



KNAPHILL
Baptist Church
Caring Christians at the Heart of the Community

Bible Reading Notes

December 2017



THE WORD BECAME FLESH

[Advent Meditations on the Incarnation]

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INTRODUCTION

The word became flesh. God became a human being. Why? How? What does it really mean? In these Advent meditations, we will be meditating on these and other questions that the Incarnation raises by looking at various Old and New Testament passages. 'Incarnation', like 'Trinity', is not actually a New Testament word but means to 'give a bodily form to' or 'to make flesh'. As we get nearer to Christmas, we will be looking specifically at the Nativity passages so that we may again enter fully into the wonder of the Christmas story. We do this so that we can prepare ourselves for his coming. This year we have seen the celebration of As the poet John Betjeman put it so well: -

*The Advent wind begins to stir
With sea-like sounds in our Scotch fir,
It's dark at breakfast, dark at tea,
And in between we only see
Clouds hurrying across the sky
And rain-wet roads the wind blows dry
And branches bending to the gale
Against great skies all silver-pale.
The world seems travelling into space,
And travelling at a faster pace
Than in the leisured summer weather
When we and it sit out together,
For now we feel the world spin round
On some momentous journey bound-
Journey to what? to whom? to where?
The Advent bells call out 'Prepare,
Your world is journeying to the birth
of God made Man for us on earth'.
And how, in fact, do we prepare
For the great day that waits us there...*

Friday 1st December 2017

MAKE WAY

Psalm 24

In the song 'Make way, make way for Christ the King', Graham Kendrick exhorts us to 'Fling wide the gates and welcome Him into our lives'. The Psalmist does the same - *Lift up your heads, O you gates, be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in* (vs. 7,9). The theme of this psalm is the worship of God as creator, Lord, victor and king of glory. It was used as a hymn celebrating the God of creation and the advent or coming of the victorious warrior king to the temple. We worship God as creator and Lord over the whole cosmos, but we also open the gates of our hearts for him to be Lord and king of our lives. This advent season is about us preparing ourselves for the coming of our king Jesus, so that he might come and fill the temple of our lives.

How do we prepare for something so wondrous and momentous as God coming to us in the flesh? The Father sent the Son. The word became flesh. God was in Christ. Anything we might do in response seems so inadequate - maybe to us, but not to God. He came to join us in our humanity so that we might join him in his divinity. He entered into our existence so that we might enter into his. By becoming one with us, he was able to share our sorrows, bear our burdens, atone for our sins and unite us to God. As we journey to Bethlehem, we look for Jesus to be born in people's hearts, to welcome him and make their fragmented lives whole. As 'the Advent winds begin to stir', we start by asking the same question as the Psalmist, *Who is he, this King of glory?* (v. 10). Who is it who will be born in Bethlehem's manger?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we prepare ourselves for your coming and open our lives for you to be born again in our hearts. Amen

Saturday 2nd December 2017

IN PRAISE OF GOD

1 Timothy 1:12-17

A 'doxology' is a liturgical formula of praise to God. When Paul thinks about God, about some majestic aspect of his character or an amazing insight into his works, he overflows with a spontaneous outburst of worship that comes right from the very depths of his soul. Here in his first letter to Timothy, a young pastor of the church in Ephesus, Paul contemplates the first coming of Christ and he is led to utter this doxology (v. 17).

As we start to meditate on the Incarnation, we need to prepare by reminding ourselves of what kind of God it is we worship - *and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire* (Hebrews 12:29). As Stuart Murray once said, we have a tendency to think of God as the 'all-matey' rather than the Almighty! Our God is eternal, immortal, invisible, and beyond our knowing. He is all powerful, all knowing, all seeing, ever present everywhere. He is awesome, perfect in holiness as illustrated by Isaiah's vision in the temple when he *saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted and the seraphs were calling to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory* (Isaiah 6:1,3). In the book of Revelation, John has the vision of the perpetual worship of heaven where the great multitude that sound like the roar of rushing waters and loud peals of thunder are continually shouting *Hallelujah for our Lord God Almighty reigns* (Revelation 19:6).

Do we really appreciate how big God is? Or, as J B Phillips asked, 'Is your God too small?'

Prayer: Father help us to worship you acceptably with reverence and awe and always remember that you are a big God. Amen

Sunday 3rd December 2017

THE MAJESTY OF GOD

1 Timothy 6:11-16

Later in the letter to Timothy, Paul starts to think about the second coming of Christ (vs. 15,16). In response to this, he is led to explode into to another and even more expansive doxology.

Before we tentatively start to appreciate the Incarnation again in this Advent season, we still need to fully absorb into our minds and hearts the vastness and majesty of God. Paul bursts out with this song of praise in 1 Timothy 6:15,16 that stresses the transcendence and incomparable greatness of God. He starts by affirming that God is sovereign and supreme over all things, who alone is the real ruler of the whole universe. God alone possesses immortality, that is the opposite of death. This is not only endless existence but divine, eternal life. God is life's never-failing fountain, the source of life and all things - God is the fountain of all life. He *lives in unapproachable light*. Like the sun, this light is too bright for us to look into even though we need it to see by. Because of the brilliance of the light, God is covered by it (Psalm 104:2) and in effect made invisible (1 Timothy 1:17) - *God is light; in him there is no darkness at all* (1 John 1:5). This light is a symbol of purity and holiness. No one can approach God because he is so holy, and all human beings are so sinful living in the darkness of this world. Moses was privileged to see some of God's glory but could not see God's face or he would die (Exodus 33:18-23). No one can see God and live.

