

**Christ Church Lewes  
(United Reformed Methodist)**

# **An inexhaustible fountain**

**Advent, Christmas and Epiphany  
1 December 2019 to 5 January 2020**

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*This booklet has been prepared with the support of the Mission Committee to encourage the congregation to look at the passages of scripture read during the Christmas Season. It is also intended to explain what Christmas means to our worshipping community. Visitors to the Church and those attending week-night events are invited to take a copy.*



This booklet is one of a series that shows how the readings selected for use in Christmas worship came to be written and why they are still relevant after many centuries. It is written with two groups of people in mind.

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

An attempt has been made to avoid words that have specific meanings different from those in everyday use. A number that have been used are printed in italics and defined.

The title comes from a passage (printed at the end of the booklet) by St Ephrem, who lived most of his life in the southern part of Turkey, near to the present-day border with Syria. As a young man he was present in AD 325 at the Council of Nicaea, which drew up the statement of belief that is still used throughout Christendom.

## Religion, Worship and Scripture

*Religion* is a much misused and misunderstood word in our secular world. It is often assumed to mean the incorporation of subjective and woolly considerations into the practical world of politics, business or science. It is often blamed for civil or international strife. Although the accusations cannot be entirely shrugged off, most would admit that religion, or *belief in God*, has underpinned and inspired much that is noble, worthy and generous in humanity. *Worship* brings together the practical, rational but ultimately fragile experience of every-day life, and the sense of one *holy* (i.e. different, set apart), *transcendent* (i.e. changeless, immeasurable) God.

The continuity in worship from one generation to another is provided by documents known as *Scripture*.

The Christian Church took over the Jewish tradition of reading aloud (or singing), during formal common worship, passages from the Law, the psalms, or the prophets, that constituted Jewish scripture. To the Jewish writings the followers of Jesus added new documents including letters or *epistles* and a remarkable new literary genre comprising extended narratives known as *gospels* or 'good news.' Documents used in worship that enshrined the teaching of the early Church were written on scrolls and laboriously copied by hand. It was difficult to maintain consistency over a wide geographical area. After a great deal of consultation and discussion lasting into the fourth century the Church formally agreed a set of documents known as the *Canon of the New Testament*. This contained the teaching that was most widely used in Christian communities and its establishment helped to preserve the Church's unity and curtail *heresy*, i.e. to prevent local communities from getting seriously out of line.

In AD 70 the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Soon afterwards the Church separated from Jewish communities based on synagogues. As part of the move to hold these synagogues together, the original Hebrew texts of the Jewish scriptures were revised and collated to become the *Canon of the Old Testament* (See p 6).

By about the fourth century the Church began to develop schedules of reading and prayers that are described as *liturgy*. The word means 'public work' so the emphasis is on the structure of regular, orderly worship. These schedules or *lectionaries* have been modified over the centuries but the general pattern has been maintained. The version we use is published in the *Methodist Worship Book*. It comprises a three-year cycle similar to the one used by Catholics, Anglicans and members of other main denominations. Four readings are selected for each Sunday in the cycle, chosen so that the content is related. For most Sundays these include:

- A reading from the *prophets*, who commented on the politics and morality of the Jewish people and their kings, or from the *Acts of the Apostles*, which describes the growth of the early Church
- A passage from the *psalms* (Jewish hymns that are often sung)
- A reading from one of the New Testament epistles

- A reading from one of the gospels. Most this year (Year 1 of the cycle) are from Matthew.

Those leading worship are not required to use the lectionary but there are some clear advantages in doing so.

- Congregations that have different preachers each week receive more coherent systematic teaching
- All the important passages of scripture are heard at least once every three years
- Worshippers throughout the world share the same thoughts and talk about the same topics on the same Sundays in a living expression of unity.

The readings are accompanied by structured petitions called *Collects*, These have been used in the Western tradition at least as far back as the sixth century, but the language has been updated from time to time. Most of those we use were revised about 1980. They summarise (collect together) the teaching for a particular Sunday. They are addressed to God, rather than Jesus, and have the following structure (illustrated by the Collect for Christmas Day p 16).

An address to God (Almighty God)

A characteristic of God's nature (you have given us your only-begotten Son...)

A petition (grant that we, who have been born again ...)

The purpose of the petition (may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit)

A conclusion that usually contains a Trinitarian ascription of praise (who is alive ...)

This ascription, repeated Sunday after Sunday summarises the uniquely Christian way in which the nature of God is understood. In a formal service the Collect usually comes before the readings but it may be helpful to reread it after them.

The readings during the season celebrating the birth of Jesus emphasise its *significance*, rather than the *circumstances* of the birth itself. No written account is known to have been made of events *as they happened*. For every reading there is a time interval between an event and reference to it. This does not mean, as some modern atheists suggest, that the readings in church can be dismissed as fantasy, made up, or unreliable. At Christmas we affirm our belief in *Incarnation*, i.e. that the transcendent God we worship became, in the person of the Jewish teacher Jesus, a true human being, without diminishing his divinity. This belief cannot be encapsulated in scientific terms. For each Sunday the lectionary gives us four different perspectives. Each is incomplete but the four different accounts, taken together, are more comprehensive than one account limited by the understanding of one writer.

### **Readings in Christian Worship**

The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* exhorts us to '*read, hear, mark, learn, and inwardly digest*' the passages from the Bible (the Church's library) read during worship. Our aim is not simply to transfer information or to go through a formal ritual. Instead, we participate

in an *interactive* and *communal* process in which we join both with those present, and with a host of others whose lives have preceded ours. It is worth considering some of these.

**Writers** The text is of paramount importance as it provides continuity over the centuries.

The written words are determined by the writers' experience. They all wrote from the perspective of their own time, as the readings discussed in this booklet show (pp 13,17,20).

All the texts were written in a pre-scientific age. It is not appropriate to expect them to have the precision about physical phenomena that we would expect in a twenty-first century text.

The readings are sometimes presented as narrative but the previous understanding of the readers or hearers will determine whether the words are taken literally or metaphorically.

