



ST JOHN'S CHURCH, BIRCHGROVE

Prepare the Way...

*Bible Studies for Advent
Week 4*

Prepare the Way...

The study of the Holy Scriptures has always been one of the most important things that any Christian can do. Although we might have different interpretations, Christians have always agreed that the Scriptures are the Word of God and reveal His plan for His creation.

Many Christians no longer try to look at the scriptures, relying on the readings on Sundays for their 'Bible Meat'. This can never be adequate and, to continue the metaphor, a Christian who relies on the Sunday readings will soon starve, spiritually, to death. There are far more nutrients to be found in the Scriptures!

The following studies, or maybe they are meditations, or just thoughts, are based on the Gospel readings for each weekday (Monday to Saturday) during Advent – the readings used at the daily Eucharist. They often seem to jump around a bit, but also have a continual theme – the coming of the Kingdom.

I have tried to explain some of the more interesting, and important, phrases and words; the most important are in bold print, indicating that they have a very short entry in the glossary at the back of the booklet. I have also tried to place each reading in its context; it is a very dangerous thing to take a passage of Scripture away from its context!

I would strongly recommend that you begin your study with prayer – ask God to speak to you from His word. Read the passage – in any version of the Bible – and think about it a bit before reading my comments. You might hear different things to me! If you can, have a commentary available, to explain some of the background.

Try to run the passage through in your head, almost as though you are watching it happen; and pray some more. Let the word come alive!

And, if you want to talk about what you have found, or what you hear, I am more than willing to do so.

May God bless us all in this glorious season of Advent.

Fr Peter Yeats

Monday, December the 18th

Lk 1:5-25

Luke, it has to be said, does a great job of building up the story of the birth of Jesus; he does not rush in, but leads the reader through the background first; notice that the name 'Jesus' is not mentioned until verse 31! Our passage today points to the fact that while many considered that the age of prophets had ended at the end of the Old Testament period, God's plan will involve the birth of another prophet – John.

Zacharias was a priest; one of the twenty thousand around at the time. They took it in turns to go to Jerusalem and perform the rituals of the temple. Some of the more important jobs were settled by lot; when we read that John had been chosen to offer incense, we should remember that this was a once-in-a-lifetime honour for him. Priests could only marry pure Israelites; John's wife, Elizabeth, was even above that – in the direct line of Aaron, the first priest of Israel. They were good people; righteous people; the best pedigree; the right sort of people.

But, they had no children – and that, for many Jews was a sign that God was not happy with them. For Zacharias and Elizabeth this was a personal tragedy, especially as they were now going into old age. But, of course, this situation was not new in Jewish history: Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 21); Rachel and Jacob (Genesis 30 & 35); the birth of Samson (Judges 13); and the birth of Samuel (1 Sam 1). It's as though God likes to show that He is the Lord of biology as well as everything else!

The offering of the Incense was not a long ritual, although the priest performed it alone. So, only Zacharias saw the **angel** and heard his message. The **angel** started with what, in this **gospel**, is a customary, and probably necessary, greeting – don't be afraid! He then announced that Zacharias' prayer had been heard. What was this prayer? Some have suggested that it was a personal plea for a son, and that that was to be given. But others suggest that a priest, on such an important occasion, would be praying for more than that; that he would be praying for the redemption of Israel. This prayer had been heard!

The angel then explained that Zacharias and Elizabeth were to have a son – the starting point of the coming Messiah. But note Zacharias' reaction – and especially when compared to Mary's in tomorrow's passage. Zacharias acted with real disbelief; he asked for some sort of proof that this was all going to happen. The scene is almost comical; in the Temple of God, Zacharias stands before an Archangel who is telling him that his miraculous son will be the herald of the **Messiah**; and Zacharias demands a sign!

He *is* given a sign, but it is more of a punishment – he can no longer speak, and will not be able to until his son is named.

