

**Christ Church Lewes
United Reformed and Methodist**

The Word of the Lord is an inexhaustible fountain

Advent and Christmas

27 November 2022 to 6 January 2023

(Lectionary Year 1)

*This booklet has been prepared with the support of the Mission Committee.
Members of our congregation, those attending weekday events, and visitors are
invited to take a copy.*

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Preface

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 the years have made regular worship a key part of their life.
- Those who are interested in church activities, and attracted towards them, but have difficulty in understanding what they perceive as arbitrary assumptions associated with religious belief and practice.

In discussion of Christian worship and the Bible, we use words that are more precisely defined than they are in everyday use. Some of these are printed in italics and their meaning clarified by their context.

Worship

Archaeological evidence suggests that from the earliest times in human history people have imagined a different, kinder world than the competitive and sometimes savage world that we know. This imagined world is described as *sacred* or *holy* (i.e., different, set apart). Because it is also *transcendent* (i.e., changeless, immeasurable), we cannot fully describe it in the logical, scientific language we use to describe nature itself.

This does not, however, make the transcendent meaningless. Human beings have the capacity to communicate through metaphors or analogies, as well as in practical or scientific terms. As a result, in *worship*, where the transcendent and the natural world are brought together, we find metaphorical and literal statements side by side. Moreover, as worship often brings together people of all ages and cultural backgrounds, some in a particular congregation may perceive allusions that give the words wide and rich significance, while others see the same text more simply, and matter of fact.

The Old and New Testaments

In common worship, the Christian Church took over the Jewish tradition of reading aloud (or singing), passages from the Law, the psalms, or the prophets. Over the centuries, these documents, known as *Scripture*, were kept up to date by rabbis (religious teachers), but the main aim was to provide continuity from one generation to another. The Hebrew text was translated into Greek after the conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean by Greece about 300 BC, and Hebrew as an everyday language was suppressed (It was reintroduced as a modern language in contemporary Israel). The Old Testament quotations which we hear in the

Christmas stories are from this Greek version known as the *Septuagint*, put together in the third to second century BC.

The original manuscripts were in separate scrolls. In the first century AD, a book form called a *codex* (plural *codices*) was invented so it was possible for the Jews to make a stable collection of books that became known as the *canon* of the *Old Testament*. The text in our English bibles was translated from this in about the 16th century (See comment on the readings from Matthew for the First Sunday of Advent and the Feast of the Epiphany below)

The canon of the *New Testament* was derived in a similar way. It included letters (*epistles*), general teaching, and four extended narratives known as *gospels* or 'good news'. Several other gospels were omitted and remain of interest to scholars. Most now think that Mark was written about 30 years after the events that are described, Matthew and Luke about 50 years after, and John about 70 years after. Inevitably the gospels are coloured by the different experience of the writers (See more below), as Jerusalem was reduced to rubble by the Romans in 70 AD and the Church scattered to become part of the culture of the whole then-known world.

Scripture and Belief An inexhaustible fountain

The books making up the New Testament were chosen because they were used widely in worship and represented the common ground that held the expanding Church together. Documents that did not meet these criteria were judged as *heresies*, meaning independent opinions outside accepted doctrine. Discussion was long and difficult. The tentative canon of the second century was confirmed only when the Emperor Constantine (272-337) saw the advantages of governing peace-affirming Christians over governing squabbling, competing tribes. He made Christianity the established religion of his empire.

The recognition of Christianity as the imperial religion meant relaxation of the persecution of the Church that had been characteristic of the first three centuries. It also led the church leaders for specific areas (*bishops*) to formulate what was distinctive about Christianity as a world religion, now it was separated from the Jewish synagogues (in contrast to the situation described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles). It led to the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), which approved the statement of belief known as the *Nicaean Creed* that is still used throughout Christendom. The process and led to a blossoming of theological writing that underpinned the formal document. All statements of belief that could not by their nature be authenticated by historical events had to be in accord with the Scripture that

had been written 200-300 years earlier and tested through persecution and suffering.

This historical background explains why Scripture is so important, why churchgoers turn to it every time they meet for worship, and why they study it persistently throughout their lives, especially at the major festivals of Christmas and Easter. It also explains the booklet's title, which comes from a passage (printed at the end) by Saint Ephrem (306-373), who lived most of his life in the southern part of Turkey, near to the present-day border with Syria. His native language was close to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus himself, and, as a young man, he was present at the Council of Nicaea. He wrote hymns and encouraged singing in worship. He founded and trained a women's choir. John Wesley described him as "the most awakening writer among the ancients."

