

*Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.*

### **Call to Worship:**

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight”.*

*Mark 1 verses 2,3*

*(Mark quotes Malachi 3.1 and Isaiah 40.3)*

Welcome to my reflection for the Second Sunday of Advent (6th December 2020). Today we're focussing on a passage from the prophet Isaiah that speaks words of comfort and hope but also challenges us to be patient. Freedom and rebuilding take time. Let us pray:

### **Opening Prayer**

God of tenderness and comfort,  
you speak words of peace  
that calm the storms of life,  
ease our troubles and heal our wounds.  
Help us to proclaim your good news;  
make straight your ways,  
and feed your people,  
that you glory will be revealed, even in us.

*Andy Braunston*

*(in 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)*

Last week I mentioned how events forty years after the death and Resurrection of Jesus influenced Mark in his writing. The Judean revolt led to the sacking of Jerusalem by Rome. That was around 70AD. The Middle East remains an area of turmoil today but it has long been so. Our reading today goes way, way back over 500 years before Jesus was born. For a generation many of the people of Judah have been held captive in Exile in Babylon. Now, the prophet Isaiah writes, there is hope of freedom and the rebuilding of their community.

### **Isaiah 40 .1-5 (NRSV)**

- 1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
- 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her  
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
- 3 A voice cries out:  
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a  
highway for our God.
- 4 Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
- 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall  
be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has  
spoken.'

If you were in some European countries, The Netherlands and Belgium for example, today would be a day of opening your presents. *(OK I'll put it down again)*. Today is the Feast of St Nicholas. Little is known of this 4th century saint except that he was Bishop of Myra in Turkey. But there are plenty of legends. In one he rescues sailors from drowning, and in another he frees three men who had been unjustly condemned to death. But by far the most influential tradition is that he saved three young girls from being sold into prostitution by dropping three bags of gold through their open window, to provide dowries for respectable marriages. From that comes the tradition of present giving on St Nicholas' Day. But he's been influential in another way too - in Dutch his name is Sinterklaas - which in America inspired Santa Claus to be the deliverer of gifts. St Nicholas didn't wear a big red cloak though - we owe that more to Coca-Cola than Nicholas of Myra.

Freedom, justice and salvation (being saved) are the themes that run through the legends about St Nicholas. They are at the heart of today's reading too. In the passage we heard a few minutes ago Isaiah speaks words of comfort and hope. A time of deliverance awaits, freedom is approaching. Impossible odds will be overcome - that wonderful passage used by Martin Luther King Junior, about valleys being lifted up and mountains laid low, stands out. Maybe it speaks to us powerfully too. Over the last twelve months we've faced seemingly impossible odds that have imprisoned us. But now there's hope.

### **Isaiah 40 .6-11 (NRSV)**

6 A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah,

'Here is your God!'

10 See, the Lord God comes with might,

and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.

Hope. yes. But there's caution there too. Nothing happens quickly. Isaiah's reference to grass and flowers growing, withering and fading depicts the seasons passing. But deliverance is coming, is Isaiah's message of assurance. After all God is the faithful shepherd who cares for all the sheep and will lead us all through the wilderness experiences of our lives. We are called to stay faithful, focussed on the freedom that awaits.

Let us pray:

### **In our world's wilderness**

Urban and rural God,  
be with us in our world's wilderness  
as we long for meaning and value,  
as we search for you without always knowing how,  
as we cry out for wholeness and healing.

Urban and rural God,  
be with us in our hearts' wilderness,  
as we strive to hear your Word,  
brought to us by prophets and outsiders;  
calling us to change.

Urban and rural God, forgive us:  
when we prefer the wilderness and isolation  
to the presence of your people;  
when we prefer to walk our own way,  
rather than the new direction to which you call us.

Urban and rural God,  
help us to accept your forgiveness,  
to be willing to change direction,  
and in you to see our new beginning,  
living the Good News of the Gospel. Amen.

*Andy Braunston  
(in 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)*

The writer of Isaiah was deeply involved in the lives and experiences of the day. But they were also deeply involved with, and attentive too, the message from God that needed to be given. Those two positions, hope and challenge, are firm characteristics of the prophets in the Biblical tradition.