And part of the reason for what can be seen to be annoyance on **Gabriel's** part was who Zacharias was. If anyone was going to have a grasp on this message, if anyone should be able to accept it then it should be a priest;

someone trained in the scriptures; someone brought up in the traditions of the faith. Yet, he asked for a sign! (And, furthermore, what a dumb thing to ask for – a sign that his wife will become pregnant; the sign will be that she did become pregnant!)

In the whole account of the birth of Jesus, we are continually brought up against various characters, who are used by God in bringing out His purpose; some are very odd; some, like Zacharias, one would expect. But, so often, the people chosen don't act in the way expected! God is willing to use everybody, even if He has to change their way of thinking.

Tuesday, December the 19th

Lk 1:26-38

A Technical Point

'engaged' (v27) – the word means a little bit more than it does in our current usage. For the Jews it was very much a legal state and one would have to go through legal processes, similar to divorce, to get out of it. It was almost actual marriage. So, if it could be shown that Mary had had sex with someone else, various things could happen:

- The 'engagement' would be off – and it would be very hard to find an alternative!
- Her parents could throw her out – with really only one choice for a future profession.
- She could be stoned to death.

As we consider these, we can understand why Mary might have been a bit concerned!

'virgin' or 'young woman'?

This is a bit of a side issue – only read it if you are interested! In Isaiah 7:14 we read that "a young woman" shall have a child. The Hebrew word for "young woman" in that particular sentence is '*almah*'; this means a woman of marriageable age still under the protection of her parents. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), the Greek word used to translate '*almah*' was '*parthenos*', which means 'a virgin'. Many Jewish scholars have argued that this is incorrect – '*almah*' refers to age, not sexual purity; the correct Hebrew word for 'virgin' is '*bethulah*'. But, even this is not clear, as the two Hebrew words can seem to be interchangeable. Thus we have the controversy over whether Mary was a Virgin or not!

It can be no coincidence that these verses are some of the most significant in the Gospel story, and have been taken, by the Church, as being some of the most important in the story of the birth of our Lord. This critical moment in salvation history focuses in on a teenage girl, a nobody in the eyes of the

world. Not the priests; not the kings; not the wise men, but Mary. As this small act takes place, one can almost hear the heavens draw breath and pause – waiting to see what will happen at this eternal moment of choice!

The news is the same as that delivered to Zacharias – but the whole tone changes. Gabriel is respectful and gentle; it is clear that Mary is of much greater importance than Zacharias would ever be. She is the ‘favoured One’ – full of Grace! Her fear is natural – such things as she was seeing did not happen often! To be told, in her position and in her circumstances, that she is to have a child, must have been bewildering. When Zacharias, the priest, the man of God, was told, he demanded a sign. Mary just shows her confusion, shows that she does not understand. “How can this be?”

Once again, the angel tells Mary not to be afraid. So often, this is the immediate reaction to anything that we do not understand, or feel that we cannot control; fear. This can then take over, and run our lives. The angel says ‘Don’t be afraid’ – in other words, trust God; what you are experiencing may seem difficult, but the Lord *is* with you!

And then that fateful moment; those words that have rung out down the centuries, showing us the true model of the Christian. The Church respects Mary as the Mother of our Lord; but we venerate her for those few small words, spoken in absolute humility, which teach us everything about what our relationship with God and what it means to be a disciple: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

The difficulties; the problems; all the things that must have sprung into her young mind; the good reasons why it should not be her – all are pushed aside as she submits to the will of God, and she is wrapped in His love. Whatever the future brings for her, she would always remember this moment. There would be pain; sorrow and many doubts – but there would always be this moment.

**Hail, Mary, full of Grace!
The Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,
Jesus.**

**Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners now
And at the hour of our death.**

*Wednesday, December the 20th & Thursday, December the 21st
Lk 1:39-45*

(The readings for today and tomorrow have been joined together, as they are more naturally one.)

There is almost an unseemly haste in Mary's desire to visit her relative Elizabeth. The angel had said that she too was pregnant – another involved in the divine plan – and it's as though Mary was desperate to share the excitement of what was happening with someone else who would understand.