No wonder the Psalmist writes - *O Lord, what are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them?*

Prayer: Lord in the light of your purity and holiness, have mercy on us and forgive us for how impure and unholy we are. Amen

Monday 4th December 2017

THE INVISIBLE GOD

Acts 17:24-28a

In his book *Reaching out for the Invisible God*, Philip Yancey asks the question 'How do I relate to God who is invisible when I'm never quite sure he's there?' Do we all feel like that sometimes? But the truth is that the infinite, awesome, holy, unapproachable, majestic God invites us to reach for him - and find him (v. 27).

The whole universe was made by God's command and it is in him that *we live and move and have our being* (v. 28a). God fills all space. He is present at the far flung reaches of the universe - and that is a long way away! But he is also present at the same time with the tiniest sub-atomic particle. God is the source of all life and he has done this so that the human beings that he has made will seek him. This is the reason why we are here. God created us to have fellowship with him but how do we find an invisible God? We find him because he has made himself 'findable'. Only God can reveal God. If God had not revealed himself to us we would never be able to find him for ourselves. The world of nature testifies to God's existence - *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands* (Psalm 19:1). But the problem is that God is altogether other to us, as Job observed, *The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power* (Job 37:23). The Bible tells us that *'No-one has seen God'* (1 John 4:12). The wonderful truth of the Incarnation is that even though *No-one has ever seen God*, it is God himself who has made himself known. *God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known* (John 1:18).

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that you have invited us to reach out to you and that you have made yourself find-able by us. Help us to keep reaching out to you. Amen

Tuesday 5th December 2017

THE LIGHT

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

In order to be able to see anything we need light. God is invisible and we are not able to see him because of our blinded eyes and darkened minds. It is through the Son that God makes himself visible - *For God... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the glory of God in the face of Christ (v. 6)*. God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shines into our hearts. The reference here is to the creation where darkness brooded over chaos until God said, *Let there be light (Genesis 1:3)*. So spiritual darkness broods over people's minds until God shines his light into their hearts. This is the light that the prophet Isaiah is talking about concerning the land of Zebulun and Naphtali in Isaiah 9:2 - *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.*

When we think of a light coming on in our minds, it is the light of knowledge, of suddenly seeing something that we had not seen before. In Christ the glory of God is revealed so that people are enabled by the Holy Spirit to see God. The person of Christ shows God to be who and what he is so that if this revelation of God in Christ is refused then there can be no real knowledge of God at all - *No-one has seen the Father except the one who is from God (John 6:46), No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matthew 11:27)*. As Christ is God so to know him is to know God and to deny him, is to deny God. Jesus is the light that *shines in the darkness (John 1:5)* of our ignorance.

Prayer: Lord, shine your light into our hearts that we might see your glory in the face of Christ. Amen

Wednesday 6th December 2017

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Colossians 1:15-20

To combat the ignorance of the Christians of first century Colossae, Paul proclaims the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ at the start of his letter to them as the best protection against error. What he is wanting them (and us!) to be clear about is that the one through whom creation came into being has now become a human being - *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:3)*. The Son of God was the means and agent of creation and is now the full and final revelation of God in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. If we want to see what God is like look at Jesus. Jesus is *the image of the invisible God* (v. 15).

We live in a very image conscious age, but this kind of image is only skin deep, a shallow veneer. Image normally suggests 'an artificial imitation of the external form of an object or person', that is something made to look like something else. Christ, as the image of the invisible God (v. 15), goes deeper than this. Jesus is the essential and absolutely perfect representation and manifestation of God made visible to created human beings. The likeness that is expressed in this manifestation is total, unique and perfect - *Anyone who has seen (Jesus) has seen the Father (John 14:9)*. God is not beyond him, but in him. He brings God to us, down to our level in a way that our limited, puny, finite minds can understand. The life of Jesus is a personal disclosure of the life of God revealing the inmost heart of God to us. That which was invisible has been made visible. In Jesus Christ, we meet God.

Prayer: Thank you Jesus for coming to our world to show us the Father. Help us to come to you and acknowledge you as Lord over all creation and our Lord. Amen

Thursday 7th December 2017

GOD HAS SPOKEN

Hebrews 1:1-4

If God had not spoken, humanity would have been buried in the darkness of ignorance. But God has not remained silent, he has spoken (v. 1). God's revelation of himself to sinful, blind, obstinate humanity has been a progression like an ongoing conversation. It starts with the Old Testament where he speaks to the Israelite tribal fathers through the Prophets and ultimately reaches the unique revelation of himself in Jesus Christ given in the New Testament. The progression is one of promise to fulfillment. The prophets did not get to see who they were prophesying about - *they did not receive what had been promised* (Hebrews 11:40). They must have been intrigued to know who it was they were talking about. For example, the Prophet Isaiah speaks of the Messiah who was to come about 700 years before Jesus was born - *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end* (Isaiah 9:6,7). The Apostle Peter says that *the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come... searched intently and with greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ was pointing* (1 Peter 1:10,11).

All the Old Testament is essentially pointing to the New. The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ but not beyond him. God has spoken his ultimate revealing, redeeming and life-giving Word.