**Translators** We have no *original* documents, i.e. ones *handled* by the original authors. We have only handwritten copies in Greek or Hebrew, or versions in Aramaic or Syriac. In many cases the authors are unknown. The original Hebrew of the Jewish Scriptures was translated into Greek after the Eastern Mediterranean was absorbed into the Greek Empire about BC 300 and local languages were suppressed. There are numerous quotations in the Christmas readings from this source, which is known as the *Septuagint* (pp 8,9,13,15,22)

The English versions that we read were first produced in about the 16th century.

Translation may result in subtle changes of meaning that are difficult to spot by those unfamiliar with ancient languages, and scholars assiduously compare texts from multiple sources to try to assess which are the most reliable. New translations of the Bible appear every few years; the authors aim to strike a balance between faithfulness to the original text and racy ear-catching appeal in contemporary speech. In choosing which version of scripture to use we inevitably participate in its interpretation.

**Readers** Those who volunteer to read in Church have the responsibility of conveying the meaning of the text. This may not be the whole meaning but the more the reader *owns* the text, the more the listeners learn. Many regular readers study the readings carefully before they come to church and this booklet, or a similar source, may provide background to contribute to this process.

**Hearers** The efficacy of the readings is ultimately shown by the response of the hearers. In the setting of worship these include an enormous range: young, old, rich, poor, sick, well, lonely and contented. They each take from the reading what they need or what they are ready to receive. Something is always left for the next time. Some prefer to follow the written text as it is read; others prefer to listen intently for nuances that cannot be expressed on paper. Some simply need reassurance and encouragement; others find themselves asking questions and seeking help from others in answering them. For all, the lectionary readings constitute a *communal* act, shared both with those in the congregation and with churchgoers throughout the world, who hear the same passages on the same day.

## 1 December 2019 The First Sunday of Advent

### The Collect

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

### Isaiah 2:1-5

Until the eighteenth century it was assumed that the 66 chapters put together in the Bible as the Book of Isaiah were written by one person (referred to in Isaiah 2:1). It is now widely recognised that the style and content show that the book comprises at least three collections of documents: one (approx. Is. 1-39) written before the Babylonian exile (BC 587), another (approx. Is. 40-55) written during exile, and the third (approx. Is. 56-66) written after the return to Jerusalem (about BC 539). Most of the passages selected for Advent and Christmas are from First Isaiah.

The people of the southern kingdom of Judah have not yet been conquered and exiled in Babylon, but commentators like Isaiah can assess the political situation and foresee disaster like that suffered earlier by the kingdom to the north. The prophet directs their thoughts to where the 'mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest' (v 2). The Hebrew expression 'house of the Lord' means the whole community or household, rather than a building. Mountains, shrouded in cloud, majestic, beautiful and mysterious, were associated with God's presence. There, in Jerusalem or *Zion*, the people and their rulers learn the precepts of God's Law and walk in his paths (v 3), the sign that they are his 'chosen'. There God reigns supreme. His law is obeyed, weapons and war are redundant (v 4), and darkness is dispelled by light. This is the way forward in the political crisis. *Light* (v 5) is one of the defining metaphors of the Advent season (v 5).

### Psalm 122

David had placed the Ark of the Covenant, containing the most holy scrolls of the Law, and the mercy seat, in Jerusalem, so that this had become a place of reverence and pilgrimage for all the people. This psalm expresses the gratitude of those able to come to the holy place where they together can feel the presence of God and align their lives with the sacred precepts of his Law and Covenant. The signs of God's presence are unity (v 3), pilgrimage (v 4), justice (v 5) peace and security (v 6-8).

Jewish tradition is enshrined in ‘the house of David’; compare ‘the house of the Lord’ in Isaiah. Christians use *Jerusalem* or *Sion* to describe the *Church*, where they sense the presence of God and find unity and purpose.

### **Romans 13:11-14**

Paul’s Letter to the Romans was probably written about AD 57-58, a few years before his execution in Rome about AD 64-65. In some passages the complicated structure of the argument is hard to follow but this section, written with vigour and urgency, is straightforward.

Immediately before this passage Paul repeats the commandments that describe the kind of life Christians should lead. He urges his hearers to wake up (v 11); they should set aside darkness and ‘put on the armour of light’(v 12) that gives protection, confidence and clarity of purpose (light) to stand up to evil (v 13). In other words, they should “put on Jesus Christ” (v 14), that is, they should live as his representatives, act in his name, and seek to do his will. According to Jewish tradition, the word ‘*Christ*’ (Greek for the Hebrew word *Messiah*) signifies that Jesus is the One anointed by God for a particular purpose. In the first century disciples of Jesus considered that after the Crucifixion Jesus would return in glory as Ruler and Judge. This belief is shown in this week’s gospel and epistle; both warn disciples to be alert and ready. Now, 2000 years later, this Second Coming is usually understood as something that appears gradually, both in individual lives and in the Church as a whole, through acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord and Saviour (See further commentary below and on the Fourth Sunday of Advent).

### **Matthew 24:36-44**

Many of the readings in Year 1 of the lectionary sequence are from the Gospel according to Matthew. We know little about him or when his gospel was written. Some assume that he was the tax-collector identified in Matthew 10:3 as one of the Twelve Apostles. However, most of those who have studied the content and style of the gospel think this is unlikely. In AD 70 Jerusalem, and many of the artefacts and scrolls of the Hebrew religion, were destroyed by the Romans. The people were scattered but a group of Jews, which was allowed to gather in a town on the Mediterranean coast, set out to recover and preserve what they could of Jewish faith and practice. Hebrew texts were gathered, edited and compared to give a definitive text for what we call the Old Testament, even though Hebrew had been suppressed as an everyday language by the Greek and Roman occupying powers. It is thought that the gospel writer Matthew could have been a Jewish Christian associated with this group. The suggestion would account for the Jewishness of the gospel, which is structured like the five books of the Jewish Law, and for the emphasis on the growth of the church from its Jewish origins to a religion that embraced the whole world.

