



"God's ridiculous plan?"

A service sheet to guide reflections on and around Sunday
20th December 2020

Our call to worship: This year at Christchurch through Advent we are thinking about homelessness and hospitality. We are adapting the Candle liturgy that the Methodist Church prepared for 2019. *We pray*

Jesus Christ, we seek you through our Advent journey.
In need of shelter, you had nowhere to lay your head.
We ask your forgiveness for our lack of welcome, our lack of warmth.
Help us to offer a place of safety, a place of hospitality, a place where others may find rest and shelter, a place which they might call home.

All: Jesus Christ, we wait for you. Jesus Christ, we welcome you.

Leader: We sing the fourth verse of *Longing for light*

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone. *Christ be our light! Shine in our hearts,*

Hymn Once in Royal David City Singing the Faith 214

On the fourth Sunday in Advent we often remember Mary. In this carol we remember that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was born of an ordinary woman called Mary.

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| 1 Once in royal David's city
stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby
in a manger for his bed :
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child. | through his own redeeming love,
for that child so dear and gentle
is our Lord in heaven above ;
and he leads his children on
to the place where he is gone. |
| 2 He came down to earth from heaven
who is God and Lord of all,
and his shelter was a stable,
and his cradle was a stall ;
with the needy, poor and lowly
lived on earth our Saviour holy. | 4 Not in that poor lowly stable,
with the oxen standing by,
we shall see him ; but in heaven,
set at God's right hand on high ;
there his children gather round
bright like stars, with glory crowned. |
| 3 And our eyes at last shall see him, | |

Cecil Frances Alexander (1818–95)

Prayer of praise and thanksgiving

God who strengthens, sustains, raises up, redeems,
births, brings, gathers and celebrates,
God whose love is bigger than the skies,
firmer than the earth, wider than the seas,
you who reveal your story and your goodness to us
through life and faith and courage and witness,
to you be glory and praise and all thanksgiving. **Amen.**

Prayer of confession

Holy God, you invite the unlikeliest of souls to be your own,
yet we are quick to judge those around us.
You welcome all to be part of your kingdom,
yet we want to accept only those carefully vetted.

You look with eyes that can see potential,
yet we are eager to point out the fault.
You view the heart and its intentions,
yet we are distracted by outward appearances.
You offer us forgiveness, yet we harbour resentment.
We ask that you grant us your pardon and create in us a heart that is willing to follow the path you set before us and become the people you long for us to be. **Amen.**

Bible Reading 1 Samuel chapter 2 1-8 Hannah's song after her reversal of fortune

In Old Testament times, Hannah, is a woman who is loved by her husband, but she has been unable to have children. She prays earnestly and in due course gives birth to Samuel, who is destined to be a prophet.

(Then) **2** Hannah prayed:
"The LORD has filled my heart with joy;
how happy I am because of what he has done!
I laugh at my enemies;
how joyful I am because God has helped me!
2 "No one is holy like the LORD;
there is none like him,
no protector like our God.
3 Stop your loud boasting;
silence your proud words.
For the LORD is a God who knows,
and he judges all that people do.
4 The bows of strong soldiers are broken,
but the weak grow strong.
5 The people who once were well fed
now hire themselves out to get food,

but the hungry are hungry no more.
The childless wife has borne seven children,
but the mother of many is left with none.
6 The LORD kills and restores to life;
he sends people to the world of the dead
and brings them back again.
7 He makes some people poor and others rich;
he humbles some and makes others great.
8 He lifts the poor from the dust
and raises the needy from their misery.
He makes them companions of princes
and puts them in places of honour.
The foundations of the earth belong to the LORD;
on them he has built the world.

Hymn Silent night, holy night *Singing the faith* 217

Next again we think of Mary whose path of life took an unexpected turn with motherhood

1 Silent night, holy night :
sleeps the world ; hid from sight,
Mary and Joseph in stable bare
watch o'er the child belovèd and fair
sleeping in heavenly rest.
2 Silent night, holy night :
shepherds first saw the light,
heard resounding clear and long,
far and near, the angel-song :

'Christ the Redeemer is here !'

3 Silent night, holy night :
Son of God, O how bright
love is smiling from your face !
Strikes for us now the hour of grace,
Jesus, Lord at your birth.

Joseph Mohr (1792–1848) *translated by* Stopford
Augustus Brooke (1832–1916)

Bible reading Luke 2: 26- 38 &

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. **27** He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. **28** The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!" **29** Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. **30** The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. **31** You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, **33** and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!"

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. ³⁷ For there is nothing that God cannot do."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

⁴⁶ Mary said, "My heart praises the Lord; ⁴⁷ my soul is glad because of God my Saviour, ⁴⁸ for he has remembered me, his lowly servant! From now on all people will call me happy,

⁴⁹ because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me. His name is holy; ⁵⁰ from one generation to another he shows mercy to those who honour him.

⁵¹ He has stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud with all their plans.

⁵² He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands.

⁵⁴ He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors, and has come to the help of his servant Israel. ⁵⁵ He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham and to all his descendants forever!"