Prayer: Lord we are so grateful that you have spoken down through the ages and all that was promised has been fulfilled in Jesus. Help us to keep trusting you for the future. Amen

Friday 8th December 2017

THE WORD OF GOD

John 1:1-5

*God has spoken - by Christ Jesus,
Christ, the everlasting Son;
brightness of the Father's glory,
with the Father ever one:
spoken by the word incarnate,
Life, before all time began,
light of light, to earth descending,
God, revealed as Son of Man.*

At the start of John's Gospel, reflected in this verse of a hymn by G W Briggs, Jesus is identified as the eternal word (v. 1). The hymn starts with *God has spoken - by his prophets* but Jesus Christ is God's supreme word to humanity, the climax of divine revelation. He is the creative word (v. 3). We read at the beginning of Genesis that God created through the spoken word - *God said, let there be...* Jesus Christ is that word.

The Greek word for 'Word' is logos. They had the concept of every word being creative, as if words have an existence of their own and float up into the ether. We may not have the same idea but perhaps we need to appreciate more fully the affect our words have on people and situations both negatively and positively. It is not very pleasant to think that the words we say hang around and affect things. No wonder the Apostle Peter exhorted his readers that *if anyone speaks, they should do it as one speaking the very words of God* (1 Peter 4:11).

Prayer: Father, thank you that through Jesus you created all that there is. As we consider the creative power of words, help us to think about what we say and use words that are positive and encouraging. Amen

Saturday 9th December 2017

NOT RECOGNISED

John 1:10-13

John Betjeman's poems are both delightful and, at the same time, incisive. He wrote, 'Too bored to think, too proud to pray, too timid to leave what we are used to doing, we have shut ourselves behind our standard roses; we love ourselves only and our neighbours no longer. As for the Incarnation, that is a fairy story for children, if we think it healthy for children to be told fairy stories'. This quote evokes 1950's suburbia where net curtains twitched, people kept themselves to themselves and the Incarnation is dismissed at a stroke. Perhaps the only difference now is that many people have not even heard of the Incarnation, fairy story or not.

Verse 11 is one of the most poignant in Scripture - *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him*. William Barclay put it, 'He came to his own home - and his own people gave him no welcome'. The Son of God through whom all things were made was not recognised and worse than that, was treated so horrifically - think of the crowd vehemently shouting *Crucify him!* (Matthew 27:23). That crowd symbolises all of sinful humanity.

Not everyone rejected Jesus when he came though. There were some who did welcome him. To these people and to all who have ever believed or will, including us, *Jesus gave the right to become children of God* (v. 12). Surely, we are children of God automatically when we are born? Jesus said that we need to be born again of the Holy Spirit to recognise the kingdom of God (John 3:5-7). This is the Spirit of sonship (Romans 8:15,16).

Prayer: Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus. May the Holy Spirit constantly be opening our eyes to recognise him. Amen.

Sunday 10th December 2017

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

John 1:14-18

Jesus Christ, the Word of God, became flesh and blood like us (v. 14). The eternal Son of God who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, created the universe became a human being and died for us - 'Hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered'. God is so vast, awesome, majestic, infinite and holy and yet is born in Jesus Christ as a baby in a scruffy manger in a squalid little stable with smelly animals; the God of eternity becoming a finite being (doing what babies do best!); the God that is immortal and the source of all life experiencing death on a cross.

Why did God have to come to us like this? Why did he have to be born a human being? Athanasius, the third century Bishop of Alexandria and defender of the deity of Christ, wrote a book about the Incarnation to explain it. He said that Jesus had to become human so that we might become divine i.e. immortal. His argument went that as sin entered the world, so did death and decay. This principle of corruption means that our bodies decay and eventually die. We are basically rotting flesh. Jesus took on this bodily stuff to put an end to this process and he had to die to achieve it. In Christ, *the perishable has been clothed with imperishable and the mortal with immortality ... Death has been swallowed up in victory* (1 Corinthians 15:54). As Athanasius said, 'For the Word was not degraded by receiving a body; rather he deified what he put on'. God, the Son, became flesh and blood and came to live with us and die for us so that we will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Prayer: Thank you Jesus that because you lived and conquered death, we will be raised immortal and live with you forever. Amen

Monday 11th December 2017

REAL FLESH

1 John 1:1-3

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (d. 107) wrote 'Jesus Christ was of the race of David, the child of Mary, who was truly (genuinely) born and ate and drank, was truly (genuinely) persecuted under Pontius Pilate'. This was to combat the heresy called Docetism where the flesh and blood of the Son of God is not considered real. Their argument goes that Jesus only appeared to be a human being. They saw physical matter as inherently evil, but Christ was pure, so he must have been some kind of ghost!?

John's letter was specifically written to refute these heresies. He starts by proclaiming that Jesus was one who he could see and touch (v. 1). John affirms that the Son of God became a real human being, ate, drank (etc.), grew tired and slept just like us and really suffered on the cross. In John's Gospel, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink (John 4:7) - it is the middle of the day, he is hot, tired and thirsty.