There is evidence from the New Testament as a whole that many of the earliest Christians responded to the Crucifixion by expecting that Jesus would come again, without warning, to administer justice and redress the balance. In chapters 23-25 of Matthew’s gospel the Second Coming is presented in a series of vivid stories, one after the other. In the Jewish legend of Noah (Genesis 6:5-8, 7:6-24), life went on as usual until the flood; men and women went about their daily tasks until they were unexpectedly interrupted. We cannot

help but smile at the burglar who does not give word of his planned arrival. Over the years, portrayal of the Second Coming shifted from a cosmic event seen by all on a specific date, to a judgment on an individual life, but Matthew's gospel is still relevant. Appearances may be deceptive (v 40-41). No one knows when judgment will come; no one can expect special privileges or foreknowledge so that shortcomings can be covered up (v 43). The followers of Jesus must always be ready (v 44).

**The Collect** comes from the Book of Common Prayer (1662) but it is based on a shorter 8th century text. It draws together the themes of repentance, the realisation of the need for forgiveness, and the hope of mercy. We pray that we may turn from darkness to light *now*, "in the time of this mortal life," (not at some more convenient time in the future) with the urgency expressed in the epistle and gospel readings. We pray that, as we become more like Jesus Christ, we may be judged fit to remain with Him always.

### **The Collect**

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

### **Isaiah 11:1-10**

The Jewish kingdom reached its greatest power and esteem at the time of David (about BC 1000), but subsequent kings failed to live and govern in accord with the Law that they had inherited from Moses. They had broken their side of the Covenant with God and, by the time of Isaiah, the kingdom was disintegrating. Isaiah sets out a vision of another kingdom arising from the “stem of Jesse”, the father of David (v 1). It will be governed with justice and peace and be true to the ideals it professes, like new growth coming from the roots of a tree that has been cut back to remove blight. The new king will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord, wisdom, understanding, power, knowledge and fear of, i.e. respect for, the precepts of God (vv 2-3). Unlike unjust judges whose work is superficial, the new king will care for the poor and underprivileged (v 4), and be faithful and true. The passage concludes with a startling vision of a natural world where predators do not chase their prey in a struggle for survival (vv 6-8), where enemies are reconciled, where the weak, e.g. children, are looked after and where knowledge of the Lord is all-pervasive (v 9) (compare the reading for last week). The new kingdom will be a flag seen by all and other nations will be drawn to it (v 10). The lost prestige and integrity will be restored in a new way.

### **Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19**

This psalm presents a portrait of, and a prayer for, an ideal king, very like the one painted by Isaiah. The king will be someone who rules as an agent of God, administering God’s justice and righteousness (i.e. fairness and integrity) to God’s people, and defending the poor and needy (v 4). His kindness and care bring refreshment and encouragement like rain on the ground, and peace to the people. The last two verses form a sort of doxology in which glory and wonder are attributed to God, in whose name the king rules. Some commentators have speculated that the psalm may have been used during the enthronement of the Jewish kings.

### **Romans 15: 4-13**

Paul claims that the hope enshrined in the Jewish scripture has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ (vv 4-5). Jesus was firmly in the Jewish tradition (v 8) but his message of joy and peace was for *all*, Jews and Gentiles alike. The quotations in vv 9, 10 and 12 are from Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalms 18:49, 117:1 and Isaiah 11:10, examples from the three most important

components of the Jewish scriptures - Law, Psalms and Writings of the Prophets. In all cases he quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek version of these documents.

### **Matthew 3:1-12**

The Church reserves part of the reading of scripture during Advent to consideration of the role of John the Baptist. His call was for *repentance*, a change of direction, a turning away from the past because a new kingdom was at hand (v 2). Like the kingdom of which Isaiah spoke, this was the kingdom *of heaven* (v 2), i.e. based on values in accord with the Law that the Jews considered they had received from God himself. Matthew (v 3) quotes from Isaiah 40:3. By identifying the 'voice crying in the wilderness' with John, Matthew emphasises that God, as proclaimed by the early church, is the same as the one God the Jewish people had known throughout their subjugation and exile 600 years earlier. Similar references appear throughout Matthew's gospel.

People from the region round Jerusalem came to the Jordan to be baptised and John is quick to spot those whose repentance did not show in deeds or actions. He was brutal to the religious leaders (v 7), warning them that they could not rely on their Jewish race or their positions in religious groups for their acceptance. God is able to raise up new children of Abraham (v 9), whose status would be determined not by race, but by bearing good fruit, i.e. by following in Abraham's faith and tradition. Matthew's portrayal of John the Baptist looks forward as well as back. John directs attention to the "one who is coming" and mightier and more worthy than he (v 11). The baptism of the new dispensation "with fire and the Holy Spirit" will be much more empowering than that of the old with water. The closing metaphor of wheat and chaff (v 12) for the new baptism of Jesus suggests purification, in which the good within society, or within each individual, is conserved and what is unworthy is cast aside.

The passage as a whole describes the early church in Matthew's time rather than the people to whom John the Baptist was preaching. The use of the term Holy Spirit suggests that the tradition of Abraham had been transformed through the life and teaching of Jesus into something new, vibrant and open-ended.

In the (modern) **Collect** we remember the holiness and steadfastness of God. As we are burdened and brought low for whatever reason, we need his mercy, forgiveness and encouragement. We pray that our hope in him may be renewed as we acknowledge his justice and mercy in our own lives and in the life of the whole world. Jesus is our Judge (i.e. by his life our own is measured) but also our Saviour.

### The Collect

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

The third Sunday of Advent marks the mid-point of the penitential season. For more than a thousand years this has been known as *Gaudete Sunday*, from 'Rejoice', the first word of the call to worship (Philippians 4:4) in Year 3 of the lectionary cycle. In parts of the Church where vestments are used, the plain Advent purple is set aside and replaced by richly adorned rose, used only on this day and the corresponding fourth Sunday of Lent.