And the excitement is shared; it might seem that the older woman might be tempted to jealousy, that she should be the important one, not just because of her age but because of her social position. Yet, she just expressed joy at what was happening with Mary and, much more than that, acknowledged her superior position. It really was a time of joy in the workings of God, knowing that each was doing the will of God, and without the jealousy or desire for 'acknowledgement' so dear to all of us.

But their meeting is not just expressed in joy as Mary proclaims the song which the Church has called the Magnificat. And what a song it is! Tom Wright says of it: "It is the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus – Jesus who's only just been conceived, not yet born, but who has made Elizabeth's baby leap for joy in her womb and has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph."

Revolution! As we again read the Song of Mary we hear how God works in the world, how even what we consider normal and natural is shaken up and turned around. The proud are scattered even though they hold such high certainty in themselves in their hearts! The powerful are overthrown, because there is only one power! Those oppressed and done down are lifted up because they have no pride; those who have nothing are given all they need, while those who have so much have it removed from them! This really is stark revolution!

This is the Song of the Kingdom; it describes how things will be under the rule of God. The bullies, the proud the self-conceited will not win; the structures that we live under today will not last forever. The revolution will begin with Jesus, the Kingdom of God smashing into the World. It is of little wonder that the World did not want to hear!

Friday, December the 22nd & Saturday, December the 23rd
Lk 1:57-79

(The readings for today and tomorrow have been joined together, as they are more naturally one.)

These two days reflect for us the great hope that we should have in God, as He works His purpose in the world, and in history!

Again, the passage begins with a little humour. Zacharias and Elizabeth have brought their baby for **circumcision**. (This always happened on the eighth day after birth. It is an interesting event in the context of what is about to happen as **circumcision** was the great sign of the covenant between God and Israel; the hope that is to be revealed takes place within the covenant. As a slightly side issue, there is no indication that the child was named during the circumcision – it seems to be a bit of poetic licence!) By tradition, the parents had the absolute right of naming a child, and a son, especially the eldest, would often take on the name of the father. So, the gathered relatives expect the boy to be called 'Zacharias'; but Elizabeth says no! Slight consternation, and the gathered turn to the father! (Notice that the text says that they 'motioned' to him as though he was deaf and not just mute!) His answer is emphatic - that the boy is called John; again, note that odd use of the present tense: the child is already called John! It is as if Zacharias is a bit worried about what might happen if he shows even the slightest reluctance after his initial meeting with the angel.

And his mouth is opened, and the first thing he utters after such a long silence is a hymn of praise to God! This hymn - called the Benedictus - has come all the way down to us, and is still said daily during Morning Prayer. It is a prophetic song (again, there is the symbolism of the fact that the gift of prophecy had seemed silent in Israel for so long - just as Zacharias was silent - and was now bursting out again); it is a song of triumph, which declares that God is not just in control, that He is not just still at work, but that His plan for salvation has reached a new and momentous moment. It is a song of pride as a new father not only recognizes the birth of his child, but also recognizes the part that his son is to play in God's plan; John was chosen, as Elizabeth was chosen, as Mary was chosen, as David was chosen, as Abraham and Sarah were chosen - as far back as one would wish to go.

What is also wonderful about this passage is how personal it is. The realisation of all that is happening comes at a small, private family gathering. Nothing too grand; a rural priest and his relatives. And God bursts into the world.

Incarnation.

The inside of the theatre lay in darkness but, as the audience began to enter, small points of light started to appear in the orchestra pit, and the forms of the musicians could be made out. The audience began to sit, getting comfortable; getting ready for a great show – the greatest show.

Sounds started coming from the orchestra as each instrument began to tune up. Some were soft and delicate, some louder and more strident. But still the show did not begin.

In front of the orchestra, a figure almost totally shrouded in darkness, could just be made out moving his arms; the conductor. The audience could not see him, but they could hear the musicians reacting to his movements, even though they were just warning up. But still the show did not begin.