Also, Jesus was physically raised from the dead so after the resurrection, he was still real flesh and blood even though it was then the disciples who thought he was a ghost - *Jesus stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and frightened thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them. Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have... he asked them, 'Do you have anything to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence (Luke 24:36-43).*

Prayer: Lord Jesus we want to affirm your humanity, that you came as flesh and blood like us. You were God but showed us how to be truly human. Help us to live in the way you showed us. Amen

Tuesday 12th December 2017

MADE NOTHING

Philippians 2:1-11

Philip Yancey writes in his book 'The Jesus I Never Knew' that he learned about incarnation when he kept a salt water aquarium. The management of it was no easy task. He had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate and ammonia content. He pumped in vitamins, antibiotics, sulpha drugs and enzymes. He filtered the water through glass fibres and charcoal and exposed it to ultraviolet light. He thought that, given the amount of energy he expended on their behalf, that the fish would be grateful. Not so. Every time his shadow loomed above the tank they hid behind the nearest shell. They showed only one emotion: fear. He dropped in food regularly to show that he cared. To the fish he was deity. He was too big, they did not understand his actions. His acts of mercy they interpreted as cruelty and any attempts at healing viewed as destruction. The only way to communicate with them and change their perceptions would be a form of incarnation. He would have to become a fish.

This illustrates what God did in Jesus Christ. He did not hang on to his deity *but made himself nothing* (v. 7). He did not exploit his equality with God for his own advantage but of his own free will, he gave up all that he had. 'He emptied himself' is a literal translation of this verse, and took on the nature of a servant or form of a slave. He left the glory and majesty of heaven to be made in human likeness and to humble himself. We should have the same attitude as him (v. 5) and not hang on to things like position or status but be prepared to be nothing like Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, you gave up everything for me, help me not to keep hold of the things that you want me to give up for you. Amen

Wednesday 13th December 2017

PERFECT TIMING

Galatians 3:26-4:7

Through the Son of God becoming a human being and dying for us, we are included in God's family. Not only that but we receive full rights of adopted children (v. 4 - *Now if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ - Romans 8:17*). By the Spirit, Jesus' Father becomes our Father (v. 6). His timing is perfect because at just the right time, God broke into space and time history. Up to this point in time, God's dealings with his people in the Old Testament was as a Father looking after a young child like the young heir to an estate who, as far as rights are concerned, is no different to a slave and is very much limited by others. But when the child grows to maturity, they receive the promised inheritance. At just the right time, the time appointed by the Father, Jesus was sent to redeem us from the bondage of slavery to sin and bring us into the promised position of true, mature children with all the rights and privileges of being members of God's family (4:4,5).

God wants all the members of his family to resemble the nature and characteristics of his Son - *For those God fore knew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29)*. This is most clearly seen not through acts of power but in his loving and humble service. When Jesus washed his disciple's feet, he set us an example that we should do the same (John 13:15). Robert Murray McCheyne observed, 'It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus'.

Prayer: Lord, thank you that you provided the way for us to be heirs in your family. Please continue to transform us by the Holy Spirit, into the likeness of Jesus so we do the things he did. Amen

Thursday 14th December 2017

ONE OF US

Hebrews 2:10-18

Jesus was not spirited into the world like an ethereal being or only assumed the form of a man. This is the message not only of the Gospels that emphasise the humanity of Jesus, but also the letters of the New Testament. In the early years of the Church the main theological priority was to establish the deity of Christ in the face of opposition. This is when the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were formulated. But how can Jesus be fully God and fully human? Does his divinity make him less human or his humanity make him less than divine? As Martin Luther said, 'The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that he sunk himself into our flesh, is beyond human understanding'. That Jesus was born as one of us is the thrust of this passage, but it also gives us the reasons why. Jesus shared our humanity in both life and death so that we might be glorified (v. 10), sanctified (v. 11), liberated (v. 15) and purified from sin (v. 17)!

C S Lewis wrote concerning the Incarnation - 'Imagine that your dog and every dog is in deep distress. Some of us love dogs very much. If it would help all the dogs in the world to become like men, would you be willing to become a dog? Would you leave everything and choose, instead of the intimate communion with your beloved, the poor substitute of looking into the beloved's face and wagging your tail, unable to smile or speak? Christ by becoming man limited the thing which to him was most precious to him; his unhindered communion with the Father'. It is beyond us to really comprehend the motivation of God that meant Jesus would come to live with us on earth as one of us - but he did!

Prayer: Lord, we are just so grateful that you became one of us and, that you know all about our human frailty and weakness. Amen

Friday 15th December 2017

A MAN FOR US

John 3:16-21

In 1098, Anselm, then Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a book called 'Why God became Man' giving his reasons why God became a human being. For Anselm, the big problem is sin. He explains sin as failing to give God what he is entitled to in worship and obedience, thereby robbing God and dishonouring him. It is not enough just to repay what has been taken, there must be satisfaction. Humanity constantly robs God of his due and owes such a huge debt to God that it cannot repay it. It can only be met by God himself. This is helpful but all rather cold and impersonal. That God himself should pay the debt because of its enormity does not take into enough account the motivation behind the Incarnation. God sent his Son and gave him to the cross because of his great love for us (v. 16). This is the reason why Jesus left the glory of heaven to live among us and to die for us. Love is the foundation of all creation. The reason why he made it was love. Love is also the motivation for God's plan for the redemption of his lost creatures and his marred creation.

God gave us his Son (v. 16), to restore us not to condemn us (v. 17). God loves us and wants us to love him - *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9,10). God is on our side and - If God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31).*

Prayer: Thank you Lord that you gave us your Son because you love your creation, the world and everything and everyone in it. Help us always to remember that you are for us, on our side, encouraging us, rooting for us, no matter how we feel. Amen

Saturday 16th December 2017

PREPARING THE WAY

Romans 10:8-17

On Christmas Eve the Chicago Daily News used to print a cartoon of a beautifully decorated Christmas tree with an unopened package underneath labelled 'Eternal Life'. The Cartoon was entitled 'The Untaken Gift'. John 3:16 was quoted underneath. God in his love and goodness gave his Son to the world and offers eternal life to all who would receive it. This is good news to beat all good news. This year countless millions will leave the gift untaken. So, the question Paul asks remains - *How can they believe on the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* (v. 14).

Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:7 (v. 15), referring to those who bring the exiles the good news of their immanent release from captivity in Babylon. John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for the good news about Jesus and the release from captivity from the bondage of sin - *There came a man that was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness concerning (the) light, so that through him all men might believe* (John 1:6,7). John the Baptist is the one Isaiah spoke of that would herald the coming of the Messiah - *A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God* (Isaiah 40:3). Matthew quotes this when he refers to John the Baptist preaching in the Desert of Judea saying *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near* (Matthew 3:1-3). *The word is near* (v. 8) , let us proclaim this message of salvation.

Prayer: Lord, as we proclaim your word this Advent season may we prepare others for your coming to them, so they are able to receive your gift of eternal life. Amen

Sunday 17th December 2017

THE LORD'S SERVANT

Luke 1:26-38

Christmas is only nine days away - yes, this is a good time to start panicking about the Christmas shopping! Having considered the reasons why *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14), we now come on to how it came about. Here we read of the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, a young unmarried woman from Nazareth in Galilee. This is known as the Annunciation and starts with the Latin greeting, 'Ave Maria'. Suddenly at just the right time in human history, in an obscure little town, the great messenger Archangel appears before Mary. To say that she was greatly troubled at what the angel said to her (v. 29) seems something of an understatement but her reaction to the angel is in marked contrast with that of her cousin's husband, Zechariah, who was scared witless - *When Zechariah saw (the angel of the Lord), he was startled and was gripped with fear* (v. 13).

This is not the only way that Zechariah falls short. Mary's response to the fact that she is going to conceive a child without sexual relations outside of marriage causes her simply to ask how it was going to happen (v. 34). Zechariah responds quite differently with a tone practically ridiculing the message the angel brought to him (v. 18). Mary's response to what the angel had to say is that of humble acceptance and obedience born of devotion and faith. Mary is the model of true discipleship for us all. Our response to God's call, no matter how costly or life changing, is to be the same as Mary's - *I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said* (v. 38).

Prayer: Lord when you call us to respond in obedience to some new service or step of faith, no matter how astonishing we think it is, help us to respond like Mary and not like Zechariah. Amen

Monday 18th December 2017

BLESSED IS SHE

Luke 1:39-45

The next episode in the narrative of the Incarnation is Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Having been told of Elizabeth's pregnancy despite her barrenness (v. 36), Mary dashes out to see her (v. 39), desperate no doubt to talk to someone about all that had happened and especially to someone who won't pack her off to the first century Palestinian equivalent of a secure unit! Elizabeth's reaction to Mary is one of sublime praise and worship inspired by the Holy Spirit and based on Hebrew poetry (v. 42). By supernatural prophetic insight, she knows that Mary is to be the mother of the Lord (v. 43). Even the baby in her womb recognises this (v. 44)!

How tremendously inspiring and strengthening this must have been for Mary to hear these words of faith and encouragement. How much we need to encourage each other in our life of faith. Mary has already been described as *highly favoured* (v. 28) and now her cousin calls her blessed (vs. 42,45). She is blessed because she *has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished* (v. 45). Mary is like Enoch who was commended as one who pleased God because he lived a life of faith and walked with God (Genesis 5:24) and without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:5,6). She is like Abraham who believed God and it was credited as to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3). Paul longs to see the Roman Christians so that they may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith (Romans 1:12). To read of, hear and see the faith of others is both inspiring and strengthening.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the encouragement we receive. Help us to be obedient to you so that others may be encouraged in their walk with God by our faith. Amen

Tuesday 19th December 2017

MARY'S SONG

Luke 1:46-56

Mary responds to Elizabeth's words of encouragement with a worship song of her own. This song is just like a Psalm and similar to Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Mary uses beautiful Hebrew poetry to express her adoration and celebration of God and his goodness. She uses Old Testament phraseology in much the same way that, in our extempore prayers of praise, we might use archaic language dredged up perhaps from our childhoods or include lines from old familiar and much-loved hymns. This is known as the Magnificat after the Latin for 'glorifies' as seen in the first line - *My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour* (v. 46 AV).

The content of Mary's Song gives us a clue as to the true nature and character of the person God chose to bear the Incarnate Christ. Mary appreciates her unique experience of God, but she knows that it is not based on her deserving of the honour. Despite being so amazingly blessed by God, she knows herself to be nothing, a servant of the Lord, a humble, lowly maiden who needs a Saviour just like everyone else. She is not concerned with what she is or will be but what the Lord has done. *From now on all generations will call me blessed* (v. 48) - not as the mother of the Son of God but because *the Mighty One has done great things for her* (v. 49). He lifts up the humble but scatters the proud (vs. 51,52) - *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble* (James 4:6). Because of her humility, Mary experiences the blessing of God and so truly glorifies the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, forgive us for our pride and give us a humble spirit like Mary's, no matter how much you bless us, and forgive us most of all for thinking we are humble enough. Amen

Wednesday 20th December 2017

ZECHARIAH'S SONG

Luke 2:67-79

Zechariah's words, known as the Benedictus from the Latin for the opening phrase 'Praise be', are actually less like a song or psalm but more of a prophecy. The Holy Spirit came upon Zechariah at the naming ceremony of his son, John, and he was able to speak for the first time for at least nine months, uttering these inspired words.