### Isaiah 35:1-10

The first part of Isaiah concludes with this marvellous poem describing a flowering desert. It was written by someone looking at the ravages of war but seeing restoration and healing beyond the destruction and heartbreak. The colour of flowers at the beginning of a new season is perceived as displaying the glory and majesty of God, who is greater than, and unchanged by, human strife (vv 1-2). The nurture and strengthening of the frail and fearful show the range and universality of God's creative power (vv 3-4). The blind, deaf, lame and dumb will be healed and their lives transformed like the desert itself (vv 5-7). The disabilities can be understood metaphorically or physically; the multiple examples indicate that no one is excluded. After the rubble is cleared a highway will be built (v 8) that is *holy*. The metaphor suggests that those who have been *redeemed* (saved) or *ransomed* (like slaves released from bondage by a generous benefactor) will be free to move forward to a new life, not based on human values, but on God's.

In Matthew 11:5 and Luke 7:22 the gospel writers quote from this passage as they identify Jesus as Messiah. The Church saw the parallel between the joy, gladness and singing as the exiles return to Jerusalem (v 10), and the exuberance and freedom that the disciples found in the life and continued presence of the risen Christ. They adopted and expanded Isaiah's metaphor and became known as the people of the Way.

For those who like looking at biblical texts: the concluding passage (v 10) is repeated in Isaiah 51:11. We cannot tell whether it was written before or during the exile, which Isaiah is the original author, or whether the duplication was an editorial oversight when the fragments that make up the book of Isaiah were put together.

## Luke 1: 46b-55

The psalm is replaced by a *canticle* i.e. a passage in the form of a song, but not one of the 150 psalms in our bibles. The words are sometimes, as here, adapted from Scripture and sometimes quoted directly. The first two chapters of Luke contain six canticles, four of which are still used regularly in Christian worship. This one is known as the *Magnificat*, from the first word in the Latin text, which means 'extols the greatness'. It is clearly based on the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), a mother who also sees herself as having borne a child who would become a special servant of the Lord. It draws on psalms and other canticles from the prophets but its lasting importance is in what it shows about the purposes of God, as understood in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. His continuing presence in the Church (which is, in part, what we mean by resurrection) serves as a Manifesto for all who accept his leadership and seek to follow him as disciples. Its unchanging relevance means that it is still, with the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32) given central place in the worship of the Church, every day throughout the world, in Evening Prayer.

Luke adapts the opening words from Psalm 34:2, 3. God is a Saviour (v 47). He watches over and rescues men and women, who are his sons and daughters. He cares about the lowliest and underprivileged, and gives them new status and dignity (v 48). Throughout all time he is revered and glorified (v 48). He is mighty (v 49). His *name*, i.e. his nature, is *holy* and qualitatively different from that of humankind (49). He is merciful towards all who fear him, i.e. respect and respond to him (v 50). The potential of the proud is restricted by their self-importance and self-delusion (v 51). God always values the humble and sincere (v 52). He feeds the hungry (v 53). The echo here of Isaiah 55:1-2 suggests that Luke includes both those who are physically hungry and those who hunger for what is good. Those who focus on money prevent themselves from engaging with him (v 53). The Jewish people have perceived his goodness, mercy and guidance throughout their history right back to their forefather Abraham (v 54, 55). Luke claims that Abraham's 'posterity' or 'seed' (v 55) are represented by the Church, because its members are people of faith. He makes dramatic contrasts between God's priorities and human priorities (v 52, 53) and so heightens the impact of the unfolding story of his gospel.

## James 5:7-10

This letter is one of the 'catholic epistles', i.e. those written to the Church in general rather than to a particular congregation. It has sometimes been assumed that the letter was written by the apostle James, or James the brother of Jesus, but this is by no means certain as James (Jacob) was a common name. The content suggests that the author was a Jewish Christian and based in Palestine, which had two rainy seasons (v 7). He was especially concerned to show that the Christian faith was not primarily theoretical or abstract, but something that coloured every aspect of daily life. Like other New Testament writers, James exhorts his readers to be *prepared* (v 9) for imminent judgment, as Jesus was expected to come a second time (v 7-8). But this urging is balanced by a call to be *patient*, as a farmer has to wait for his crop. Some commentators have suggested that the Church was beginning to realise that the Second Coming was to be from within, as the body of disciples that made up the Church gradually became more truly representative of their Lord.

Meanwhile the disciples were encouraged to be cheerful and non-judgmental, and to persevere in the face of suffering, like the prophets before them.

### **Matthew 11: 2-11**

This passage is almost identical with Luke 7:18-35, suggesting that both gospel writers had access to an earlier, now lost, document, called by biblical scholars Q, from the German *Quelle*, meaning 'source'.

The story of John the Baptist continues from the previous week's reading. He has been imprisoned because he has denounced King Herod's marriage. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether he was the person whom John had announced. We do not know what was behind the question but Jesus' reply was characteristic of his teaching: "Tell John what you hear and see (v 4), i.e. "Make up your own mind." Those who, metaphorically, hear and see are blessed (v 6); those who are offended, i.e. do not hear and see, cut themselves off.

The Jewish tradition had been refreshed and made relevant for many centuries by political and religious commentators known as *prophets*. There had, however, been few in the period before John the Baptist and the appearance of a new prophet was a matter of some excitement. Crowds flocked to see him. Jesus asked them ironically: "Did you go to watch the swaying of the reeds in the Jordan valley?" On the contrary, they went to see someone of trenchant views (See Second Sunday of Advent), which had got him into serious trouble. "Did they go to see someone in fine clothes with influence with the king?" They went to see a prophet who would point them to God's ways: someone like Elijah, who was considered to be a forerunner of the Messiah, or like the messenger of Malachi 3:1, quoted in v 10, who would draw people back to their Covenant.

Jesus endorses John the Baptist as the last and greatest in the long line of prophets (v 11) but ranks him least in the kingdom of heaven that he is inaugurating. Matthew represents him as a turning point in history. God's relation with the Jewish people is continued in the Church. The Covenant is extended so that it covers the whole human race.