Who are the modern day prophets? Over the last few weeks we have been brought a message of hope - vaccines have been developed to combat Coronavirus. But there's a challenge too, we need to remain focussed on what we do. In a very real sense scientists are among the prophets of today. They bring hope of freedom from masks and lock-downs. But they they challenge and urge patience too. Salvation - rescue - is never quick. Many a flower will grow, fade and wither before we're out of this and society is rebuilt. For Isaiah's people the return to, and the recovery and rebuilding of Jerusalem and Judah took a long time. In rebuilding our society, let us build a community of justice and compassion. A society where valleys are raised, mountains brought low and then:

Then the glory of the Lord shall  
be revealed, and all people shall see it together, *(Isaiah 40 .5)*

### **Closing Prayer: Advent Adventure**

Advent is scary and exciting,  
a journey into the unknown.  
What dangers, what discoveries await us,  
wrapped in the folds of the future,  
we do not know.  
This Advent adventure is different.  
Something comes towards us  
through the darkness;  
our candles are tokens  
of unimaginable light.

*Frances Copsey  
(from 'Candles and Conifers', Wild Goose Publications)*

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site, and also the Advent material for you to enjoy.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

*Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.*

### **Call to Worship:**

Rejoice in the Lord always,  
again I will say, Rejoice.  
Let your gentleness be known to everyone.  
The Lord is near.

*Philippians 4 .4,5*

Welcome to my reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent (13th December 2020). The Third Sunday of Advent is sometimes called Gaudete Sunday. If you are lighting Advent Candles, and you have three purple ones and a rose coloured one. Today is the day that the rose coloured one is lit. Gaudete means 'Rejoice!' - and our opening prayer reflects that theme. Let us pray:

### **Opening Prayer**

At the rising of the dawn  
and the setting of the sun  
we will rejoice in the Lord.

In the busyness of the day  
and the quieter times within,  
we will rejoice in the Lord.

In the joining of our lives  
and the fellowship we enjoy,  
we will rejoice in the Lord.

Gaudete Sunday is near the middle of Advent - and the realisation that the coming of Christ is near. The traditional Introit to the Latin Mass on this day began with the words 'Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete' (Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice).

The focus of the Gospel reading today is on the ministry of John the Baptist. He's mentioned in all four Gospels, and today's reading is from John's Gospel - written by a different John of course. The theme is the arrival of Christ.

### **John 1 .6 - 8, 19 - 28 (NRSV)**

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' 21 And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' 22 Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' 23 He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord" ', as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, 'Why then are you baptising if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' 26 John answered them, 'I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.'

28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptising.

The Birmingham comedian, Jasper Carrot, has a routine that he calls 'The Nutter on the bus'. As with much of his humour its observation from daily life and experience. In this case, we've all been there. If you're on the bus, and you come to a bus stop, sometimes there will be someone getting on who is, to put it sensitively, eccentric. They might seem different in behaviour, clothing, what they say and how they say it or, maybe hygiene! In Jasper's routine he says "You always know that person is going to sit by you!". No matter how much you try and take up both seats, 'forget' to offer to move your bags or just ignore the approaching eccentric - you know they'll perch on the seat by you. To be fair us clergy sometimes see others react that way if we get on a bus wearing dog collar.

John the Baptist would no doubt have received that reaction of he boarded a bus. Can you see him getting onto the Number 11 in a coat stinking of camels and crunching a bag of locusts after dipping them into a tub of honey? That's how Matthew and Mark (Matthew 3 .1-12 and Mark 1 .4-8) describe him. You wouldn't want him sitting by you! And if he opened his mouth .....

Luke (Luke 3 .1-20) tells us that John the Baptist addressed people as 'a brood of vipers' and spoke about burning those who were 'like chaff, or 'branches that failed that bear fruit'. But despite this he drew the crowds and there's a clue in Luke and John as to why? They thought he was the Messiah, the Christ.

### **A hymn by Andrew Pratt:**

Pharisees had come to question,  
heard a rumour in the town:  
in the wilderness a stranger.  
Was Messiah coming down?