Instead of waxing lyrically about his new born son out of exuberant paternal devotion, Zechariah praises God and affirms his promises for the first eight out of the twelve verses. Then he talks about his son being the forerunner - *And you, my son, will be called prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him* (v. 76). Zechariah soon realises that if his son is the forerunner then there is soon to appear one who is infinitely more important and significant than John.

In Zechariah's mind's eye, he can see that John is already outshone by the rising sun which *will come to us from heaven* (v. 78). The Apostle John in his Gospel writes of John the Baptist not being the light but that *he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world* (John 1:8,9). Interestingly, Zechariah uses the past tense (vs. 68,69) even though Jesus is not yet born, the sun had not yet risen. It was still dark. But through the eyes of faith, it was as if it had already happened - *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see* (Hebrews 11:1). We too are called to *live by faith and not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Prayer: Lord help us to keep looking through the eyes of faith and to keep believing and living like Zechariah as if we already have that which you have promised. Amen

Thursday 21st December 2017

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Isaiah 9:1-7

Zechariah speaks of the rising sun, who is to come from heaven, that will shine on all who are lost in darkness, separated from God in the shadow of death and he will guide their feet into the path of peace (Luke 1:79). This verse is so reminiscent of Isaiah's prophecy about 700 years earlier - *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned* (v. 2).

God is clearly seen as the victor here through all the struggles of war and oppression by the Assyrians and he promises an end of the gloom of the distressed (v. 1). Isaiah has already promised the coming of a sign - *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:14) and further strengthens this with the promise of the coming of the Saviour (vs 2-7). Isaiah talks of a 'child', a 'son', being 'born', 'given' (v. 6) - surely speaking of the incarnation of Christ, who became a little baby! This is the one who would become the *Wonderful Counsellor* whose counsel would come from God, the *Mighty God* or 'Hero-God, the *Everlasting Father* or 'Father and king for ever' and the *Prince of Peace*. This peace is more than just freedom from war. It speaks of the rich, full, creative, joyous, harmonious community life of those who will dwell together as the redeemed in God's kingdom. It speaks of God's 'shalom' or wholeness of life and it is given by Jesus (John 14:27). This is the great message of the angels who praised God at Jesus' birth saying, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests* (Luke 2:14).

Prayer: Lord thank you for your peace that passes understanding. Please guide us in the path of peace. Amen

Friday 22nd December 2017

FROM BETHLEHEM

Micah 5:1-5a

In asking questions about the who, what and why of the Incarnation, we come to the question - where? Could this world changing, earth shattering, cosmically significant event have happened just anywhere? Is the choice of the venue arbitrary, like sticking a pin in a map, or is it an integral part of the preordained purposes of God? Is the little town of Bethlehem in Judea meaningful in itself in some way?

From this prophecy of Micah, we see that Bethlehem was chosen for a reason - and not just to fit the prophecy! Things were not going well for Jerusalem or its Davidic kings. There was going to be a siege and the people taken into exile in Babylon (v. 1). But things were going to change (v. 2). Ultimately the situation of defeat would be reversed. The Messiah incarnated in lowly Bethlehem, Ephrathah will triumph. These names translate as 'house of bread' and 'fruitfulness', indicating future prosperity. This is the place where King David came from (1 Samuel 17:12) and the true King of the line of David would also, therefore, come from here. The Messianic age would be launched from this small, seemingly insignificant place - *But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah (Matthew 2:6)*. As so often with God, what the world sees as insignificant is actually not the case in the purposes of God. The fulfillment of this prophecy confirms that the Lord delights to choose the weak and despised things of the world to shame the wise and the strong (Corinthians 1:27,28).

Prayer: Lord, help us not to be dismissive of people or situations because they appear insignificant by worldly standards but always see their possibilities and potential in your Kingdom. Amen

Saturday 23rd December 2017

JESUS, SAVIOUR

Matthew 1:18-21

The next question to think about concerning the Incarnation echoes Mary's own in Luke 1:34 - How? This is not an easy one to answer because we are now delving into the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. In Luke, the angel answered Mary's quite legitimate query - *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you* (Luke 1:35). The phrase 'overshadow you' picks up Old Testament symbolism, such as that of the cloud of God's glory over the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:35) and the winged cherubim overshadowing the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:20). Matthew is less descriptive - *(Mary) was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit* (v. 18) Somehow the creative power of the Holy Spirit brings about the conception of the child. How difficult this was for Joseph until that is, the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and allays all his fears and doubts (vs. 20,21).

Instead of dumping Mary, by simply giving her a 'bill of divorce', Joseph is given the assurance, the strength and the faith to believe that what is going on is from God. He is to name the child and in so doing officially accept him and confer on him the status of a descendent of David. He is not free to decide on the name because this child is special, and his destiny is to be expressed in the meaning of his name - *you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins* (v. 21). As William Barclay put it, 'Jesus was not so much The Man born to be King, as He was The Man born to be Saviour'.

Prayer: Lord, help us to keep trusting in you to allay all our fears and doubts and receive the assurance, the strength and the faith to keep on believing in Jesus as the Saviour of the world. Amen.

