

Christ Church Lewes

United Reformed and Methodist

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

Advent and Christmas

3 December 2017 to 7 January 2018

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Mission Committee

Christmas as a religious festival

In a secular world Christmas has become a winter festival and promotional opportunity. But the English word itself suggests that it is a *religious* festival; the *mas(s)* indicates that at the heart there is the notion of *worship*.

Worship is understood as an activity, usually with others, that brings together the world that we live in and the separate unchanging world that we call *holy* or *sacred*. The sacred cannot be defined, measured or studied by science, but that does not indicate that it is meaningless. Humans are capable of discussing it rationally and taking it into account in making decisions.

This booklet is written with two groups of people in mind.

- Those who over many years have made regular worship a key part of their life.
- Those who are interested in religious belief and attracted towards it but have difficulty in understanding what they perceive as arbitrary assumptions associated with religion, when there is no verifiable, universally accepted, evidence that these assumptions have any direct influence on events in our world.

A recent opinion poll indicated that a majority in the UK consider themselves to be non-believers. However the same poll showed that whereas most (70% of) non-believers think that Christians routinely take the Bible literally and accept its pre-scientific world-view, only a minority (20% of) believers do so. As there is considerable misunderstanding about, and ignorance of, what Christmas means, this booklet provides background information about the passages read aloud in Church. It explains some of the technical terms used in worship (many of them designated by italics) where the meanings are different from those in common use. It argues that modern biblical scholarship makes it possible to understand the readings in a way that is consistent with 21st century thought, and that the message proclaimed in them is as fresh and relevant as ever.

Christian belief

Christians believe in one holy, sovereign, changeless God, whose tender and generous nature is shown in people, and especially in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish itinerant teacher who lived about 2000 years ago. Jesus' teaching and ministry, the manner in which he submitted to his execution, and the sense that his followers had that he was still with them after his death, led them to elevate him above all others and to seek to represent him in their own lives. Through them, the Church, he lives for ever from generation to generation.

Easter, the preeminent festival of the Church, marks this new life or *Resurrection* that sprang from the death of Jesus. In contrast, the *birth* of Jesus was unnoticed and unrecorded. It was an obscure incident in an obscure province of the Roman Empire.

Celebration of the birth of Jesus became widespread much later than celebration of the Resurrection. By the fourth century AD the Church was freed from imperial persecution. The church in Rome shrewdly rebranded the pagan feast of the Unconquered Sun, celebrated at the winter solstice, as a celebration of the birth of Jesus. [In some ways the modern secular festival is reverting to what it was at first.] Christians saw Jesus as light in darkness, turning the cold of winter into the warmth, hope and new life of spring.

The Church's increased freedom led to an increase in numbers so that formal statements of *doctrine* became important to maintain unity in belief. These statements or *creeds* have been passed on over the centuries. They are not intended to encompass all Christian thought but only those aspects that are essential to provide an enduring foundation.

Scripture

After much discussion and consultation the Church was able to agree a list of documents that became what we call the *canon* of the *New Testament*. These included letters (*epistles*) and general teaching and a remarkable new literary genre, comprising extended narratives known as *gospels* or 'good news'. Of the four that were included in the canon, Mark was written about 30 years after the events that are described, Matthew and Luke about 50 years afterwards, and John about 70 years afterwards. Inevitably the gospels are coloured by the experience of the writers in the early Church as it expanded beyond the confines of Jerusalem and embraced the culture of the Eastern Mediterranean. The principal Jewish writings – the Law, Psalms and Prophets – and the New Testament are together known as *scripture*.

The Church took over the Jewish tradition of reading aloud passages from scripture during formal common worship. Those during the season celebrating the birth of Jesus emphasise its significance, rather than the circumstances of the birth itself. No written account is known to have been made of events as they happened. The Jewish prophets or psalmists looked forward to a promised new world that would supersede the world they knew, in justice, nobility and equity. The Church sees this promise fulfilled in Jesus. The epistles and gospels view the birth of Jesus from decades later as further aspects of his significance came to be understood among his followers.

The orders of service used in worship are called *liturgy*; the word means 'public work' so the emphasis is on what is done. The readings are usually determined by schedules known as *lectionaries* which have been used from at least the fourth century. They have been modified over the years but the general pattern has been maintained. The version we use is published in the *Methodist Worship Book*. It uses a three-year cycle similar to the one used by Catholics, Anglicans and members of the other main denominations. The lectionary ensures (i) that all the important passages of scripture are heard at least once every three years, and (ii) that worshippers throughout the world share the same thoughts and talk about the same topics on the same Sundays in a living expression of unity.

The readings this year are from Year 2, when most of the gospel readings are from Mark. Even if they are familiar, we hope you will read them again; scripture can always be explored but its meaning is never fully

grasped. Narrative passages that appear to be historical accounts are found to have multiple layers of meaning. Words that appear to be factual are found on rereading to be metaphorical. In any case, no one is quite the same person as they were three years ago, when the readings were last read in church and when our last booklet on them was written

Advent

From a liturgical perspective the period covered by this commentary is divided into three parts:

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|-----------|----------------------------------|
| Advent | 3-24 December 2017 |
| Christmas | 25 December 2017– 6 January 2018 |
| Epiphany | 7 January 2018 |

A similar pattern is evident in the Easter liturgy:

Lent - Easter - Pentecost

The word *Advent*, covering the first four Sundays, simply means 'Coming', but several distinct themes are displayed in the lectionary readings.

