

Circuit service for December 18th, 2022 (Advent 4)

Prepared by Jon Skeet

Advent Liturgy

Introduction and invocation

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we relight the first three candles, of expectation, hope and peace, and we light the fourth Advent candle, as a sign of the **love** of God, shown to us in Jesus Christ.

Lord, touch us and our world with love.

The lighting of the candles

As the fourth candle is lit, a reader says:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10: 17-19)

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13: 34-35)

Response

StF 168 – *either* sing verses 1 - 4, *or*:

Leader Come Lord Jesus, we need your hope
 Fill us with your peace
 Touch us with your love

Response **Come Lord Jesus, to this world of ours**

Prayer

God of love and mercy,
may your Holy Spirit fill our hearts with your love,
the love that was made flesh in your son Jesus.

Move our lives to show your love,
for with your love, all things are possible.

Amen.

Call to worship

Welcome to worship on this fourth Sunday of Advent, however you are worshipping. If you are taking time on your own, know that God is with you. If you are joining others via Zoom, we pray for each home represented on the screen. If you are in a church building, we pray for the work of God in that place.

In this service, we'll be making Advent personal. We will go on a journey from God *transcendent* – beyond human knowledge or perception – to God *immanent*, here amongst us in human form, with a ministry of making God known and accessible.

Our first hymn is a combination of the two: while it describes “every eye” beholding God, its music is grandiose. You may wish to picture a huge cathedral, dimly lit, with a thundering organ and perhaps the smell of incense – all earthly attempts to glimpse something of all-encompassing glory of God.

Hymn: STF 177 – Lo, he comes with clouds descending

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cHmPHCljY8>

(Words by Charles Wesley. H&P 241; CCLI 4256010)

1. Lo, he comes with clouds descending,
once for favoured sinners slain;
thousand thousand saints attending
swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia!
God appears on earth to reign.
2. Every eye shall now behold him
robed in glorious majesty;
we who set at nought and sold him,
pierced and nailed him to the tree,
deeply wailing,
shall the true Messiah see.
3. Those dear tokens of his passion
still his dazzling body bears;
cause of endless exultation
to his ransomed worshippers:
with what rapture
gaze we on those glorious scars.
4. Sing, amen, let all adore thee,
high on thine eternal throne;
Saviour, take the power and glory,
claim the kingdom for thine own:
come, Lord Jesus!
Everlasting God, come down!

Prayer of thanksgiving

Lord God, we thank you for a reminder of your majesty. We remember that everything we have comes from you; that your generosity is as boundless as your love and power. We give thanks that you recognise what we need most, even when we don't: our relationship with you. As we reached feebly to the heavens, unable to understand your nature, you came to earth as Jesus, so that each one of us could know you better.

We thank you that after Jesus was crucified and resurrected, and ascended into heaven, you blessed us with the Holy Spirit, moving with us and between us, working in our communities and demonstrating your love for all people.

Lord, we offer our thanks and praise for everything you are, everything you have done for us, and everything you continue to do, eternally.

Amen.

We say together the Lord's Prayer.

If an offertory is to be taken, it may be received at this point – or after the prayers of intercession if that fits better with the pattern of worship.

We now hear our first reading from Scripture: the *annunciation* or announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary.

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

We'll reflect on Mary shortly, but first we sing "The Angel Gabriel" – a paraphrase of the Basque carol, retaining its somewhat haunting music. Can you feel the transcendence of God, defying any adequate representation, even while the angel makes God's message known to Mary?

Hymn: STF 187 – The Angel Gabriel from heaven came

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzC9dxwRddc>

(Words by Sabine Baring-Gould. H&P 87; CCLI 5009754)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow,
his eyes as flame;
'All hail', said he,
'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!</p> | <p>3. Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God, she said,
'My soul shall laud and magnify
his holy name:'
most highly favoured lady.
Gloria!</p> |
| <p>2. 'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy son shall be Immanuel,
by seers foretold:
most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!</p> | <p>4. Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world
will ever say,
'Most highly favoured lady.'
Gloria!</p> |

Reflection 1: Mary

Mary is one of the most well-known women in the world, and almost certainly the most frequently talked about and prayed to woman *ever*. Imagine the billions of prayers addressing Mary over the centuries. Think of how many statues and pictures there are of her; how many books of poems and reflections on every aspect of the annunciation and the few later appearances in the Gospels.

Who are you, Mary?

Are you a meek young woman, eager to please, never saying boo to a goose? Did your "yes" begin before Gabriel had finished speaking?

Are you a trouble-maker, keen to shake up the Roman empire, thrilled at the opportunity to be part of a rebellion for Israel to be ruled by one of David's line?

Are you thoughtful beyond our dismissive expectations of teenagers, responding to Gabriel's news with reflective questions? When the shepherds visited Jesus, you "treasured up all these things and pondered them in your heart" – did you ever reach any conclusions?