Sunday 24th December 2017

NO VACANCIES

Luke 2:1-7

Due to a Roman census taken for taxation purposes, Joseph and the heavily pregnant Mary have to travel about 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem (vs. 1-3). They had to register in the place where they came from (v. 4). Both Mary and Joseph came from the family of David as can be seen from the genealogies of Matthew 1:1-16, giving the line of Joseph, and Luke 3:23-38 emphasising that of Mary. This is important because Jesus' claim to Messiahship meant that he had to be of David's house and so be heir to the covenant and promises made by God with David (1 Chronicles 17:14). This is why the angel describes the destined role of Mary's child as *The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end* (Luke 1:32,33).

Despite having relatives in the town, they were not able to stay with any of them. All accommodation for travellers was pretty basic, effectively being a series of stalls that opened out onto a common courtyard. Innkeepers merely provided fodder for animals and a fire to cook on. But the town was so crowded that there were 'no vacancies' left for Mary and Joseph. So Mary's baby was born in the courtyard. The word manger could be a stable or generally where the animals fed. This is the popular nativity scene of Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus placed in a food trough surrounded by a selection of farm animals. This is the dramatic illustration of Jesus' life. There was no room for him in the overcrowded inn. Is there any room for him now in the overcrowded hearts of people?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, forgive us that we crowd out our lives with so much that there is little room left for you. We pray that you will have the prime place in our lives. Amen

Monday 25th December 2017

THE CHILD IS BORN

Luke 2:8-20

This is the day of celebration - Christ is born today!

Hark! the herald angels sing: 'Glory to the new-born King!

Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!

The long-awaited Messiah, the Incarnate King, the Sun of Righteousness, the Lord of Glory, the Prince of Peace, the Saviour of the world is here! The angel proclaims - *Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord* (v. 11). This is good news indeed. No wonder all the angels start celebrating and praising God giving him all the glory (v. 14).

This most familiar of Christmas nativity stories is full of poetic symbolism. This should not detract from its historicity. How dull and pedestrian history would be without poetry and yes, how meaningless such symbolism would be without historical truth. Here in the Gospel of Christ we have both - the rich imagery of the shepherds caring for their sheep, the mother cradling her baby, the radiant choir of angels bursting into the darkness giving encouragement and assurance even to the humblest. God cares for us and has come to us. We no longer have any need to be afraid. God in his grace and mercy has reached down to us. As John Stott wrote, 'grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues'. This is what God has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. What is the response of the shepherds? Well once they have got over the shock, they hurtle off to find out for themselves what the angels are singing about (vs. 15,16). The shepherds search for the true Shepherd. What is our response? Are we seeking him with the same sense of urgency and excitement this Christmas?

Prayer: Lord, today we celebrate. Help us to be like these shepherds who left everything to look for you. Amen

Tuesday 26th December 2017

IMMANUEL, GOD WITH US

Matthew 1:22-25

In the fourth century, Athanasius described the agency of the Holy Spirit in the Immaculate Conception as, 'he built himself a temple, a body, that is, in the Virgin, and so made himself an instrument in which to dwell'. Writing at about the same time on the incarnation, Cyril of Jerusalem was a little more down to earth. He bluntly stated that 'Christ did not pass through the Virgin as through a channel but truly took flesh and was truly fed with milk from her. He truly ate as we eat and drank as we drink. For if the incarnation was a figment then so is our salvation'. The significance of the Virgin is in the mode of conception. It is the conception that is virginal not the birth! Mary and Joseph enjoyed a normal marriage and, after Jesus, had plenty of other children conceived in the usual way?

Matthew quotes Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 7:14) about the virgin bearing a special son (v.22). The sign Isaiah speaks of is of a liberator that will convince King Ahaz that God is with him. Matthew includes this because in Jesus this promise has been fulfilled in its fullest sense. Jesus is also to be called *Immanuel* - which means *God with us* (v. 23). No-one actually called Jesus by this name but all that is meant by Immanuel was embodied in him. The quotation and the name are written to underline the fact that in Jesus none less than God himself came to us right where we are. At the end of this Gospel after the Great Commission is the promise that Jesus will be with his people to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20) - God with us indeed!

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that you came to us to be right where we are. You promise to be with us always and never leave us. Help us to do everything you have commanded. Amen

Wednesday 27th December 2017

COME TO WORSHIP

Matthew 2:1-12

What is our response to the coming of God's incarnate Son? Here we read that *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea* (v. 1) there were already a variety of reactions.

Firstly, we have Herod the Great (37-4 BC) King of Judea, Galilee, Iturea and Traconitis. He is disturbed and responds in suspicion, fear and hostility. This little baby threatens everything he holds dear - his status, his power, his influence. He wants him dead, just like all those who don't want him to interfere with their lives. They want to do what they like, and Christ will not let them.

Secondly, we have the chief priests and teachers of the law. Their reaction is one of complete indifference. The birth of Jesus Christ did not make any difference to them. They were blindly and doggedly going to carry on just the same. They had their own lives to lead and nothing and no-one was going to disturb this - even God! The trouble is, for them and for all who try to ignore Christ, God has a way of breaking through!