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

### **The Collect**

God our Redeemer,  
you chose the Virgin Mary  
to be the mother of our Lord and Saviour.  
Fill us with your grace  
that in all things we may embrace your holy will  
and with her rejoice in your salvation;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

### **Isaiah 7:10-16**

The background to this reading is a series of encounters between Isaiah and the king Ahaz, a descendant of David. Ahaz is unwilling (v 12) to accept the proposals of the prophet about the policies he should pursue as his kingdom collapses in war. He does not wish to hear Isaiah, so Isaiah points to an external sign. A young woman will bear a son (v 14), who will be called Emmanuel (literally 'with us is God,' or 'God is with us'). In many English translations the word for 'young woman' is given as 'virgin' but there is nothing in the Hebrew to indicate that this should be taken in a technical sense. The young woman is probably a wife of the king. The child will eat curds and honey. It is suggested that this is an allusion to the promise of God to Moses that the affliction of his people in Egypt will be ended (Exodus 3:7-8). Likewise, as the child grows up (v 16) and learns (unlike Ahaz), to choose good rather than evil, the adversaries threatening the Jewish kingdom will be destroyed. The line of David will continue. The child is a sign of hope and a reassurance that God is still faithful to his people.

The words of v 14 are cited (Matthew 1:23) in today's gospel and often quoted in Christmas carol services. They provide an example of the way the New Testament writers searched the Jewish scriptures to justify the claims of the time when the gospels were written: that the line of David was continued in his descendant Jesus, who fulfilled rather than replaced God's covenantal promise to his people. Whatever it meant in Isaiah's day, the word Emmanuel has come to represent the doctrine of the Incarnation that we celebrate each Christmas.

### **Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19**

This psalm is a general plea for help in time of trouble. As in the three preceding psalms, God is addressed as a Shepherd, who leads (v 1) and saves (v 2-3). The theme of coming light and restoration that has been evident throughout the Advent readings is shown in the refrain (vv 3, 7, 19), which suggests that the psalm may have been used in worship. In v 17 the phrase 'man on your right hand' probably refers to a king; the position on the right side of a ruler was formally reserved for his agent or representative. The prophets were aware that the Jewish kings had not been faithful agents; the psalm ends with a prayer in which the people vow to make a new start and to be faithful.

## Romans 1:1-7

In 20-30 years, thanks to the good communications established by the Romans and the travel of Jewish traders throughout their vast empire, the Church had spread from Jerusalem to Rome, the seat of the Imperial Government. Paul announces his proposed visit in a densely packed, breathless letter to the small Christian community already established among the Jews in the capital city. Paul was executed around AD 64 so this is perhaps one of the last letters that he wrote. Its importance lies in the account it gives of the thinking of the Church before the New Testament gospels were written. Paul presents his credentials like an ambassador. In summarising what he wants to say he sets out to reconcile his good news or *gospel* with his background as a Pharisee. He claims that the itinerant Jewish teacher Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah, not only for Jews but for the whole world. The ground covered in this one introductory sentence is astonishing.

- Paul describes himself as a servant of *Jesus Christ*, It is worth repeating that *Jesus* is a *name* and *Christ* a *title* (the Greek word for *Messiah*) that expresses *function*. In *Jesus Christ* 'name' and 'purpose' are bound together. Paul in this passage uses this designation four times, twice with the addition of the word *Lord*. This means someone to be respected and obeyed; it was often used in the Jewish scriptures to refer to God. Paul himself is an *apostle*, a messenger, one who is sent. Initially the term was used for the original Twelve Disciples. It soon became clear that all faithful disciples are, in a sense, apostles (v 5).
- Paul claims that Jesus stood in the Jewish tradition as set out in the Jewish scriptures (v 3). He was a direct descendant of David.
- Jesus is designated as Son of God. This was the title of God's Anointed One, who would, by following God's precepts, restore the Jews as God's chosen people. After Paul's time the phrase came to express the profound unity between Father and Son that is referred to as the *Mystery of the Incarnation* (See introduction). It is at the heart of our Christmas celebration.
- After Jesus' Crucifixion his disciples were inspired and empowered by the belief that he was still in their midst, even though he was not physically present. They called this *Resurrection* (v 4) and attributed their empowerment to the *Holy Spirit*. The sense of God's living presence was referred to as *grace* (v 5) and it was this that enabled their apostleship and obedience to Jesus' *name* used here to mean 'nature'.
- Paul's message was for all people, including those in Rome, which was then perceived to be the most important city in the world. Its people were God's beloved or *saints* (v 7), the word used to describe those who had made the commitment to follow in his ways or, in New Testament terms, those who were true disciples of Jesus Christ.

That's why he wanted to come; this is his sales pitch, manifesto, mission statement, or proto-creed.

## Matthew 1:18-25

The preface to the letter to the Romans (see above) shows that by about AD 60 the Church had a reasonably coherent understanding of the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The accounts given in the epistles, however, give no information about his birth. The surviving information is found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, each written after the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of Jews among non-Jewish peoples.

This passage from Matthew may be read in several ways. Taken literally, it describes the birth of Jesus as a highly unusual event but no attempt is made to describe it fully as a *natural* phenomenon. If however we ask not ‘What happened?’ but ‘What is Matthew trying to tell us from his perspective 80 years after the event?’ the passage has a clearer and more satisfactory meaning. Like Paul, Matthew places Jesus firmly as a successor of Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1-17), and links him with the child referred to in Isaiah 7:14 (See above). He was ‘King of the Jews’ but also ‘Christ’ with a status above all others, as implied by Paul (above). It was therefore logical to insist that his life was imbued with a power and purpose that could not be described in purely human terms (v 20). This takes the discussion away from *science*, where we describe and explain, to the deeper level of *faith*, where we focus on meaning and purpose.

The name *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Jewish Joshua, which originally meant ‘Yahweh, help!’ but in popular thinking had become ‘God saves’. Matthew expands this to “he will save his people from their sins”, and explains later that this will be by the proclamation of Jesus’ kingdom (Matthew 4:17) and through his death (Matthew 26:28). The word *Emmanuel* (v 23, See commentary on Isaiah above) is reflected in the final words of the gospel (Matthew 28:20). We are again reminded that at Christmas we celebrate not just a historical event but the *Incarnation* at the heart of our faith.