Are you angry sometimes, frustrated by the assumption of your "yes"? Do you wonder what right we have to invade the privacy of your pregnancy?

Are you funny, with a belly laugh that flies in the face of the unending line of images of "Mary dressed in blue", with a face showing love that is only solemn? Did you tickle Jesus and respond to his smiles with your own?

Are you all of these things? We marvel at Jesus being fully human, but then try to reduce you, his mother, to a few clichés that are less than any real human. Does that bother you, or is it insignificant compared with the pain of your son's sacrifice for us?

Who are you, Mary?

Prayer of confession

We offer a prayer of confession.

Lord, we are sorry for our narrow ways of thinking, and everything that comes from them. For times we have reduced people to a single label: refugee, immigrant, professional, unemployed, remainder or leaver. We are sorry for the hurt we cause by thoughts of "them and us" – and the boundaries we place on the love we're willing to show.

We are sorry for times we have deliberately ignored your call to love.

We are sorry for times that we've not even been aware of your will; for times that we have hurt others through careless words and actions.

We know that for every life, you see the whole person, not the label, and so we know that we are seen too. As we turn back to you, we are sure of your forgiveness – not because we deserve it, but because of the grace shown through Christ. And so we rejoice with wonder and gratitude: our sins are forgiven.

Amen.

Having thought about Mary, we now turn to Joseph in our second reading.

Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Our second hymn recalls God speaking not just to Joseph, but to God's people throughout the ages – and reminds us that we are God's people, called like those before us.

Hymn: STF 464 – God it was who said to Abraham

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArWTCvLWp_o

(Words by John Bell and Graham Maule. CCLI 959404;

H&P alternative: 98 – Cradled in a manger meanly)

1. God it was who said to Abraham,
'Pack your bags and travel on.'
God it was who said to Sarah,
'Smile and soon you'll bear a son.'
Travelling folk and aged mothers
wandering when they thought they'd done —
this is how we find God's people,
leaving all because of One.
2. God it was who said to Moses,
'Save my people, part the sea.'
God it was who said to Miriam,
'Sing and dance to show you're free.'
Shepherd-saints and tambourinists
doing what God knew they could —
this is how we find God's people,
liberating what they should.
3. God it was who said to Joseph,
'Down your tools and take your wife.'
God it was who said to Mary,
'In your womb, I'll start my life!'
Carpenter and country maiden
leaving town and trade and skills —
this is how we find God's people,
moved by what their Maker wills.
4. Christ it was who said, 'Zacchaeus,
I would like to eat with you.'
Christ it was who said to Martha,
'Listening's what you need to do.'
Civil servants and housekeepers,
changing places at a cost —
this is how Christ summons people,
calling both the loved and lost.
5. In this crowd which spans the ages,
with these saints whom we revere,
God wants us to share their purpose
starting now and starting here.
So we celebrate our calling,
so we raise both heart and voice,
as we pray that through our living
more may find they are God's choice.

Reflection 2: Joseph

When Jesus called the apostles, he promised to make them "fishers of men".

When Gabriel appeared before Mary, he announced that Mary was highly favoured; that God would reside within her womb.

When a host of angels appeared to the shepherds, they were told "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

The angel who appeared before Joseph asked Joseph to stay with Mary, and name the baby Jesus. It doesn't feel quite the same.

I'm exaggerating – Joseph *is* told that Jesus will “save his people from their sins.” But it still feels like Joseph is playing second – or even third – fiddle. Did this feel like Good News to Joseph? The response of the couple's friends and family isn't recorded, but the assumption that either Mary had been unfaithful or Joseph had been rather too eager would not have gone down well. In a patriarchal society, instead of being the most important member of the household, he's stuck in last place. Their child will be the most important human being in history; Mary will be hailed as the model of motherhood for thousands of years. The Magnificat will be repeated and celebrated in services across the world – we don't even hear Joseph's response. When Jesus talks about his father, we know he means God the Creator – not Joseph.

Joseph doesn't appear in the gospels after the Passover visit to the temple in Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve years old. We can probably assume he died leaving Mary as a widow for the adult ministry of Jesus – but apparently that wasn't worth recording in the gospels.

So who is Joseph? A carpenter. Oh, and descended from David. That's it.

No.

No, because *no* human should be reduced to a handful of words.

And no, because even through the little we do know of Joseph, he was so much more. He was obedient in the face of social scorn. He took his family to Egypt as refugees to escape Herod. And he raised Jesus, with Mary. Who else had as many years living with Jesus? Who else watched him grow, remembering the promise of his nature and destiny? Who else felt the weight of that responsibility? Who else gently placed nails in the hands of Jesus as an act of apprenticeship, instead of the Romans' later act of cruel punishment?

We don't know how Joseph's relationship with Jesus took shape. We don't see the bond between them. We don't see their arguments and reconciliations, their growing together. But I have faith that the coming of Jesus really *was* Good News for Joseph, in a unique and personal way. We can celebrate that relationship without prying into it any further.