First, the Church celebrates the coming of Jesus, born in obscurity but acknowledged as revealing the *glory*, i.e. the true nature, of God whom he called Father. The opening chorale of Bach's Christmas Oratorio asks 'How shall I fitly meet thee?' The answer must be, with some circumspection, self-examination and *repentance*. Repentance means making a new start, a sort of winter-cleaning. It means setting aside the features of our lives that distract us from noticing and responding to others, in whom the image of Jesus may be perceived. It means stretching our potential as human beings beyond human limits. In congregations (including occasionally at Christ Church) where those leading the worship indicate the season by the colours of their clothing, the green of the previous Sundays is changed to purple during Advent and Lent, to indicate a period of penitence.

Secondly, the readings from the Jewish prophets speak of a light that shines in the darkness and of an anointed leader or *Messiah* who will shepherd them in the true way of peace. John the Baptist proclaims that the Messiah is at hand and urges repentance, in order to be properly prepared.

Thirdly, Luke's narratives present Mary as an image and prototype of the Church as she offers herself as the means by which Jesus can be born, nurtured and his presence made known.

Fourthly, some of the New Testament writers considered that after the Crucifixion the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah meant that he would soon return to judge the human race and to rule in majesty. This *Second Coming* was thought to be *imminent*. The word means 'overhanging' and suggests something that could happen without warning, at any time. Two thousand years later only a minority of Christians expect an imminent physical Second Coming.

The idea remains, however, as an important metaphor in the Advent readings. It can be taken as describing a time when the whole human race recognises the sovereignty of Jesus and his will, the same as the will of his Father, is done on the whole earth. It can also be taken to refer to the lives of individuals. All are of course tarnished by self-serving but all have the potential, as the New Testament puts it, to *grow in grace*. This means to become kind, truthful and forgiving like God himself. So God's presence is shown, or 'he comes', in people.

These four points are highlighted in the *Collects* (prayers that draw together the main themes of the readings) and in the verses of the Advent carol with which we begin our services in December.

The Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness
and put on the armour of light,
now in the time of this mortal life,
in which your Son Jesus Christ
came to us in great humility:
that, on the last day
when he shall come again in glorious majesty
to judge the living and the dead,
we may rise to the life immortal;
through him who is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 64:1-9

Most biblical scholars agree that the book of Isaiah is not the work of a single author. The first part (chapters 1-39 or so) is associated with an 8th century BC prophet, who warned the Jewish king and his people of coming disaster. The rest of the book appears, from its style, vocabulary, outlook and references to contemporary events, to be the work of more than one author. It was written while the people were captive in Babylon or just after they returned to Judaea in BC 596, but its magnificent poetry and vivid language are for all time.

Today's reading comes from this second section. The writer looks on the world around him with dismay. He sees the destruction wrought by earthquakes and the fire from volcanoes (vv 1-2) as evidence of the wrath of God (v 3) because his people have *sinned* (v 5). In Jewish thought 'sinned' meant 'turned away from the Law and writings of the Prophets.' But he believes that God is merciful and supports those who try to be true to him (v 5). He refers to God as Father (v 8). He depicts him as a potter with the skill to mould the clay of humanity into a people that is fit to be called his own (v 9).

The gospel writers perceived Jesus as making *incarnate* (literally 'becoming flesh' or 'embodying') the kindness and mercy of God and making possible a new start for the human race. In proclaiming this good news they drew heavily on the language of Isaiah and other prophets writing centuries earlier.

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

The psalmist is reproachful. 'Come and save us' (v 2), he says. 'How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?' (v 5). Yet underneath his self-pity his faith is shown by the metaphors he uses. He speaks of 'the Shepherd of Israel' (v 1); the 'face' of God and his power to restore his people (vv 3,7,19). The God who is enthroned above all (v 1) cares for all his people.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

The letters of Paul, who died about AD 64, predated the gospels so they give us some of the earliest understanding of the impact of the coming of Jesus.

The opening salutation (v 3), is used daily within the Church as a greeting or farewell. Each word is important. Paul sees the coming of Jesus as a gift of *grace* and peace (v 4). In Christian thinking, grace within people describes the characteristics that lead others to discern the power and presence of God in them. Jesus is recognised and proclaimed as *Christ*, the Greek word for the Messiah, an anointed leader or king who would bring peace, justice and purpose. Jesus is *Lord*, sovereign like God himself. Jesus shows the nature of the Father in his own life so that he could be called a *Son* (v 9). Paul had also seen the nature of the Father in the people to whom the letter was written (vv 6,7) and this was the basis of their *fellowship* (v 9). The phrase 'Day of the Lord' (v 8) was commonly used in Jewish literature to refer to the time when God would judge his people and punish those who had been unfaithful and reward the loyal. It was thought that judgment would be initiated by the coming of the Messiah and this idea was reinforced by the attribution of divine status to Jesus.