Most of what could be heard seemed discordant, without purpose or structure. But, every so often, a snatch of a tune could be heard, something with order and recognizable, something with beauty. In these snatches, the audience anticipated the whole. But still the show did not begin.

The audience became restless; feet were shuffled; slight murmuring and muttering. Why was it taking so long? Why the delay? But still the show did not begin.

Suddenly, another piece of music could be heard – different. The audience seemed to become quieter, maybe trying to hear; maybe expecting something. But the 'tune' came to nothing – it seemed to have structure; it seemed to have order, but it was too different, nothing like a tune should be. The orchestra were still tuning up.

Longer to wait; more people got restless; someone got up and left – followed by another.

Then silence; darkness; suddenly nothing, and the audience knew that it was about to start. But still the darkness, still the silence. More restlessness. More waiting. Why, people were wondering? Why the delay? Why doesn't he get on with it?

And then it all began. The curtains fell apart; bright, garish lights came on, mesmerising and shocking. The orchestra played; wild, fantastic music, yet so hard to hear that it really *was* music. Dissonant, discordant – yet structured and together. And then the dancers burst onto the stage; wild people, weird people; cavorting, romping, playing – filled with wild joy, with laughter, with pleasure. For many in the audience the whole thing was just too shocking, too crass and common. Some moaned quietly in disbelief, and many got up to leave.

There was new activity on the stage; the dancers were gesturing to the audience; it looked as though they were inviting them to join them on the

stage! The feeling of disbelief grew in the rows of seats. It was impossible; unthinkable.

And then someone moved; a young woman towards the front stood up and moved towards the stage. Eager hands of dancers pulled her up and her face exploded with pure joy as she was swallowed up in the seething mass. Others followed her, one by one, carefully cautiously, mainly the young. Then an elderly man, dressed in full bow tie and tails; he slowly, painfully moved forward, was grabbed and pulled up; and began to dance.

It was bedlam; a mad-house! It was unreal; it was not the way that it should have been! It was not what so many wanted. They cried, they fled, angry, upset, not understanding. They had come to listen, to watch, to appreciate – they certainly did not want to join in! And still the dancers beckoned people to come; all, everyone, anybody, nobodies! All were invited to join the dance. Some did; many did not. Some closed their eyes and put their hands to their ears, preferring the comfort of silence and darkness.

Every so often, someone would take their eyes away from the swirling crowd on the stage, and look towards the orchestra. Although the music sounded so odd, it was noticed that the musicians keenly followed the directions of the figure at the front, the conductor. And sometimes, the flashing lights would catch him in their glare, as he turned to look at the people behind him. And some swore that, instead of the usual sombre conductor's uniform, he was dressed as a jester – and his face was lit with a huge smile of pure joy and love. Those who saw the face sometimes winced in fear, or dislike; but many who looked on the face and into the eyes rose to join the dance.

Glossary

Angel

In popular thought, a being of great power sent by God; one of the Heavenly Realm. The name comes from the Greek '*angelos*' which can mean 'message', 'messenger', or even the one who sends a message. Four Archangels are mentioned in scripture: Michael ('*who is like God?*'); Gabriel ('*God has shown himself mighty*'); Raphael ('*It is God who heals*'); and Lucifer ('*Light Bearer*').

Apostle

The word literally means 'one who is sent'. In the Gospels it is usually reserved for the inner circle of Twelve, although later, with Paul, others are referred to as 'apostles'.

Centurion

A Roman soldier with command over one hundred men. Centurions were really the backbone of the Roman army, like a modern Sergeant-Major.

Circumcision

The removal of the foreskin of males. For Jews, this was the sign of the Covenant with God (Gen 17:9-14). It was usually performed on the eighth day after birth.

Disciples

'one who learns from a master, then teaches others that learning'. While we often think only of the Twelve as disciples, the gospels include many more; all linked to Jesus are disciples.

Galilee

A region and large lake in northern Israel. It was bordered on three sides by three other nations, and was known as an area with quite a large number of **Gentiles**.