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Comment

Mary's words in her song echo the words of Hannah, after Samuel was born. Hannah's song in our first Bible reading speaks of the reversal that God has caused - the one who was barren has had a child and the poor and needy are lifted up from the dust and the ash heap and given thrones with princes. Mary's words too speak of reversal: "He has scattered the proud with all their plans. He has brought down the mighty kings from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." (Could we be forgiven for thinking that the recent election result in the USA is an example of bringing down the mighty? We may well be hoping and praying that the next President will show more compassion for those who are downtrodden.)

Christians have often picked up on the message of God's care for the poor which is here in both passages. It is important that we do so. Mary herself is just an ordinary simple girl, cast into the whirl of motherhood and marriage in an unexpected and perhaps unwanted way. Yet, as we know, she rises above her predicament and finds in the birth and life of her son a whole new place in the order of things.

Our recognition of God at work through the ordinary girl, the ordinary things of birth, and of family life, can cause us to value them all the more today. Not just for ourselves but for others too. It makes us want to stop and ask - who are the poor in the dust and the ashes today? We don't have far to search as the current pandemic has meant that many people have lost their jobs. People who were managing and doing OK are finding that they cannot make their mortgage payments or put food on the table for their families. There are plenty right now who must feel on the "ash heap" of life. The news today is that for the first time in 70 years the United Nations children's charity is helping to provide food for British children.

Both of our Bible passages speak of a reversal of situations for those who are weak and poor. Mary's song is far more than a straightforward social message concerning care for the poor. Rather, Mary's song presents Jesus' coming as starting the long-awaited final reversal of power and authority talked about by Hannah and by other prophets.

Jesus is the one who comes to do battle with those powers and authorities that oppress and dehumanise. Jesus is the one who will restore to full humanity those who are the victims of such powers. Jesus has come to make all things new.

At Christchurch we continue to remember the difference that Christ's coming still makes through the work of organisations like St. George's crypt in Leeds. From time to time people who have been helped by organisations like St. George's turn around and volunteer to help others. That has happened also through the Ilkley food bank. On the Ilkley Foodbank

Facebook page they tell the story of one young woman who they were able to help a few months ago. This woman is now selling her art works again and giving a per centage to help the foodbank. It is great to hear about people getting back on their feet.

I wonder if we can think of a time when we felt very low and someone helped to turn our fortunes around? Perhaps we can thank God for that help. Perhaps like Mary we have been surprised at some turn of events life has taken. Maybe also like Mary we can see how God will work through it and so we keep giving thanks. And maybe we can play our part to help reverse the fortunes of others not just for a day but for the rest of their lives. Encountering Mary's child gives the power to do that. It looks a ridiculous plan but it is genius!

Prayers for others

Gentle Father,
you work in the most surprising ways!
You sent your Son to the womb of a young
unmarried woman.
She said yes, and the saviour of the world
was born! So we too say, let it be
according to your word.
Thank you for the many women of faith and
holiness in the life of the church.
Help us value their ministry and empower
them to testify to the truth of the gospel.
Let it be **according to your word.**
We pray for those like Mary
who find themselves pregnant
unexpectedly and at a young age.
Help us to support them, and comfort them
with the knowledge of your love and care.
Let it be **according to your word.**

We pray for orphans
and those who have lost their parents
before time.
We remember broken and disrupted
families, those who, for whatever reason,
will not be whole this coming Christmas.
Help us to serve them with generosity of
heart, and by your spirit heal their wounds.
Let it be **according to your word.**
We remember those who are suffering and
sick, those who have died and those who
have mourned.
Gather them to yourself as a mother hen
gathers her chicks. Let it be
according to your word.
Amen.

The Lord's prayer

Hymn **See him lying on a bed of straw *Singing the Faith* 216**

Sometimes called "The Calypso Carol" this song also speaks of Mary mothering Jesus.

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| <p>1 See him lying on a bed of straw ;
draughty stable with an open door,
Mary cradling the babe she bore ;
the Prince of Glory is his name :
<i>O now carry me to Bethlehem
to see the Lord of love again ;
just as poor as was the stable then,
the Prince of Glory when he came.</i></p> <p>2 Star of silver, sweep across the skies,
show where Jesus in the manger lies ;
shepherds, swiftly from your stupor
rise</p> | <p>to see the Saviour of the world :</p> <p>3 Angels, sing again the song you sang,
sing the story of God's gracious plan ;
sing that Bethl'em's little baby can
be the Saviour of us all :</p> <p>4 Mine are riches from your poverty,
from your innocence, eternity ;
mine, forgiveness by your death for
me ;
child of sorrow for my joy :
Michael Perry (1942–1996)</p> |
|---|---|

Blessing

God, who sent the Angel Gabriel to Mary and called her to be the mother of your Son,
make us bearers of your Word, and send us to all who need to hear the good news of Jesus
Christ, your Son, our Lord. **Amen.**
And the blessing of God, creator, redeemer and friend be with us now and for ever. Amen.