Thirdly, there are the wise men from Babylon. These were not those with a special gift of wisdom but astrologers, students of the stars, interpreters of dreams - New Age travellers? Their reaction is of adoring worship. When they find the baby, they bow down and worship him (v. 11). They were most probably not kings but laid down their costly and noble gifts as an offering of worship before the infant King. What is our reaction to Jesus - one of hostility or indifference or do we bow down and offer to him our equivalent of costly gifts of worship as a sacrifice of praise?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we offer to you our worship and adoration. Help us to give you our all even if it is costly to us. Amen

Thursday 28th December 2017

SIMEON'S SONG

Luke 2:21 -35

In this section we read of the observation of ancient Israelite ceremonies - circumcision, redemption of the firstborn and purification after childbirth because *God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law (Galatians 4:4)*. When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple they met a man there called Simeon. Who was he? Nothing seems to be known of him. It is presumed that he was an elderly chap because the narrative gives the sense that he has been waiting patiently for the redemption of Israel for a long time (v. 25). The Holy Spirit came upon this pious, old Jew so that he was able to recognise Jesus and see what had long been promised. So much of the Christmas story is about promises being fulfilled which then prompts praise and worship. God is a God who keeps his promises.

Simeon's reaction to seeing his promised Messiah is to respond in a song of praise of Hebrew poetry full of prophetic insight and Old Testament references. This is known as the Nunc Dimittis, Latin for the first words 'Now dismiss'. Simeon is looking back, remembering all the promises and saying 'that's it, I've seen it, I can now die in peace'. At this time of year, we can often spend time looking back and seeing how God has been with us over the past year and see how he has fulfilled his promises to us. The puritans used to call this 'recollections'. As the Lord said, *stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls (Jeremiah 6:16)*.

Prayer: Lord as we look back and recollect your goodness to us, help us to do so not with regret but with the eyes of faith. Amen

Friday 29th December 2017

ANNA'S SERMON

Luke 2:36-40

Just as Simeon was blessing the family and giving that prophetic word to Mary about her son and how his ministry will affect her (v. 34,35), at that very moment Anna comes up to them (v. 38). We know a little more about Anna than we do about Simeon. She is a prophetess, of which there are several in Scripture such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4) and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9). Anna had been a widow for many years. She lived in the precincts of the temple in Jerusalem so that she could be constantly at worship (v. 37). She was very old but never missed a worship service and never gave up hope. She was like the psalmist who says to the Lord, *no-one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame* (Psalm 25:3) and, *as for me, I shall always have hope; I will praise you more and more* (Psalm 71:14).

Despite her age, Anna's response to seeing the infant Christ is different to that of Simeon's. Simeon looked back, Anna looks forward (v. 38). She gives thanks for the child and preaches a sermon to all who are of a similar attitude to her, all looking forward to the redemption of Israel. Simeon looks at the difficulties, Anna is encouraging, positive and enthusiastic. The difference between these two is a bit like the difference between those whose glass is half empty or half full. Stemming from a life of worship, prayer and fasting, she sees the future and, even though the way may not be easy, it is full of blessing, hope and salvation. This is what Jesus brings to us as we look to the future. As the Lord said, *Forget the former things do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!* (Isaiah 43:18).

Prayer: Lord, help us not to dwell on the past but like Anna look to the future with hope and anticipation. Amen

Saturday 30th December 2017

KEEP WATCH

Mark 13:32-37

As we look to the future, we need to remember that the Bible has even more to say to us about the second coming of Jesus than the first. When Jesus comes again, however, he will not be born in a squalid stable full of animals but *will come on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory (Matthew 24:30) - For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God (1 Thess 4:16)*. This is what was promised on the day of Ascension when angels spoke to the disciples as they watched Jesus being taken up before their eyes. *'Men of Galilee' they said 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11)*.

But when will he come? Robert Murray McCheyne, a Scottish minister, asked some friends, 'Do you think that Christ will come tonight?' They all answered, 'Oh no, I think not.' Then he quoted the words of Jesus, 'The Son of Man cometh at an hour when, ye think not'. We do not know the day or the hour, so Jesus implores us to be ready - *'Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come... keep watch' (vs. 33,35)*. We are to keep watch for the second coming as those who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel looked for the first. The shepherds were given a sign for the first coming of Christ (Luke 2:12) and Jesus warns us of *fearful events and great signs from heaven (Luke 21:11)* that will precede his coming again. He instructs us to *Be always on the watch, and pray (Luke 21:36)*.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we look forward to the day of your coming again in glory, help us to keep watch, and pray. Amen

Sunday 31st December 2017

WAKE UP

Romans 13:8-14

On the night Jesus was betrayed into the hands of those who would have him put to death on a cross, he went to a favourite place to pray - the beautiful, cool, serene gardens of Gethsemane. There, he asked his disciples to keep watch and pray with him because his soul was overwhelmed to the point of death (Matthew 26:38). But when he returned, he found them sleeping - *Could you not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation* (Matthew 26:40,41). The Apostle Paul urges the Christians in Colossae to devote themselves to prayer being watchful and thankful (Colossians 4:2). Being watchful, alert and prayerful is the only way to stand up to temptation, to the devil's schemes and to live in such a way that we will be ready for the Lord whenever he comes. St Basil, the 4th century, Greek father of the church said this: - 'What is the mark of a Christian? To love one another, even as Christ also loved us. What is the mark of a Christian? To see the Lord always before him. What is the mark of a Christian? To watch each night and day and, in perfectly pleasing God, to be ready'.

In this passage in Romans, the certainty of the second coming and the end of the age is used to motivate and encourage us to live godly lives (vs. 11-14). *You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming* (2 Peter 3:11,12). We need to wake up (v. 12) and take our responsibilities as God's people seriously. *Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead,* (Ephesians 5:14) for *'I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation* (2 Cor 6:2).

Prayer: Lord, as we look forward to the new year and to your return, help us to live prayerful, godly lives and be ready. Amen