Gabriel

See **Angel**.

Gentiles

Anyone who is not a Jew! While Jews and Gentiles did live together, Jews tried to avoid any physical contact with Gentiles, whom they considered 'impure' and liable to bring impurity to a Jew.

Good News / Gospel

The Greek word for this is '*euangelion*', from where we get the word Evangelism and Evangelist. The same word in German is '*gut spiel*', which, contracted, gives us the English word 'Gospel'. All refer to the Good News of Jesus Christ!

Heaven

Whereas 'earth' is the world set in time and space, 'heaven' is the dimension of God set beyond time and space. 'Going to heaven' is not about going to a place after death but is about living in the present under the rule of God.

High Priests

The priests came from the tribe of Levi, and served in the Temple in rotation, offering the sacrifices. The High Priest was a direct descendent of Aaron and among his tasks was the offering of the sacrifice for the whole nation on the Day of Atonement.

Judea

The Greek and Roman name for Judah. Usually it refers to the south of the country, but was also used to include **Galilee** and Samaria.

Kingdom of God / Kingdom of Heaven

(Luke uses the phrase 'Kingdom of God' while Matthew, as a Jew tries to avoid the use of the word 'God', out of respect, and uses the phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven').

The phrase refers not to a place, a geographical Kingdom, but to the sovereign and saving rule of God. This rule is not just in the future, it can be here and now.

Law

For the Jews the Law was primarily the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, the Books of Moses, the Pentateuch; the Jews refer to these books as 'Torah'.

Messiah / Christ

The two words mean the same thing: 'Messiah' is Hebrew, 'Christ' is Greek. The word means 'the anointed one' in other words one chosen by God. The Jews looked to a Messiah who would come and free them from their physical bondage to foreign powers; someone who would come as a mighty king. It was probably for this reason that they found it so hard to accept Jesus as Messiah.

Passover

A festival to remember the 'Passing Over' of the Angel of Death in Exodus 13:3-9. Also called the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

Pharisees

A group within Judaism who kept the **Law** very strictly, and encouraged others to do so as well. They were not priests, but lay-men, and had great influence outside Jerusalem. Unlike many Jews, they believed in a resurrection and life after death.

Rabbi

A title of respect given to spiritual leaders and instructors.

Sabbath

The seventh day of the week, which was a constant reminder of both creation and the Exodus. Along with circumcision and the dietary laws, it was a badge of Jewish identity, and a huge body of laws grew up concerning its observance.

Sanhedrin

The highest Jewish Court or council, made up of the Chief Priest, elders and scribes.

Satan

'The Accuser'; the bible is never really clear as to the identity of the Satan – at times he is like a divine prosecutor serving in the heavenly Council (e.g. Job). But he also becomes the one trying to lead humans away from God.

Scribes

People who were trained to write, and especially draw up legal contracts; thus they were often experts at the **Law**. Many scribes were also **Pharisees**.

Sermon on the Mount

A series of teachings (which include the Beatitudes) by Jesus in chapters 5 -7 of Matthews Gospel. It seems likely that Matthew is bringing together into one 'slot' a lot of quotes from Jesus spread over his ministry. Luke has the same teachings, but he places Jesus in the plains; in Matthew, Jesus goes up 'the mountain' a very typical Jewish symbol of being close to God, and reflects Moses on Mt Sinai.

Son of David

A somewhat rare title for the Messiah, although more common in Matthew's Gospel. The Messiah was to come from the line of David (see 2 Sam 7:12). For many ordinary people, David was the great hero of Jewish history, and it was therefore logical that the Chosen One (Messiah) would be his descendent.

Teachers of the Law – see Scribes

Transfiguration

An event in the **Gospels** in which Jesus goes up a mountain (possibly Mt Hermon) with three disciples: Peter, James & John. On the mountain he seems to shine, and talks with Moses and Elijah, and then his ministry and Mission are once again affirmed by a voice from heaven. (See Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36)