They heard thunder in the desert,  
thunderer by name of John;  
not Elijah, not the prophet,  
so the story led them on.

John did nothing to evade them,  
answered all they sought to ask,  
brought the people to repentance,  
faithful to his call and task.

'I baptize my friends with water,  
someone who you will not know,  
stands among you and will shock you:  
fire will kindle, then will grow'.

Still that spirit fire is burning  
in the hearts of those who live,  
one with Christ, self sacrificing,  
giving all they have to give.

*Andrew Pratt (Tune: St Oswald)*

The fact that John had to rigorously deny that he was the Messiah clearly indicates that some people thought that he was. Indeed even the religious leaders thought he might be - as we heard in today's Gospel reading.

John the Baptist wasn't the Messiah. Instead his preaching urged people to be ready for when the Messiah by repenting, turning their lives around. Among them, he said, was one that they do not yet know but who was God's anointed; Christ, Messiah.

I'm sure the crowds expected the Messiah's teaching and probably appearance and behaviour to be a bit like John the Baptist's. But when Jesus arrived ....

### **Just when**

Just when  
we expect you to  
arrive  
with anger steaming out of your ears,  
you come  
to sit next to us, listening to our deepest brokenness;

just when  
we figure you will show up to toss us in  
the nearest  
fire,  
you come  
to sweep up  
the ashes  
of every broken  
hope,  
refining them  
into the chalice  
of wonder;

just when  
we are certain you are hiding there  
in the shadows,  
ready to leap out  
and scare us into repentance,  
you come  
to swaddle us  
in garlands of grace, twinkling off and on  
in pure joy.

*Thom M Shuman*

That poem emphasises the immensity of the love that Jesus showed in his life, death and resurrection. But like John the Baptist, Jesus also spoke hard words about judgement and the need for repentance - turning our lives around. Advent, the very name of which reminds us of Christ's coming - not just at Bethlehem - but of encountering him at the end of time, is full of themes of hope and expectancy but also of judgement. Advent is also a season of darkness and, for many, this year in particular is one where happiness is far removed from many people's daily lives. In Gaudate Sunday how can we proclaim "*Rejoice in the Lord always*"?

The theologian Henri Nouwen described the difference between joy and happiness.

"Joy is not the same as happiness. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God's love for us. We are inclined to think that when we are sad we cannot be glad, but in the life of a God-centred person, sorrow and joy can exist together. (Joy is) the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us."

Let us pray:

### **Closing Prayer**

Let us end this reflection  
with a song in our hearts,  
God's name on our lips,  
God's purpose in our minds  
and Advent love, hope and comfort to offer to others.  
Amen

*Frances Copsey  
(from 'Candles and Conifers', Wild Goose Publications)*

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site, and also the Advent material for you to enjoy.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

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### **Call to Worship:**

God of truth  
For you we wait  
God of justice  
For you we wait  
God of loving kindness  
For you we wait  
We know that you are always near.

Ruth Burgess  
(in 'Winter' , Wild Goose Publications)

Welcome to this reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (20th December 2020). This is the 40th in this series of weekly reflections. Today, as Christmas is almost upon us, we focus on the radical message of how God chose to enter our world as Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

### **Choosing God**

Choosing God.  
Choosing to let your child be born in poverty  
and of doubtful parentage.  
Choosing an occupied country with unstable rulers.  
Choosing the risk of him dying in a dirty stable  
after a long journey by a pregnant teenager.  
Choosing to let him grow up poor, and in danger,  
and misunderstood by those who loved him.

Choosing God,  
we doubt the wisdom of your choices then,  
and we doubt them now,  
while the rich are still full  
and it is the poor who get sent empty away.

Help us, lest we, in our anger or ignorance,  
choose to walk another way.

