's family; and with that comes certain commitments and promises. Today, try to live as Jesus would want you to.

Jesus, thank you that I am part of your family, that you called out my name and I responded. Today, help me to live the way you would want, with a servant heart. Amen.

Friday 22nd: The Family: *Mary*

If you were a great designer, commissioned to make the perfect mother, what attributes would you give her?

Read: Luke 1:26-38

In this passage, Luke tells us of the beginning of Jesus' life. God was about to place his only son into the care of this ordinary, scared young girl from the middle of nowhere. She was going to give birth to, and bring up, His precious son, the saviour of all mankind. As God is the ultimate planner, someone who never makes a mistake, the mum he chose must have been something special.

Consider her response when the angel suddenly appeared to her, completely out of the blue. The phrase 'Mary was greatly troubled at his words' seems to be something of an understatement, and yet she remained calm. The angel announced that she would have a child, even though she was not married and had never slept with a man. She knew that, if she became pregnant, she would face rejection, her proposed marriage to Joseph would be wrecked, her family shamed and she even risked being stoned to death. But her response is awe inspiring. Mary modelled true discipleship and submission to God's will even when, in human terms, it looked like a disaster. Her submission to God's will played a vital part in the salvation of all mankind.

When God asks us to do something, we too have to make the decision whether to serve Him no matter what the apparent cost, or to take the easy way out and please ourselves. Who knows what God can do with your obedience?

Lord God, help me to hear your call, and to respond to it with obedience. Strengthen me that I may serve you in whatever you are asking me to do for you.
Amen.

Pause for thought: When God asks you for something, do you place your own interests first, or those of your King?

Saturday 23rd: The Family: *Joseph*

What do you do when someone behaves badly toward you, breaks a promise, or says something that hurts you? Do you lash out verbally? Do you punish them, set them straight? Do you give them the silent treatment?

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Not much is written about Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus, but this short passage really helps us to gain an insight into why God chose Joseph to be Jesus' step-dad.

When Mary became pregnant, Joseph could have responded selfishly to her. She appeared to have broken her betrothal promises to him, so he was within his rights to publicly divorce her, or even have her stoned to death for adultery.

But look at what he did. He quietly considered the situation, then he looked for a kind solution that wouldn't hurt Mary or her family. He didn't consider his own bruised pride or damaged image, he considered how he could respond with love. God prized his graciousness and showed him the way forward in a dream. Joseph listened to God and acted on His advice immediately.

We can all learn from Joseph. We can learn to face difficult situations, by asking ourselves; 'How can we show the grace and kindness of God in this matter?' We must listen to what God has to tell us, and respond promptly. Remember that Joseph didn't know what Jesus would grow up to achieve, but we do. We not only have Jesus' example, we also have the Holy Spirit living within us, to guide us and to strengthen us.

Pause for thought: What opportunities do you have to honour God rather than sooth your wounded pride, when can you show grace to those who hurt you?

Holy Spirit, guide me and strengthen me, that I might show grace to those around me, and in doing so reveal the kindness of God. Amen.

Sunday 24th: Seeing the Light

In this well-known passage, Jesus is described as ‘light to live by’. Today we will think what John meant by these words and reflect on how the light challenges both the way we see the world and the way we live in it.

Read: John 1:1-18 (in the Message version if you’ve got it)

For those of us who are blessed with good vision, sight tends to be our dominant sense. Think of the expression ‘seeing is believing’... We trust what we see with our own eyes –but what about those times when things are not as they appear? A while ago a friend told me about her trip to Nepal. On her first evening there, she was bitterly disappointed to find that she could not see one single mountain from her guest house. The next morning she was amazed to look out of the same window and see herself surrounded by mountains. What she had not realised was that the night before fog had hidden the mountains from her view.

But fog is not just physical. Fog can be spiritual. Look at the vivid description of Jesus from today’s reading (Message version):
‘The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn’t put it out.’
What a wonderful, powerful image – and yet: *‘the world didn’t even notice’*; *‘they didn’t want him’*.

How could that be? How could anyone miss light blazing out of darkness and why would anyone not welcome it? The truth is, light can be very uncomfortable. Have you ever known anyone say that faith in Jesus is fine for others, but it’s just not for them? And what about you? Have you ever had a belief challenged by your Bible reading? Or by a sermon? Or by the way someone else sees the world? Have you ever been tempted to turn a ‘blind eye’ to something that is just too difficult to tackle right now? Or could it be that the light has blazed out and you haven’t even noticed...?

Pause for thought: Is there ‘fog’ in your life? What is it preventing you from seeing or acting on?

Lord Jesus, shine your light into my life today and show me what I have been missing. Amen.