Mark 13:24-37

The 13th chapter of Mark's gospel is a collection of teaching about the 'last things.' [There are similar passages in both Matthew and Luke; the technical term for them is *eschatology*.]

Mark's chapter is part of his Passion narrative, recording the final days of Jesus' life. The disciples are filled with foreboding as the world that they have built around him seemed to be collapsing (v 24-25). But Mark is writing from the perspective of 30 years later. He knew that as the old world passed away a new one appeared. Jesus died but lived on in the lives of his followers 'from the ends of earth to the ends of heaven' (v 27). The Crucifixion was not the end of Jesus's story. Mark seemed to expect

an imminent return of Jesus (v 30) and so issues a stern warning: 'Take heed and watch!' enshrined in two parables.

- In vv 28-31, he says: 'Notice what is happening'. When trees begin to fruit, summer is here. Remember your commitments as disciples.
- In vv 32-37 he points out that no one can predict when those who make commitments will be called to account. A watchman's job is to watch, not to sleep.

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The message is repeated as we pass through the Advent Season to Christmas.

The Collect comes from the Book of Common Prayer (1662) but it is based on a shorter 8th century text. We pray that we may turn from darkness to light now, in our present transient life. As we identify with Jesus Christ, we wonder at the contrast between his 'great humility' and his 'glorious majesty' they are found united in him. We pray that when our own lives are judged we may be considered fit to remain with Him always.

10 December 2017 The Second Sunday of Advent

The Collect

God of all Holiness,
your promises stand unshaken through all generations
and you lift up all who are burdened and brought low:
renew our hope in you,
as we wait for the coming in glory of Jesus Christ,
our Judge and our Saviour,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, world without end. Amen.

Isaiah 40:1-11

The Jewish people have been taken captive in Babylon, but a voice in the wilderness gives hope (v 1). The mercy of God is beyond measure, more than enough to forgive the failure of his chosen people to keep their part of the Covenant they have made (v 2). For rulers who conquered desert areas it was important to have well-built roads as links between cities. The extended metaphor of vv 3-4 suggests that the exiles will find a secure way back to their own cities and their broken relationship would be restored. All nations shall see the glory of God (v 5) i.e. his power to heal and make new. In vv 6-8 the frailty of humanity is contrasted with God's changeless strength. But for all his awesome power (vv 9-10) God is tender as a shepherd, caring for each individual (v 11). The New Testament writers were convinced that, in a way that they could not fully articulate, God had shown Himself to them in Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Christ (See last week's commentary) and they turned to this poetry of 600 years earlier to underpin their case. The voice in the wilderness (v 3) is identified with that of John the Baptist in today's gospel.

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

God forgives and restores his people (vv 1-2). He brings peace (v 8) to those who turn to him, i.e. seek to keep his Law. The message is similar to that in the previous reading from Isaiah.

God brings *salvation* 'to those who *fear* him' (v 9). 'Salvation' means healing wounds, reviving what is good, and opening up new possibilities. In Jewish worship the phrase 'fear of the Lord' came to mean 'taking note of God' or 'responding to the Law'. Scripture was put together over 1000 years during which the Jewish understanding of God matured. The tribal god evident in the earliest passages became a universal God who

governed and upheld all peoples. It was no longer necessary to think of him as vengeful by nature. His attributes here are listed as steadfast love, faithfulness (v 10), righteousness ('rightness') (vv 10, 12), peace (v 8), and generosity (v 12). These characteristics involve relationships between people so that the terms have to be considered together (v 10-13). The psalmist suggests that the commitment between God and his people, described (v 9) as his *glory*, determines the commitment between individuals. The final verse is sometimes translated 'He shall direct his going in the way' or 'He shall set us in the way of his steps' i.e. the psalmist is shown God's way by the Law.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

The second epistle of Peter is called 'general' because it was written for wide circulation, not for any particular church. The text suggests that it was almost certainly not written by the Apostle Peter: e.g. it refers to the Church as it was after his death in AD 65.

The writer, like Mark (See last Sunday's commentary), says that the day of the Lord will 'come like a thief,' without warning, and that the world will soon come to a melodramatic end (v 10). The previous verses offer an explanation for literal minded readers of why the end has not come already. A transcendent God is not limited by time as measured by human experience (vv 8-9). 'One day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day'. Rather than worrying about the end of the world they should wait in patience, concentrating on living without spot or blemish (v 14), at peace with one another, and trusting in God's generosity, mercy and kindness to cleanse and renew.

Mark 1:1-8

The gospel according to Mark has nothing to say about the birth of Jesus.

The reference in the dramatic first line to 'the gospel of Jesus Christ' makes it clear that *Jesus Christ* is the *euangelion* (literally 'good news') that is translated into English as 'gospel'. There is only one gospel: the life and work of Jesus, so it is more accurate to use the formulation 'The gospel according to Mark ...' rather than 'Mark's gospel.' Good news is by definition always fresh; we can come back to it year after year. Scholars have explored the meaning of *euangelion* in other contexts, e.g. the Messianic message of hope (See Isaiah 40:9 above), imperial proclamations, or messages brought home by runners about victories on the battlefield.