The petition in the **Collect** is that the Church may be animated by the living presence (grace) of God. That grace had made Israel his people, had been manifest in Mary, and been embodied in the son she bore. God is described as Redeemer who in Jesus Christ brings salvation, i.e. healing or freedom from all that separates us from God. The Church throughout the whole world is associated with Mary’s rejoicing as it tries to live wholeheartedly by God’s holy will.

## The Collect

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

## Isaiah 9:2-7

This marvellous celebratory poem has for many of us become associated with Christmas through the music of Handel's *Messiah*. It looks forward to the coming of a new king who will be very different from the kings of Isaiah's time like Ahaz. He will be faithful to his God and rule according to God's precepts. His reign will shine light in darkness (v 2); bring the joy of harvest so there is plenty for all; and free people from the Assyrian 'yoke', 'staff', 'rod' (v 4) and the carnage of war (v 5). He is described as a child for his accession will be long in coming. The quality of his reign will be shown by his titles which reflect those of God himself (v 6). He will bring peace (v 7), and his government will be just and righteous. The Church came to believe that only in Jesus were these attributes realised. He was perceived by the Church as the true successor to David and King for ever.

## Psalm 96

This psalm also appears in 1 Chronicles 16:23-33, where the writer used it to express the joy of the people when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem at the time of David. In Christian worship it is one of a group of joyful psalms, 96-98, that is used at both Christmas and Easter. The celebration of Christmas is lifted into the context of the eternal purpose of God. His sovereignty is over all peoples (v 3). There is none greater (v 4). His honour and majesty, strength and beauty are incomparable (v 6). His judgments are fair and true (vv 10, 13). The whole universe sings his praise.

## Titus 2:11-14

The letter to Titus is one of a group of 'pastoral letters' so-called because they deal mainly with church life and practice. Most modern scholars agree that it was probably not written by Paul (the vocabulary and approach are different) and that the ascription in the first verse was added later. It is worth considering why the lectionary compilers have chosen these words, by an unknown author and sent to unknown recipients, as a reading in this important festival.

The passage describes the rationale for Christian living and behaviour. (In Jesus) the presence of God (grace) provides healing (salvation) for all people (v 11). It changes our

priorities in deciding how we order our lives (v 12) so that we are judged worthy as disciples (v 13). “Our Saviour Jesus Christ” gives himself to redeem us (free us) from the consequences of wrongdoing (v 14) so that we may live lives of generosity and service. He purifies us (we could paraphrase this as ‘makes us more noble, more holy, more like Jesus himself). Jesus’ coming (*Incarnation*) is evident through the lives (i.e. integrity and motivation) of his followers (v 14). God’s glory is revealed (v 13), and his purpose fulfilled.

### **Luke 2 1-14**

This densely-packed passage brings together many of the points made elsewhere in this booklet. Most of us first heard Luke’s words when we were children. We have returned to them each Christmas morning for many years and can recite them from memory. Over our lifetime, however, we have changed, and, for some at least, it may no longer seem adequate to view this passage as a simple description of events in the small town of Bethlehem many centuries ago. If we think, as many biblical scholars do, that the account was written 80 years after the event described, it makes sense to assume that Luke’s purpose was to focus on the significance for himself *for his own day*, and on the *future*, rather than to document the *past*.

In vv 1-2 he tells us that Jesus was born during the administrations of Caesar Augustus, Herod and Quirinius. He does not get the facts quite right but that is not the important point, which is that Jesus was a real human being, born at a specific time and place like anyone else. There was nothing magical or ambivalent about his human nature.

In vv 3-4, Jesus is explicitly described as a descendant of David. This is not just a minor point of family history: The Jewish people believed that someone from ‘the house and lineage of David’ would become a *Messiah*, who would redeem them from the events of their troubled history, renew their sense of direction, and bring healing and hope.

In vv 5-7, Luke brings us up sharply. The kingly qualities of Jesus were not perceived. He was cast into an outhouse at his birth, his care for the disadvantaged was mocked by the self-righteous, his teaching aroused hostility in the religious establishment, and he was crucified with two robbers.

The change of scene at v 8 makes another theological point. After asserting the full humanity of Jesus (See above vv 1-2) Luke now claims that Jesus was unique. The opening of the sky and the appearance of an angel were literary devices employed by first century writers in their attempt to describe the holy, indescribable realm of God, as indicated in the Introduction.

The shepherds, by their occupation were unable to observe ritual, e.g. over the Sabbath, and were therefore considered to be unclean and banned from religious ceremonies. But they were the first to receive the ‘good news’ (v 10). It came to the shepherds in the course of their everyday lives. No corners of the world were to be excluded from the story that Luke was to tell in his gospel.

Luke’s central theme is condensed in v 11. Jesus, a successor to David, showed the true qualities of kingship. He would be *Saviour*, rescuing the blind and lost, and freeing all men and women from what restricts them from achieving their full potential as human beings.

He would be *Christ* or Messiah, the anointed leader, to whom the Jewish people would respond, He would be *Lord*, who would command allegiance from all.

The dramatic bringing together of the manger (v 12) and the heavenly host (v 13) – the one showing lowliness and vulnerability, and the other representing the changeless supremacy of God – lie at the heart of our Christmas celebration. The song of the angels, 'Glory be to God in the Highest', proclaims the bond between God and the human race that binds all peoples together in peace. It was incorporated into a hymn known as the *Gloria*, probably by Ambrose (AD 340-397) and is still said or sung throughout the world.

A commentary on the alternative reading for Christmas Day, John 1:1-18, is given below, under the First Sunday of Christmas.

**The Collect** is again from the Book of Common Prayer. The petition is addressed to Almighty God, who through his Son takes our human nature. We cannot but be drawn in. The event involves us, our nature, our adoption, our daily renewal.