Ruth Burgess  
(in 'Candles and Conifers', Wild Goose Publications)

The nativity accounts in Luke's Gospel take up the best part of two long chapters. Not only that but they cover a period of time of well over a year. That's because we are looking at the birth of two babies not one. Nearly as many words are written about the conception and birth of John the Baptist as are written about Jesus'. Luke places all this very carefully within a timescale. What we don't know are dates! There is no evidence at all that Jesus was born at this time of year. But what is important is the framework. Two couples; Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, and the birth of John and Jesus. We'll use 25th December as a reference point for the birth of Jesus. Events then happen like this:

We can place the conception of John the Baptist at around 23rd September (Luke 1 .5-25). The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will conceive, even though they are advanced in age. That happens and then, “in the sixth month”, in other words the sixth month of Elizabeth pregnancy, the angel Gabriel has a message for Elizabeth’s cousin Mary. The church traditional observes this event, as The Feast of the Annunciation, on 25th March.

### **Gospel: Luke 1 .26-38**

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’ 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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.

33 He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ 34 Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.’ 38 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.

Mary is betrothed, but not yet married, to Joseph. This means that, in contrast to Elizabeth she is young. Indeed the age of betrothal in that society was probably around 14. We can understand Mary’s astonishment. Doubtless with many questions she heads off to see her older, and maybe wiser cousin Elizabeth, whose been in seclusion for the first five months of pregnancy (Luke 1 .24). When Mary greets her we are told that “the child leapt in (Elizabeth’s) womb” and somehow Elizabeth knows that this is a signal that Mary is bearing a very special child. (Luke 1 .39-45).

Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s reaction is to praise God in the words that we know as The Magnificat.

### **Gospel: Luke 1 .46-55**

46 Mary said,  
 ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,  
 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
 48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.  
 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
 51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Mary then stays with Elizabeth for "about three months" (Luke 1 .56) which means that she would have been there to support Elizabeth through the birth of John - which on the churches calendar is observed on 24th June (Luke 1 .57-66).

John's birth is also celebrated with a song of praise - this time on the lips of Zechariah - which we know as the Benedictus (Luke 1 .67-79).

Mary meanwhile has returned home to Nazareth and, six months later, after journeying to Bethlehem Jesus birth takes place - which we celebrate on 25th December. The entire of Chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel focusses on birth, the traditional Jewish rite of Circumcision, and an account of Jesus being presented in the temple about five weeks later. Luke also adds at that point an intriguing mention of Jesus at the age of twelve, the only reference anywhere to him between birth and the start of his ministry 30 years later.

The details around John's birth, and the way events are interwoven with Mary's pregnancy, sometimes go unnoticed. But I think that the support of Mary and Elizabeth for each other during their pregnancies, and the clear timescale that Luke sets out, grounds these events in the realities of life. It is into the realities of ordinary life that God makes his way into the world in human flesh - more about that next week - but its implications are clearly stated in Mary's Song, The Magnificat. In being born as Jesus Christ at Bethlehem, God has sanctified each and every one of us, and that has profound consequences for how we should relate to each other and how community and society are structured.

### **That we may sing Magnificat**

Glory to you, O God,  
you have kept us in mind,  
lifted us up and set us free!

Glory to you, O God,  
your mercy extends to the downtrodden and oppressed,  
raising and liberating all who trust in you!

Glory to you, O God,  
your coming judgement on the full and the rich,  
will scatter the proud and break empires!

Glory to you, O God,  
for the promise of your mercy.  
Strengthen us as we:  
lift the downtrodden,

free the oppressed,  
frustrate tyrannical plans,  
and banish pride from our hearts and minds  
that, with Mary, we may sing Magnificat.  
Amen.

*Andy Braunston*  
*(in 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)*

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. What's happening next? There will be a short reflection for Christmas Day, it's a bit of fun for all the family to enjoy, and that will be available from 4pm on Christmas Eve. Then next Sunday (27th December) there'll be a reflection in which we look a bit deeper into the Christmas message. That will be available from 10am as normal. Printed versions of all will be available on the resource site and there'll be some other fun links there too.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

*Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.*

## **Call to Worship:**

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given:  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder:  
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor,  
The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace

*Isaiah 9 .6 (King James Version)*

Merry Christmas! Welcome to this short message on behalf of The Cotteridge Church. This is a short video in which I'm going to tell again the account of the birth of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem - but tell it in a way I hope you'll find fun and amusing. Let us pray:

## **Opening Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
your birth at Bethlehem  
draws us to kneel in wonder  
at heaven touching earth:  
accept our heartfelt praise  
as we worship you,  
our Saviour and eternal God. Amen.