The word *Christ* has been discussed above. There is some speculation about whether the words 'Son of God' were included in the original text. They may have been added later, perhaps to mirror the conclusion: 'Truly this man was a son of God,' attributed to the centurion (Mark 15:39).

Mark passes breathlessly from this opening headline to the message of hope proclaimed by Isaiah. Like the other gospel writers (Matthew 3:3; Luke 3:3; John 1:23) he immediately identifies the voice in the wilderness as that of John the Baptist, who claims to be merely the forerunner of one who is greater. Compared to Jesus he is like the slave who undoes the sandal of his rich master (v 7). By the time Mark wrote his gospel *baptism* had become the defining initiation rite of the Church but the meaning of the word had been greatly expanded. Whereas John saw baptism as cleansing by the waters of the Jordan (looking backward) the emphasis in the Church is on looking forward. The flicker of God's light in the baptised gives a flame that can grow through life and worship within the Church (v 8).

In the (modern) **Collect** we remember the holiness and steadfastness of God. We pray that our hope in him may be renewed as we wait until his justice and kindness are acknowledged throughout the world, and his kingdom is fully come. We recognise our personal responsibility: Jesus is our *Judge* (by his life our own is measured) and our *Saviour* (we need his support and mercy to enable us to set aside what holds us back from being worthy citizens of his kingdom).

17 December 2017 The Third Sunday in Advent

The Collect

God for whom we wait and watch,
you sent your servant John the Baptist
to prepare your people for the coming of the Messiah.
Inspire the ministers and stewards of your truth
to turn our disobedient hearts to you;
that, when Christ shall come again in glory to be our judge,
we may stand with confidence before him,
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, world without end , Amen.

In some parts of the church, the third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* (Rejoice!) Sunday, when the sombre Advent vestments are replaced by richly ornate ones. The word 'Rejoice!' rings out in the first word of the *Preface* (introductory text of the service), in the words of the prophet and the epistle here, and in the epistle designated for *Gaudete* in Year 3 (Philippians 4:4).

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Both Matthew (11:5) and Luke (4:18-19) quote this passage to support their claim that Jesus is Messiah. He is presented as expressing 'the Spirit of the Lord God' (v 1) and his coming marks the Year of the Lord (v 2) that brings justice and renewal. The poetry is carried along by vivid metaphors. The pain of the poor and broken-hearted will be relieved; captives and prisoners will be freed from their chains. The oppressed will have a place in the new society. Those who mourn in Zion (i.e. those who are saddened by the state of their nation) will be strengthened and become like oaks (v 3). The sacked city will be rebuilt (v 4), justice (fairness) will be restored (v 8), the Covenant between God and his people will be restored through the new ruler (v 8), and their descendants will flourish (v 9). All this is cause for exuberant rejoicing (v 10) as shown in festive wedding garments, or in the new vegetation and colour of spring (v 11).

It is interesting that vv 5-7, which are not quoted by the New Testament writers, represent a less generous world view. This illustrates how the thinking of the early church and the lectionary is both embedded in the Jewish scriptures and also moves on from them.

Psalm 126

In 539 BC Cyrus, King of Persia, decided to allow captives of all nations (not just Jews) to return to their own lands. Their Babylonian rulers had now been conquered by Cyrus. The first verse of the psalm suggests that it was a song of rejoicing for this liberation. *Zion* in Jewish and Christian literature means 'Jerusalem' or (as here) 'the Jewish people.' Their relief is shown in laughter and shouts of joy (v 2) that are mingled with a prayer that God's goodness will continue (v 4).

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

These words conclude what may be the earliest of the Pauline letters. The recipients were presumably mainly Greeks or Gentiles, who may not have had the Jewish background of the psalms or of prophets like Isaiah. Paul, brought up as a Jew, captures the excitement of the early church as he describes the new life of his converts. He exhorts them to rejoice at the new direction of their lives and the mutual support that helps them to turn aside from thoughts and actions that separate them from God (vv 16-22). The letter ends with a blessing (v 23). Paul prays that his readers may find peace (v 23), that they may *grow in holiness* (i.e. become more like God himself), and that they be made fit to be one with Jesus Christ.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The prologue of the gospel according to John is interrupted by vv 6-8, which are here linked with a longer passage about John the Baptist. The Gospel points to John as the forerunner of Jesus (v 6) but the underlying metaphor is different from that in the other gospels. John the Baptist is described as 'a witness to the light, that all might believe through him', pointing to 'the light (that) shines in the darkness' (v 5). John, like Mark, refers to John the Baptist as 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness' (v 23), but places this assertion in the course of an interrogation, first by the *priests and Levites* (religious authorities, v 19), and then by the *Pharisees* (a sect particularly dedicated to keeping the Law in every detail v 24). They supposed that he must be the Messiah or his predecessor Elijah who has come to announce him. But John the Baptist says he has no formal standing. He is just a voice in the wilderness. His significance is in pointing to the one who is coming (v 27) and who is far more important.