St Ephrem's insight was that reading Scripture is not simply a transfer of information. It is *interactive* (i.e., the hearer is drawn into a dialogue with the writer) and *iterative* (i.e., the full meaning is not grasped in one fleeting second, but it can be approached by a series of small steps in which each depends on previous ones). Readers change over a lifetime as their experience is extended. The commentaries below on readings appointed for the Christmas Season are written with the insight of St Ephrem in mind.

Lectionaries

By about the fourth century the Church began to develop schedules of readings 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 lectionary we use is published in the *Methodist Worship Book*. It comprises a three-year cycle, like those 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) 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).

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.

A closer look at readings in Christian Worship

The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) exhorts us to ‘*read, hear, mark, learn, and inwardly digest*’ the passages from the Bible (the Church’s library) read during weekly worship. Our aim is not simply to transfer information about historical events or philosophical discourse. Instead, we participate in an *interactive* process in which we join both with those in our own congregation, and with a host of others whose lives have preceded ours. It is worth considering the part these people play in our experience each week.

Writers The text is of paramount importance as it provides continuity over the centuries. The written words were determined by the writers’ experience. They all wrote *from the perspective of their own time*, as the readings discussed in this booklet show. They do not, like journalists or media presenters today, describe precisely what is happening around them. Instead, they rely on people who *were* present during Jesus’ lifetime, whose memories have been passed on orally from one generation to another for 30-70 years (See paragraph on Old and New Testaments above). What they convey is not what is widely known to have happened, but what has become important to *them*, the followers ‘in the Way’, who accept Jesus as Lord and Messiah. It is worth remembering that the strongest convictions are often expressed both in biblical times and in our own, by narratives that are profoundly true, without being literally true in every detail.

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 and 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, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Syriac. In many cases the authors are unknown. As indicated above, the Christmas readings contain several passages translated from the Greek Septuagint, which was itself translated from the original Hebrew scriptures. These translations may result in subtle changes of meaning that are difficult to spot by those unfamiliar with ancient languages. Many major translations are therefore made

by groups of scholars who can assiduously compare texts to assess which are the most reliable.

Furthermore, translators look forward as well as back. For example, the text of the *King James Bible* (1611) was written so it was majestic and memorable when read aloud to largely illiterate congregations. Despite the archaic language, the translation is still widely used. New translations of the Bible appear every few years; the authors aim to strike a balance between faithfulness to the original text and ear-catching appeal by using racy contemporary speech. In choosing which version of scripture to use for a particular occasion, we inevitably participate in this process.

Readers Those who volunteer to read in Church declare that their passage is “the Word of the Lord.” They have the responsibility of conveying the meaning of the text. They decide which words to emphasise and whether any lines should be read more slowly than the rest. Inevitably, the readers will not be able to convey all the nuances of the text, but the more they themselves *own* 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 for this purpose.

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 the nuances that cannot be expressed on paper. Some 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.

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. Isaiah 1-39) written before the Babylonian exile (587), another (approx. Is. 40-55) written during exile, and the third (approx. Is. 56-66) written after the return to Jerusalem (about 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 as suffered earlier by the kingdom to the north. The prophet directs their thoughts of the people 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* (v 5). This is the way forward in the political crisis that is brewing in the Kingdom of Judah. *Light* is one of the defining metaphors of the Advent season.

Psalm 122

David had placed the mercy seat and the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the most holy scrolls of the Law, in Jerusalem, which 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 intuitively know the presence of God so they can 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 (vv 6-8). Jewish tradition is also enshrined in 'the house of David'; compare 'the house of the Lord' in Isaiah. Christians use *Jerusalem* or *Sion* to indicate 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 from sleep" (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 he 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 epistle for the Third 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 70 AD, 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, taken 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, punish wrongdoers and reward the righteous. 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 came suddenly; 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 (vv 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. The themes of repentance, the realisation of the need for forgiveness, and the hope of mercy, are drawn together. 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. We pray that we may show 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.

4 December 2022 The Second Sunday of Advent

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 1000 BC), but subsequent kings failed to live and govern in accord with the Law and Covenant with God that they had inherited. 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 the Lord, i.e., respect for his precepts (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 of the Jewish kingdom 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., with 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*, and *all* logically includes Gentiles as well as Jews. The quotations in vv 9, 10 and 12 are from Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalms 18:49, 117:1 and Isaiah 11:10, and comprise examples from the three most important components of the Jewish Scriptures: Law, Psalms and Writings of the Prophets. In all cases Paul quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek version of these documents, which in his time was the most up to date version derived from the original Hebrew. The nuances of translation in Paul's quotations and in the preceding psalm point to the same conclusion: If their (and our) God is God of *all* He must be God of Gentiles as well as Jews. Put in another way, it is almost as if during the thousand years of Jewish history, the Old Testament has gained something of the flavour of the New Testament.