Maybe you've a tub of chocolates around like the one. If you want to be absolved of the guilt of eating them why not use the unwrapping of each chocolate as a way of reminding yourself about the Christmas story. I present:

## **Chocolate Nativity**

It was the first Christmas Day and, in Bethlehem, Jesus had just been born.

In the fields nearby were shepherds. It was a cold, cloudless night just AFTER EIGHT when, as they gazed up at the MILKY WAY they saw a strange sight. There were angels in the sky, hovering TWIX heaven and earth. The angels sang like MINSTRELS and told the shepherds about a very special birth in Bethlehem. The shepherds didn't know whether to take the angels seriously and regarded them AL TEASERS. But, on what had been so far a very boring night, it was a good TOPIC of conversation so they decided to go the Bethlehem without delay. They went the quickest route, as straight as an AERO

The shepherds found the stable and went in. There were animals; cows, donkeys and even a KIT-KAT chasing a mouse. It was a very smelly stable. It certainly didn't smell of ROSES. But there in the centre were Mary, Joseph and, in the manger, baby Jesus fast asleep. The shepherds were very quiet and had to WISPA so as not to wake him. They REVELLED in the sight of the new born child.

Far, far away in the east there were Wise Men, proper SMARTIES you could say. They had been studying the GALAXY and had seen a special star. It was the brightest STAR, BAR none. Was it MARS? No, it was a very special star, the sign of a new king being born and they decided to go and see. So they packed a PICNIC, put their coats on, did up their BUTTONS, mounted their CAMELS and

set off. It was a very long way, a MARATHON of a journey or to put it another way these days they had to pack plenty of spare SNICKERS.

It was a long, long journey, there were even a FLAKE or two snow falling to make the ground CRUNCHIE. Eventually the Wise Men, yes a right bunch of SMARTIES, arrived at Bethlehem and, after parking their CAMELS they went to see the baby Jesus. There they presented him with a rich BOUNTY of gifts; Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh and worshipped Jesus.

Every year we continue the CELEBRATIONS of that birth of a very special baby. A baby who grew to be a man followed by millions, the Son of God, King of Kings, Saviour of the World. Jesus Christ, the greatest of all HEROES.

Let us pray:

## **God in a manger**

God in a manger,  
God of surprises,  
help us to unwrap  
your present to us  
this Christmas:  
show us how to celebrate your birth simply,  
with justice  
and with holy joy. Amen

*Ruth Burgess  
(from 'Winter', Wild Goose Publications)*

Thank you for joining me for this Christmas message. I hope that you enjoyed Chocolate Nativity. It's the product of more than one author and has been added too over the years, I added a couple of chocolates too. There a written version of this on the resource site and I've also added some links to other fun presentations of the Nativity accounts. Enjoy those and enjoy your Christmas!

There'll be a Sunday reflection as always this Sunday, available from 10am that morning. In that we'll be thinking a little deeper into the message of Christmas. Let us pray:

## **Blessing**

May the joy of the angels,  
the eagerness of the shepherds,  
the perseverance of the Magi,  
the obedience of Mary and Joseph,  
and the peace of the Christ Child,  
be yours this Christmas.  
And may the blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit  
be with you today and always. Amen.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

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### **Call to Worship:**

Let earth and heaven combine,  
angels and all agree,  
to praise in songs divine  
the incarnate Deity,  
our God contracted to a span,  
incomprehensibly made man.

*Charles Wesley*

Welcome to this reflection for the First Sunday of the Christmas season. Sunday 27th December 2020. The Christmas season has only just started, and I always find it sad when I hear of people taking decorations down as soon as Christmas Day has passed. This is Christmas, stretching from Christmas Eve until 6th January. Time to praise God's gift of the Divine becoming human - the immensity of the Word, the energy behind the universe, contracted to the span of a human life.