The **Collect**, like that for the previous Sunday, is modern. The themes are similar: repentance (turning away from past errors), being prepared (so that our lives are fit to be judged in the light of Christ), and confidence that if we turn to him he will gladly receive us. We also pray for ministers and

stewards who have the responsibility of pointing us to the new possibilities that the coming of Christ brings.

24 December 2017 The Fourth Sunday of Advent

The Collect

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 our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. Amen.

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

The passage is an example of a narrative that has several layers.

Meaning that is difficult to capture is often expressed in this way and hearers or readers are expected to explore the significance (consistent with the rest of the Bible) for themselves.

This narrative gives us insight into David's character and into the Messiahship of his descendant Jesus.

David, the Jewish King of Israel when it was at the height of its power and influence about BC 1000, reflects that he lives in a better house than the tent that contains the sacred scrolls setting out the *Law and Covenant* that symbolise the presence of God with his people. He considers building a house for the worship of God. Nathan, the prophet, dissuades him. David thinks of himself as doing something gracious for God, forgetting that all his past successes have been possible only with God's help. In this respect he was deviating from a key idea in Jewish thinking: that the people owed obedience to God because it was He who had brought them from slavery in Egypt to their Promised Land (v 6).

Obedience to God was more important than a building. *God* will make David a house (v 11) in the sense that his descendants will continue to rule (v 16). The Hebrew word for 'house' could also mean 'temple' or 'family'.

By placing this story in the Christmas readings the lectionary compilers imply that the house built by God was provided by Mary. Through her willingness and humility she was able to make possible a whole new understanding of God's presence.

Luke 1: 46b-55

The song of Mary or *Magnificat* is a *canticle*, i.e. a song that is from Scripture but not part of the psalms. It is still said or sung every day throughout the world as part of Evening Prayer. It is clearly based on the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), a mother who also sees herself as having borne a child who would become a special servant of the Lord. It draws on psalms and other canticles from the prophets but its lasting importance is in what it shows about the purposes of God.

God is a Saviour (v 47). He watches over and rescues men and women, who are his sons and daughters. He cares about the lowliest and underprivileged and gives them new status and dignity (v 48). Throughout all time he is revered and glorified (v 48). He is mighty (v 49). His name, i.e. his nature, is holy and qualitatively different from that of humankind (49). He is merciful towards all who fear him, i.e respect and respond to him (v 50). He has no use for the proud; their potential is restricted by their self-importance and self-delusion (v 51). He always values the humble and sincere (v 52). He feeds the hungry (v 53). The echo here of Isaiah 55:1-2 suggests that Luke includes both those who are physically hungry and those who hunger for what is good. Those who focus on money prevent themselves from engaging with him (v 53). The Jewish people have perceived his goodness, mercy and guidance throughout their history right back to their forefather Abraham (v 55). God reveals himself to his people, the Jews, and then to the Church, for ever. Luke makes dramatic contrasts between God's priorities and human priorities (v 52, 53) and so heightens the impact of the unfolding story of his gospel.

or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

The psalmist proclaims the steadfastness of God's support and love that underpins his Covenant with his people. This is presented as a Covenant with David (vv 3, 20-26) and his descendants. For Christians the most important descendant is Jesus, whose coming is understood as a continuation and fulfilment of Covenant with the Jewish people. The reference to God as Father (v 26) is significant because that was a relationship emphasised in the words that the New Testament writers attributed to Jesus and to those who followed him in the Church.

Romans 16:25-27

The passage forms a *doxology* (a formal ascription of praise and honour) at the conclusion of a long letter. The message of hope that Paul has brought and the teaching of the Messiah Jesus (v 25) has shed new light on the changeless God, who is referred to as *mystery*. This means something that can never, ever be fully described; the term is much stronger than it is in everyday use, where it sometimes means something that is not yet explained. Through Jesus the words of the prophets have been brought to fulfilment and made known, not only to the Jews, but to all peoples (v 26). Through Jesus Christ the nature of the one supreme God - his *glory* - has been revealed in a way that transcends time (v 27)..

Luke 1:26-38

The episode depicted in this passage has been commemorated on 25 March since the earliest years of the Church. Some have suggested that this determined the choice of 25 December (rather than the precise date of the winter solstice) as Christmas Day. The passage is daily said or sung in both Evening Prayer and personal devotions, and it has been illustrated in countless paintings. Conversations between humans and angels are not intended to be taken as matter-of-fact history. Each line makes a serious *theological* statement, i.e. expresses something of the writer's understanding of the nature of God. By weaving all these statements into a dialogue Luke expresses what is meant by the words in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed: that 'the Lord Jesus Christ...by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the virgin Mary and became man'.

In v 31 we have 'you shall call his name Jesus'. This means 'God saves'. In him men and women will find new and everlasting life.

In v 32 'He will be called the Son of the Most High' indicates that his life will show the divine nature and character of God.

In v 32 'The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David' gives assurance of his continuing presence (See the reading from 2 Samuel 7, above).

The words 'His kingdom will have no end' (v 33) are also in the Nicene Creed. His kingdom is not limited by time or space, his power does not wax or wane, he does not maintain it by force (John 18:36).

In v 35 'The Holy Spirit will come' (also in the Creed) we have a way of describing God's presence among his faithful.