### **The Collect**

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

### **Jeremiah 31:7-14**

Jeremiah's life spanned the tumultuous sixth century BC when the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were conquered first by Assyria and then by Babylon, and many of the people exiled for 50 years. For the Jewish people, this period led to profound insights into the nature of God. In earlier times gods were associated with particular local areas so people in different areas worshipped different gods. The Exile led the Jews to believe that their God was sovereign over the whole world. Today's reading is one of the four hymns from Jeremiah 31 that begin with the words "Thus says the Lord" and extol God's power to bring insight and understanding from times of suffering. The remnant from exile (v 7) will return to their own fertile land round Jerusalem. The reference to Joseph's son Ephraim, who was adopted and blessed by his grandfather Jacob (Genesis 48:8-17), suggests that broken relationships will be restored. The benevolence of God is indicated by his care of the weak and disabled as well as the strong (v 8) and by the metaphors used to describe him: father (v 9), shepherd (v 10), redeemer (v 11), provider (v 12), supporter in good times, and consoler and strengthener in times of sorrow (v 13). From the earliest times the Church has seen this pre-Christian poetry as expressing the confidence found in the ministry of Jesus, God's Anointed One.

### **Psalms 147: 12-20**

The psalmist sees the goodness of God in the wonders of the natural world and associates this with his special care of Israel through the gift of the Law. In Christian worship the providence of God extends to all peoples. It is interesting to compare the use of 'word' in vv 15, 18, 19 with that in John 1 (See below).

### **Ephesians 1:3-14**

From the second to the eighteenth century the letter to the Ephesians was attributed to Paul, as indicated in the introduction (Ephesians 1:1-3), but many modern scholars think that the author was someone writing between AD 80 and AD 100, after Paul's authentic letters had been collected together. The style is different from Paul's; the Greek sentences are long and splendidly crafted, and the thinking about the place of Jesus in the whole sweep of history has developed since Paul's time. Christ is now intimately associated with God, the Father in *heaven* (v 3) and is viewed as participating in God's eternal purpose (vv

4-5). This balances the portrayal in some Christmas worship of the vulnerable humanity of the new-born infant.

The centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ, not only to events at Bethlehem, but in the history of the Universe from its beginning to its end is emphasised by the repetition of the words “in him” throughout the passage (vv 4,7,10, 11,13). Astonishingly, the writer claims that Jesus’ disciples, baptised into the Church, are also part of this divine presence (v 4-5); they are made holy and become more like him. It has been suggested that the word “Beloved” in v 6 may be a reference to Mark 1:11; as the baptism of Jesus revealed his Sonship, so the baptism of his disciples affirmed their adopted sonship. In Jesus we are redeemed, forgiven (v 7), and empowered by his grace, freely shared with us (v 8). As his sons and daughters we have a specific place in ‘all that is’ (v 10). This assurance enabled his first followers to be witnesses to his glory (v 12) and to proclaim the good news of his living presence. In turn, those who hear and believe (v 13) are themselves empowered to show his glory to future generations (vv 13-14).

### **John 1: 1-18**

Most biblical scholars agree that of the four gospels in the New Testament, the one according to John was the last to be written. It probably therefore reflects the thinking of the Church about 100 years after the birth of Jesus. By then many of those who had heard or known Jesus before his crucifixion had died. The Jewish people had been scattered throughout the Eastern Mediterranean after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Many had left the synagogues and joined non-Jews in new *Christian* communities. This left them without the protection that the Roman Empire accorded to Jews, so that they were open to persecution by both local and imperial authorities.

The make-up of the Church had changed and this affects the way in which John introduces his gospel. In contrast to Matthew and Luke, he focuses almost entirely on significance rather than historical detail. His words are for all, Jews and Gentiles alike, including philosophically well-educated people in the Hellenistic world, irrespective of their background or culture. For John the Incarnation is inherently indescribable. The short words in the English translation disguise the profundity of the subject.

The first verse is an echo of the Creation story in the first chapter of Genesis and sets the Incarnation in the context of the whole Universe. God is associated with *Logos*, translated into English as ‘Word’. A word that is spoken has power; it makes things happen. It has thrust. *Logos* is similar to what was called *Wisdom*, especially in the book of Job, the Psalms, the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and several books in the Apocrypha. The same sense is apparent in our English suffix *-ology* which means ‘study of; exploration that is ongoing but not complete’. It is perhaps helpful to think of *logos* as *the purposeful creative presence of God, beyond time and space, and yet sustaining and breathing both life and reason into all that exists* (v 3), including the human race (v 4).

*Logos* brings life and *light*, with the sense of insight, liberation, opening of new possibilities. The reference to John the Baptist (v 6) may have been inserted intentionally or inadvertently from a later section in the chapter, as ancient manuscripts were copied and edited.

The Light enlightens “every man coming into the world” (v 9). The whole world relies on God for its existence and sustenance (v 10) but fails to acknowledge its dependence. Even God’s chosen people, the Jews, turned away (v 11). But an amazing promise is made to all who believe in his Name, i.e. seek to follow his way and do his will. They are to be received as *children of God* (v 12); they have experienced a new kind of birth (v 13) and their lives have taken on a new significance.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (v 14). This sentence attempts to describe the Christian insight that leads us to celebrate Christmas. The eternal God becomes human without diminishing his divine glory. He raises the status of the whole human race and opens the possibility that all may be adopted as his children.

After another insertion about John the Baptist (v 15) the writer turns to the relation between the old and the new (v 17). The Jews had found meaning and purpose as human beings through obedience to the Law; those who believed (v 12) in Jesus as Christ found confidence, empowerment, direction (all these are implied in the words ‘grace and truth’) Something of the nature of the holy, invisible, unsearchable God became accessible through another human being, a Son.

The powerful **Collect** is based on one that has been in use for many centuries. Like the Collect for Christmas Day, its petition sums up why we continue to celebrate Christmas no matter how long we live. Through the petition we make an amazing claim: “Grant that as [your Son Jesus Christ] came to share in our humanity, so we may share in the life of his divinity.” By his birth as a human being God gives new dignity to the whole human race so that human beings become partners in his eternal creative purpose to bring about a world where ‘[his] will is done on earth as it is in heaven’.