Prayers of intercession

We offer our prayers for the world. In a service based on personal experiences of Advent and Christmas, we offer these prayers individually. After a sentence introducing each area of prayer, we will pause, praying into the silence – and aware of “the breath of God moving in the fervent breath of prayer”.

Particular concerns may be introduced within these prayers at any point.

Lord, we pray for your church in the world, for all those who hear your call.

Silence.

Lord, we pray for leaders of nations, and all those making decisions affecting others, particularly in difficult financial circumstances and in the context of the war in Ukraine.
Silence.

Lord, we pray for all those facing challenges of health, poverty, injustice, war, natural disaster.
Silence.

Lord, we pray for your creation: for the climate, the landscape, and all living creatures.
Silence.

Lord, we pray for our local communities – for all those we know of who need your strength and comfort.
Silence.

All of these prayers we offer in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

After singing of the angel Gabriel earlier and reflecting on Mary and Joseph “back then”, our third hymn is more immediate, encouraging us in the here and now to be God’s angels for today, showing God’s love and offering praise to Jesus.

Hymn: STF 188 – There’s a light upon the mountains

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuvbW7gVwal>

(Words by Henry Burton. H&P 246; CCLI 2846240)

1. There's a light upon the mountains,
and the day is at the spring,
when our eyes shall see the beauty
and the glory of the King;
weary was our heart with waiting,
and the night-watch seemed so long;
but his triumph-day is breaking,
and we hail it with a song.
2. There's a hush of expectation,
and a quiet in the air;
and the breath of God is moving
in the fervent breath of prayer:
for the suffering, dying Jesus
is the Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our spirit
is the travail of his own.
3. He is breaking down the barriers,
he is casting up the way;
he is calling for his angels
to build up the gates of day:
but his angels here are human,
not the shining hosts above;
for the drum-beats of his army
are the heart-beats of our love.
4. Hark! We hear a distant music,
and it comes with fuller swell;
'tis the triumph-song of Jesus,
of our King, Immanuel:
Zion, go now forth to meet him;
and, my soul, be swift to bring
all your finest and your noblest
for the triumph of our King!

Reflection 3: each of us

Mary was a fully-rounded human. While being the mother of Jesus is no doubt the most historically important aspect of her life, it does not define everything about her.

Joseph was a fully-rounded human. While we may only see glimpses of his life, that doesn't mean that life was any less full, or his relationship with Jesus any less significant.

And so it is with us. When writing and recording this reflection, I have very little idea who will read it or listen to it. I don't know your background, your journey with God, what weight you might currently feel on your shoulders or what joys you might be celebrating.

But both Advent and Christmas are for you – for each of you, and for me. Part of the mystery and miracle of Immanuel, God *with us*, God with *each* of us, is that God is not some far off, distant, anonymous all-powerful deity. We are not numbers on a celestial spreadsheet; we are God's children. The relationship I have with each of my children is different and couldn't be summed up in a few sentences or generalised, so why would we expect human relationships with God to be any different?

In the Circuit Service for the first Sunday of Advent, Audrey spoke about waiting and being alert. Each of us has a different call; each of us will hear God's voice differently.

On the second Sunday of Advent, June spoke about our inheritance as children of God. In human family trees, we inherit DNA from our ancestors but that doesn't mean we're carbon copies of them. So as family members in the body of Christ, we are still unique, and precious in the eyes of God.

On the third Sunday of Advent, David spoke about God at work "now and not yet". God is at work in each of us, in a different way, now and not yet. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, we are each being transformed into God's image with ever-increasing glory. How boring it would be if we were all being transformed into the *same* likeness! Can you imagine the God of abundant creation ever aiming for such uniformity?

So today, I'm preaching of Christ coming into the world *for you*. Not *only* for you, but still *for you*. What does that mean in *your* heart? How does it change how *you* live? Don't accept anyone else's answer as a substitute for your own – instead, like Mary, treasure up all these things in ponder them in your heart. For the birth of Jesus is as much for *you* as for Mary, or Joseph, or for any one of the other children of God. Rejoice and be glad – God is with us!

Amen.

Our final hymn in this service doubles as our prayer of adoration. You may be surprised to see it at the end, rather than alongside the reading and reflection around Mary. But today we are co-opting it from Mary to make it personal to us; each one of us can sing “Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!” as the Lord has given each one of us unnumbered blessings. Let us sing our praises to God, our individual voices combining, and joining with choirs of angels in every place and time.

Hymn: STF 186 – Tell out, my soul

(Words by Timothy Dudley-Smith. H&P 86; CCLI 2402653)

1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.
2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name — the Lord, the Mighty One.
3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.
4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and forever more!

Amen!

Blessing

May we feel as blessed as Mary, singing praises so long ago.

May we be as steadfast as Joseph and as faithful to God's will.

And may we carry blessings to others, sharing the miracle of God's presence on earth: God with all of us, and God with each of us.

Amen.