In v 37 'with God nothing will be impossible' asserts that the power of God is stronger than that of any other power.

In v 38 the response 'I am the handmaid of the Lord' indicates that Mary is the willing agent through whom God's presence is made evident. She is the first representative of the Church

The petition in the **Collect** is that we may be filled with the presence of God (grace). It draws together three points: that God's presence had made Israel his people, that this presence was to be expressed in Mary, and that, as we in the Church seek with her to offer ourselves as the means by which God's holy will may be fulfilled, we are associated with her rejoicing (See *Gaudete* last week).

The Collect

Almighty God

you have given us your only-begotten Son
to take our nature upon him
and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin.
Grant that we, who have been born again
and made your children by adoption and grace,
may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 52: 7-10

The Jewish people, disconsolate in their Babylonian captivity, hear that their exile is about to end and that they will be able to return to Jerusalem. The good news is shouted by the watchmen as they together see the approaching procession. The people break into song and their joy is irrepressible. The city will be rebuilt from its 'waste places' (ruins). Peace will be re-established. Their *redemption* (freedom to make a new start) and *salvation* (healing of their wounds as their suffering is ended) are unequivocally attributed to their God, who reigns supreme above all nations. It is not surprising that this incomparable poetry has been incorporated by the Church into the Christmas celebrations.

Psalm 98

This, one of the most joyful of all the psalms, is also used in the Easter season. It is best read slowly, so that its images can be savoured. The Lord's victory (vv1-3) is clear to all people. He has shown his tenderness and faithfulness to his people Israel and all creation sings with joy and praise (vv 4-8). The celebration of Christmas is lifted into the context of the eternal purpose of God in the whole universe. He guards, upholds, renews and judges, not only the people of Israel, but the whole human race (v 9).

Hebrews 1:1-4

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is unknown. He was almost certainly a Greek Christian with a fine command of language and rhetoric, as is shown by this magnificent opening passage. The writer says that knowledge of God is always fragmentary and incomplete, but now the One who upholds the whole universe has spoken of himself in a new way. The Jews found God in their history, their Law, and the words of the prophets, but in Jesus he is seen in a person, a Son and heir (See further commentary for Epiphany). Jesus is the true reflection of God's nature, the true measure of his glory, and 'the express image of his person' (v 3a AV). He is esteemed above all. The metaphor of v 3b is incorporated into the Creed: 'he sits at the right hand of the Father', i.e. as an agent of God, with the authority of God.

Luke 2 1-14

This passage is one of the most familiar in the Bible. It is also one of the most profound, described as 'a masterpiece of Lucan art.' The writer looks back on the birth of Jesus from the later perspective of the Church, probably in the city of Antioch (in present day Turkey) about AD 85. Two traditions — that Mary and Joseph (a descendant of David) came from Nazareth, and that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the time of Herod, Caesar Augustus and Quirinius — are anchored in history, though Luke is muddled about which census occurred at this time. He weaves these traditions with themes of grace, urgency, joy, lowliness, peace, salvation, and universalism into what one writer has called 'an exquisite theological tapestry'. To read it as a simple historical account is to miss both its richness and Luke's intention. For example (there are many others), the words 'She laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn' show the vulnerability of human life, with which God was to be associated, and the rejection that Jesus would meet. [Compare: 'He came to his own home and his own people received him not' (John 1:11)]. The shepherds were barred from formal religion because their occupation rendered them ritually unclean but they were the first to hear the good news, which was for outcasts as well as the visibly religious. Each of the words in the angel's message: 'To you is born a *Saviour*, who is *Christ* the *Lord*' has deep resonance in Jewish and Christian thinking (See elsewhere in these notes). The song of the angels, 'Glory be to God in the Highest', proclaims the bond between God and the human race that binds all peoples together in peace. It was incorporated into a hymn known as the *Gloria*, probably by Ambrose (340-397), that is still said or sung every Sunday in Christian worship.

John 1: 1-18

The gospel according to John, was written about 100 AD. The majestic prologue is interrupted by two references to John the Baptist (vv 6-8, 15 See commentary for the Third Sunday), presumably as ancient manuscripts were copied and edited. The commentary here focuses on the prologue itself.

One aim of the prologue seems to be to connect the active presence of God from the beginning with the amazing claim that this presence became a human being. This presence is denoted by *Logos*, inadequately translated into English as 'Word'. It is referred to as light, everywhere in the world, or as the capacity for thought, but the Jews, whose distinct understanding of God was recorded in their scripture, did not, in the end, recognise the human representation of the Logos in Jesus, the Messiah (vv 10,11). Those who did respond to Jesus as Messiah or Christ were adopted as *children of God*, in a spiritual sense (vv 12-13), and receive unlimited grace (v 16). The key assertion (v 14) —'the Word became flesh' — brings together the glory of God associated with the Word and the human being Jesus, the Messiah. This verse also shows the proper figurative way of understanding 'Son of the Father'.

The Collect is again from the Book of Common Prayer. It gives us a concise statement of our belief in Incarnation. Through the willingness of Mary and the birth of Jesus, our all-powerful and ever gracious God shared our human nature. We pray that we, who have been 'born again' by our baptism, may be freed from the constrictions limiting the growth of our true selves, that we may be accepted as adopted sons and daughters, and that through his continued presence our relationship may be renewed and strengthened every day.