Let us pray

### **Father of mercy**

Father of mercy,  
through your loving kindness,  
Jesus, your Son, was born for our salvation.  
Renew us through the power of the Holy Spirit,  
that we may not seek to earn your grace,  
but trust in your promises  
and hope for eternal life. Amen

*Andy Braunston*

*(in 'Prayers from the Hearts', URC Prayer Handbook 2020)*

We started today's reflection with a verse from a Charles Wesley hymn. A hymn that many say embodies the theology of Jesus' birth finer than any other. It contains the words "Incarnate Deity, our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man". The word 'incarnate' means, in a literal sense, "being made flesh". It's a theme of the Prologue to John's Gospel which is our reading today:

### **Gospel: John 1 .1-14**

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

A Victorian slum priest, campaigning for better sanitation in disease ridden cities, was told to stop interfering in secular matters and concentrate on prayer and sacraments. He replied, 'I speak out and fight about the drains because I believe in the Incarnation'. He wasn't alone. Henry Scott Holland, Canon at St Paul's Cathedral said: 'the more you believe in the Incarnation, the more you care about drains'.

Incarnation means, in a literal sense, 'becoming flesh'. The word for flesh used in the passage from John's Gospel that we just heard was, in Greek, 'sarx' or in Latin 'carne' from which we get the word 'carnal'. God has taken on the basic nature and existence of human beings. The immensity of this statement is reinforced when we realise that the phrase The Word, or Logos in Greek, was regarded by philosophers at the time as expressing the energy and very being of the Universe. If that wasn't enough, that God had taken on the nature of our very own flesh and blood, the phrase "and lived among us" can be translated as "pitched his tent among us". It expresses the fragility and risk, the Divine embodies in sharing human life.

In other words God has made human beings holy - all human beings, those valued and those not so valued by the standards of world. All are holy and that is why many Christians are involved in social justice issues - from fighting racism and homophobia to campaigning for better drains!

Julia Esquivel, who died just over a year ago, was a poet, theologian and human rights activist in Guatemala. She wrote the following reflection based on the passage from John's Gospel and Luke's nativity account.

### **The Word, for our sake ...**

The Word, for our sake, became poverty clothed as the poor  
who live off the refuse heap.

The Word, for our sake, became a sob a thousand times stifled  
in the immovable mouth of the child who died from hunger.

The Word, for our sake, became danger in the anguish of the mother  
who worries about her son growing into manhood.

The Word cut us deeply in that place of shame:  
the painful reality of the poor.

The Word blew its spirit over of the dried bones of the churches,  
guardians of silence.

The Word awoke us from the lethargy  
which had robbed us of our hope.

The Word became a path in the jungle, a decision on the farm,  
love in women, unity among workers,  
and a Star for those few who can inspire dreams.

The Word became Light,  
The Word became History,  
The Word became Conflict.

The Word became indomitable Spirit,  
and sowed seeds,  
upon the mountain,  
near the river  
and in the valley,

and those of good will heard the angels sing.

Tired knees were strengthened,  
trembling hands were stilled,  
and the people who walked in darkness  
saw the light ....

The Word became the seed of justice  
and we conceived peace ....  
The Word made justice to rain  
and peace come forth from the furrows in the land.  
And we saw it's glory in the eyes of the poor  
transformed into real men and women.

And those who saw the Star  
opened up for us  
the path we now follow.

*Julia Esquivel, Guatemala (poet, theologian and human rights activist).  
from 'Threatened with Resurrection', The Brethren Press, Elgin, Illinois. 1982*

In the incarnation, the baby of Bethlehem, God didn't just take on human nature. The birth of God as Jesus Christ meant that humanity had also taken on divine nature too. There is something of Jesus Christ in every one of us. That's why Henry Scott Holland and others were so concerned about those inadequate drains.

### **The Blessing**

May God who by his incarnation gathered into one things earthly and heavenly,  
bestow upon us the fullness of inward peace and goodwill;  
and the blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be upon us and remain with us always. Amen.

Thank you for being part of this reflection today. There's a written version on the resource site. Next Sunday is The Feast of the Epiphany as we focus on the Magi, or Wise Men, bearing gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh when they arrive to greet the infant Jesus.

Leave those decorations up! Christmas has a long way to go yet!

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!