### The Collect

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

### Isaiah 60:1-6

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

### Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

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

### Ephesians 3:1-12

The passage refers more than once (vv 3, 4, 9) to the '*mystery of Christ*' (See commentary on John 1 last week), suggesting that his Incarnation can be explored again and again but that its meaning can never be fully grasped. The true significance of this mystery was not obvious to previous generations (v 5) but the coming of Jesus and his recognition as Messiah or Christ had brought new understanding. The nature of the transcendent God in Jewish tradition had been revealed further both in the life and resurrection of Jesus and in the belief of his followers. They described this belief that the risen Christ was present with them was the work of the *Spirit* (v 5). After the separation of Jews and Christians around the end of the first century the Church had become convinced that Jesus was not just the anointed leader of the *Jews* but was born for *all*, 'who are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the [same] promise' (v 6). The three nouns 'heirs', 'members' and 'partakers' in Greek all begin with the same prefix *syn-* (meaning 'with', 'together', 'at the same time'), emphasising their full and equal participation of Jews and Gentiles in the

Church. They share the same inheritance; they are one people; they together participate in all that Jesus Christ has achieved. Through the Church, they join in making known his greatness (v 8), his manifestation in history (v 9), his wisdom (v 10), and his eternal purpose through Christ (v 11). Through this new understanding, the Church proclaims that Jesus, Lord and Christ, gives believers confidence in their approach to God (v 11-12).

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

The gospel according to Matthew, like that of Luke, is thought by scholars to have been written between 80 and 90 AD, about the time that the followers of Jesus, now known as Christians, were becoming distinct from the Jews, whose religion became focused on the Law and Synagogue. As there is no overlap between Luke 2 and Matthew 2, Matthew's text is often used as a sequel to Luke's in modern Christmas services. Many of the points made by Luke are repeated by Matthew.

In the first century, as the Church expanded to include people familiar with myths in which gods became human (See, for example, Acts 14:11) or appeared as spirits (e.g. 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 7), it was important to make clear that Jesus was a real human being. So Matthew, like Luke (See above), begins his gospel by placing the birth of Jesus firmly in history, 'in the days of Herod the king' (v 1). Jesus was born at a specific time and in a specific place, like anyone else.

'The wise men from the East' are often depicted as kings. The term may have been taken from the allusion to Isaiah (See above) in v 11, but it does not appear in the gospel. The wise men seem to represent the wisdom of pagans, as shown by their attention to heavenly bodies (v 2). Matthew tells us indirectly both that Jesus was 'King of the Jews' in the Davidic succession, and that he would be acknowledged and worshipped by other peoples as well as Jews (v 2). He would not be like the self-important kings of Judah such as Herod. He would be born not in Jerusalem but in the insignificant city of Bethlehem. His kingship would be recognised but rejected by the devious and self-serving Herod (v 8). Jesus would provoke opposition as well as bring leadership.

The colour of the narrative changes as the wise men escape from Herod (v 9). 'They rejoiced exceedingly' as the light of the star directs them. They fall to their knees in worship. Matthew draws on Isaiah 60:6 to describe their gifts: gold symbolising kingship and power, incense to symbolise holiness, and, significantly, adds myrrh to symbolise suffering. In that one sentence Matthew summarises the content of the narrative ahead. The wise men depart 'by another way'; not just by taking another road, but by setting behind them, at the court of Herod, their preconceived view about the birth of a king. They left darkness for light.

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

## Summary and Postscript

In this commentary we have joined a range of writers, translators, and lectionary compilers in re-exploring the significance of the Christmas Season. Some of these lived centuries before the birth of the Jewish preacher Jesus, but their hope in the suffering of war and exile was seen by later generations as a sign that our ever-faithful God would never forsake his people. Centuries later, Paul in the Letter to the Romans expressed his conviction that the hope of the prophets had been realised in the life and death of Jesus and in the belief of his followers that he was alive in their midst (p 14). Later, Matthew and Luke wrote their superficially simple, but theologically profound, narratives that are sometimes called the 'Christmas story' (pp 17,23). Later still, John and the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians came to understand that the Christmas story implies the new insight expressed in the Christmas collect (p 19): that the "God of Glory ... came to share our humanity so we may share his divinity." This is the amazing, inexpressible, life-affirming conclusion to which we are drawn by the words of Scripture. They constitute 'an inexhaustible fountain', providing us with more insight every year, and enough for the whole world.

## **St Ephrem (AD 306-373)      The Word of God is an inexhaustible fountain**

Lord, who can grasp the wealth of just one of your words? What we understand is much less than what we leave behind, like thirsty people who drink from a fountain. For your word, Lord, has many shades of meaning, just as those who study it have many different points of view. The Lord has coloured his words with many hues so that each person who studies it can see in it what he loves. He has hidden many treasures in this word so that each of us is enriched as we meditate on it.

The word of God is a tree of life that from all its parts offers you fruits that are blessed. It is like a rock opened in the desert that from all its parts gave forth a spiritual drink. As the Apostle says, 'All ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink'.

He who comes into contact with some share of its treasure should not think that the only thing contained in the word is what he himself has found. He should realise that he has only been able to find that one thing from among many others. Nor, because only that one part has become his, should he say that the word is void and empty and look down on it; but because he could not exhaust it he should give thanks for its riches. Be glad that you were overcome and do not be sad that it overcame you. The thirsty man rejoices when he drinks and he is not downcast because he cannot empty the fountain. Rather let the fountain quench your thirst than have your thirst quench the fountain. Because if your thirst is quenched and the fountain is not exhausted you can drink from it again whenever you are thirsty. But if when your thirst is quenched the fountain also is dried up your victory will bode evil for you.

Be grateful for what you have received and do not grumble about the abundance left behind. What you have received and what you have reached is your share, what remains is your heritage. What, at one time, you are not able to receive because of your weakness, you will be able to receive at other times if you persevere. Do not have the presumption to try and take in one draught what cannot be taken in one draught, and do not abandon out of laziness what you may only consume little by little.

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