31 December 2017 The First Sunday of Christmas

The Collect

God of glory,
who wonderfully created us in your own image
and yet more wonderfully restored us in your Son Jesus Christ;
grant that, as he came to share in our humanity,
so we may share in the life of his divinity;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3

In scintillating metaphors the words of Isaiah portray the end of the exile as a new start for the Jewish people. As at a wedding the bride and bridegroom appear in their finest clothes (v 10), the freed Jews have the chance to put on new garments representing salvation (healing) and righteousness (keeping true to the Law). As the seeds that lie hidden in the ground emerge to life and beauty as spring approaches (v 11), the release from exile shows that God has reaffirmed his trust in his people. The renewed righteousness of the Jews will become a shining example to other peoples, so bright that the light will reach to the whole world (vv1-3). Similarly, the gospel writers, and later the lectionary compilers, see the birth of Jesus as a sign of God's continuing confidence in humanity and as opening up new possibilities for the human race.

Psalms 148

The psalm has echoes of the creation story in Genesis 1. The whole universe displays God's purposeful sovereignty, wonder and majesty. People of all nations, their kings, princes and rulers, recognise his greatness and join in his praise, for none is greater than He. 'His glory is above earth and heaven.' His nature cannot be grasped but his presence can be recognised everywhere.

Galatians 4:4-7

The Letter to the Galatians was one of a group that Paul wrote during his travels in Asia Minor, perhaps about AD 54. Therefore this reference to the birth of Jesus is one of the earliest we have. It does not say anything about the pre-existence of Christ, unlike the later passages in Hebrews or John that we heard on Christmas Day. It does however state that the purpose of his birth was to redeem the human race from the constraints

imposed 'under the law'. The Galatians had been 'got at' by people from Jerusalem who argued that Gentiles must accept Jewish law before they could be baptised as Christians (Galatians 2:11 and 3). Paul says that as followers of Christ new converts were adopted sons so they could call God 'Abba.' 'Abba' is the Aramaic word for Father; it is one of the few words that we can be absolutely sure was used by Jesus himself. Paul concludes with the extraordinary claim: 'So, through God, you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.' This is what is meant in the Collect, when we pray that, through Jesus Christ 'we may share in his divinity.' See further commentary on Epiphany Sunday below.

Luke 2:22-40

Here we have the last piece of Luke's Christmas story. He establishes that Jesus' life began in conformity with Jewish practice, which decreed that the first-born be presented to God in the Temple in Jerusalem (vv 22-24), as an image of sacrifice (v 23).

The centrepiece is the *Nunc Dimittis*, the song of Simeon. The words are taken almost entirely from Isaiah [52:9-10; 49:6; 46:13; 42:6; 40:5] but Luke has put them together to give a passage that reflects one of the most prominent themes of his writings in the rest of his gospel and Acts. The light and understanding revealed in the Messiah is a gift of the Jewish people to the whole world, including Gentiles, their gift is their glory (vv 31-32). The *Nunc Dimittis*, like the Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, is sung or said every single day in the Christian Church as part of Evening Prayer. Although it is introduced by Luke as a blessing of an old man at the presentation of a child, it has become a prayer in which all can join. It is seen as a dedication to God of the work of a day and as a prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of all humanity for the light that has been brought by the Messiah.

Anna makes a similar prayer. Luke concludes by hinting at what is to follow (vv 34-35). The way of Jesus, and that of his mother, would be a way of suffering as well as joy.

The **Collect** is based on one that has been in use for many centuries. Like the Collect for Christmas Day, its petition sums up why we continue to celebrate Christmas no matter how long we live: 'Grant that as [your Son Jesus Christ] came to share in our humanity, so we may share in the life of his divinity.'

Sunday 7 January 2018 The Epiphany

The Collect

Eternal God,
by a star you led wise men to the worship of your Son.
Guide by your light the nations of the earth,
that the whole world may see your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6

The lectionary compilers, like the New Testament writers and the librettist of Handel's *Messiah*, perceive the birth of Jesus as light in darkness (v 1, 3). Indeed 'light', which we take to mean 'insight' or 'understanding', is one of the defining metaphors of the Christmas Season, and nowhere more so than on the feast of the *Epiphany*, which means 'revelation', 'manifestation', or 'seeing things in a new way.' This feast is the major winter celebration in the Eastern Church. Isaiah says that the glory of the Lord will shine everywhere (v 1-2) and be recognised by all nations and kings (v 3). Those who have been scattered by war and by exile will return to Jerusalem to help rebuild the city. They will bring their wealth and join in celebration. Kings will bring tributes of gold (symbol of power) and frankincense (symbol of holiness) (v 6), Matthew (below) weaves these details into his Christmas story.

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

The psalm extols the virtues of a true king: one who is right and just in his judgments, who looks after the poor and needy, and punishes the oppressors, who brings peace to his people, who lifts up the helpless, who pities and rescues the weak, frees them from exploitation and violence, and counts them as precious in his sight. The king with these qualities commands the respect of other nations, who, acknowledging the justice and peace that he brings, accord him tribute to express their allegiance.

Ephesians 3:1-12

From the second to the eighteenth century the letter was attributed to Paul, but most modern scholars agree that the author was someone writing between AD 80 and AD 100, after Paul's authentic letters had been collected together. Part of the confusion comes from the fact that

passages such as this are introduced by 'I, Paul' (v 1) and there are references to Paul's experience (v 8) . However, the style of the letter is different from Paul's; the Greek sentences are long and splendidly crafted; and the thinking (See next paragraph) is much more advanced than that elsewhere in Paul's writings.

The passage refers more than once (vv 3, 4, 9) to the '*mystery of Christ*', suggesting that his incarnation can be explored again and again but its meaning can never be fully grasped. The true significance of the birth of the Messiah was not obvious to previous generations (v 5). Now that the Church had grown its thinking had matured 'by the *Spirit*' (v 5). This was how the early church expressed its sense that the continued deepening of its understanding indicated the ongoing presence of God, which had been evident from the beginning of time and dramatically displayed in the life and death of Jesus. It was clear that he was not just the anointed leader of the Jews but was born for *all*, 'who are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the [same] promise' (v 6). The three nouns 'heirs', 'members' and 'partakers' in Greek all begin with the same prefix *syn-* (meaning 'with', 'together', 'at the same time'), emphasising their full and equal participation in the Church. They share the same inheritance; they are one people; they together participate in all that Christ Jesus has achieved; they join in making known his greatness (v 8), his wisdom (v 10), and his eternal purpose (v 11). By the time Ephesians was written, the meaning of the word Christ had been vastly enlarged from that in 1 Corinthians (See commentary on Advent Sunday). Through this new understanding, the Church proclaimed that Jesus, Lord and Christ, gave believers confidence in their approach to God (v 11), even the confidence to offer themselves as partners in his 'eternal purpose' (v 11-12).

Matthew 2:1-12

The Gospel according to Matthew is thought to have been written between AD 80 and AD 90 about the time that Christians were formally excluded from synagogues. He argues that Jesus is firmly within Jewish tradition but that the kingdom of Jesus as Christ includes people of all nations. These two themes are immediately apparent in this passage. We often tack it on to the Bethlehem story of Luke 2, as there is no historical overlap, but we can also view the narrative, with its symbolism, as an independent tradition.

The early designation of Jesus as 'King of the Jews' (v 2) both draws attention to his inheritance (a second David) and signals the opposition that was to come (Matthew 27:29, 37). His birth in Bethlehem rather than

in Jerusalem shows that he will not be the sort of king that people expect. The wise men can be considered as representing the wisdom of pagans (hinted at in their attention to the heavenly bodies), who would come to acknowledge the kingship of Jesus, both in his day and in the future. Matthew draws on Isaiah 60: 6 to describe their gifts, but adds the gift of myrrh to foreshadow the Passion narrative to come later in his gospel. The dealings with Herod show why the message of Jesus will meet opposition. In an echo of Psalm 72:11, the wise men kneel in worship, recognising his greatness and holiness.

The **Collect** is a revision of a much earlier one. Epiphany is ongoing throughout history. The dark world described by Isaiah is flooded with light; the light of a single star reaches to all nations; the child born in Bethlehem becomes the Christ in whom the purpose of the whole universe is fulfilled. We can also take this prayer as expressing the development of our personal faith from an uncertain beginning to ever greater wonder. An extended version of the collect is found in the Reformation hymn R&S 182 (How brightly beams the morning star...till his praises flood with light earth's darkest places).

Conclusion

For the past month we have heard how ancient writers have perceived the birth of Jesus. They have each written from the perspective of their own time. Their principal concern has been the long-term effect that the coming of Jesus had rather than what exactly happened. They have used poetry, metaphor and story-telling and it is our challenge in reading Scripture to see through the descriptive details to the meaning behind them.

‘The birth of Jesus’ could be described as part of an imperial census but its significance would be missed. In the gospel according to John, however, the writer tells us not that ‘Jesus was born’ but that ‘the Word became flesh’. God, whose power, order, and purposefulness underpins the whole Universe became, *without changing his true nature*, a transient, vulnerable human being. God who is holy, separate from the Universe was revealed in a human person. This is what is behind the Father-Son language of Christian worship. The implication of this astonishing statement – the Word became flesh – is that humans who seek to follow God’s will have the potential to become adopted sons and daughters, and be the means for further revelation of God’s purpose.

In technical language, God is said to be both *transcendent* (not part of the physical world) and *immanent* (ever present). ‘Immanent’ is not to be confused with ‘imminent’, discussed earlier in this booklet.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, writing recently about religious art, has commented: ‘The divine was never something lying around to be watched, copied, exhibited. It was the active foundation for all activity within the world, without being another example of that activity.’ Similarly, God cannot be understood by historical or scientific investigation, but his grace, compassion and healing can be discerned through his presence in our common humanity.

We hope our booklet has encouraged you to look beyond the pagan facade of the winter solstice festival to see the religious festival that underpins it, and to find the hope, joy and peace that the readings so obviously portray.