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" as John the Baptist's, 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 more than 500 years earlier. Similar references to the Old Testament 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 whole passage 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*, i.e., qualitatively different. 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 the text of the Bible. The words are sometimes, as here, adapted from Scripture, and sometimes quoted directly from the Law or the writings of prophets. 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, like Mary, sees herself as having borne a child who would become a special servant of the Lord. It draws on psalms and other canticles, but its lasting importance is in what it shows about the purposes of God, as understood through 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. Throughout all time he is revered and glorified (v 48). He is mighty (v 49). His *name*, i.e., his nature, is *holy* and inherently different from that of humankind. 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 (vv 54, 55). Luke

claims that Abraham's "posterity," (v 55), translated 'seed' in the Book of Common Prayer, are represented by the *Church*, because its members are, like Abraham, *people of faith*. He makes dramatic contrasts between God's priorities and human priorities (vv 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 (vv 7-8). But this urging is balanced by a call to be *patient*, as a farmer waits 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 (v 10).

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., don't hear and see, cut themselves off.

The Jewish tradition was 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 teasingly: “Did you go to watch the swaying of the reeds in the Jordan valley?” On the contrary, they went to see someone with trenchant views, which had got him into serious trouble. (See the gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent) 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, a forerunner of the Messiah, or, like the messenger of Malachi 3:1 quoted in v 10, someone 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 himself inaugurates. Matthew represents John as a turning point in history. God’s relation with *the Jewish people* is continued in *the Church* (vv 11-15). 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 Jesus 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 the First Isaiah (See commentary for the First Sunday) 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 around 85 AD, when the gospels of Matthew and Luke were written. The line of David was to be 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.

Psalm 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 was used in communal worship. In v 17, the phrase 'man on your right hand' probably refers to a king, as 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 and the travel of Jewish traders throughout the vast Roman 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. He was executed around 64 AD, 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*). 'Jesus' is a tag or label; 'Christ' expresses *function* or purpose. 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 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) and 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 God's 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, and incipient creed.

Matthew 1:18-25

The preface to Paul's letter to the Romans (see above) shows that by about 60 AD 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 don't ask 'What happened?' but 'What does Matthew tell us?' from his perspective, 80 years after the event, the passage has a clearer and more satisfactory meaning. Like Paul, Matthew perceives Jesus as a successor of both Abraham (See final line of Magnificat) and David (Matthew 1:1-17). Abraham's faith led him to migrate to a new land and found a new nation so that all Jews considered themselves to be his offspring. David was the most powerful and respected King of Israel, who, through the link with Joseph (v 20) and the child referred to in Isaiah 7:14 (See the first reading above and v 23). Jesus was not only 'King of the Jews' but also 'Christ' with a status above all others, as implied by the preceding reading. It was therefore logical to insist that his life was imbued with a power, purpose

and significance that could not be described in purely human terms. This takes the discussion away from *science*, where we can (ultimately) describe and explain, to the deeper level of *faith*, where we focus on meaning, intention, and belief, and set confused scientific explanations aside.

The name *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Jewish *Joshua*, which originally meant ‘Yahweh, help!’ but in popular thinking became ‘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 reminded that at Christmas we celebrate something much, much greater than a historical event: the *Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

The Collect was published in 1964. Its petition is that the Church may be empowered by the living presence of God that we call *grace*. That grace had made Israel his people, and, when the storm clouds gathered before the impending collapse of the Assyrian Empire, led prophets to envisage a new community where the poor and weak would not be forgotten. That grace was shown in Mary and embodied in the son she bore. Through that grace Mary was the first to offer herself as a participant in the Incarnation: “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). We pray that we may be associated with Mary’s rejoicing at her salvation (Luke 1:47) through which she embraced God’s holy will. She stands as an exemplar and inspiration for the Church throughout the world.

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 as 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 intention) 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 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 and reminds us of the rest of his story. The divine qualities of Jesus were not perceived by those around him in Bethlehem. He was born in an outhouse rather than a palace or even an inn. Later in his life 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, transcendent realm of God (See the Introduction to this booklet).

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 during their everyday lives. No dark 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 (v13) – 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 humanity that binds all peoples together in peace. It was incorporated into a hymn known as the *Gloria*, probably by Ambrose (340-397). This is still said or sung regularly 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, from the Book of Common Prayer, gives us a concise statement of our belief in Incarnation. Through the willingness of Mary and the birth of Jesus, our all-powerful and ever gracious God shared our human nature. We pray that we, who have been 'born again' by our baptism, may be freed from the constrictions limiting the growth of our true selves, that we may be accepted as adopted sons and daughters, and that, through his continued presence, these relationships may be renewed and strengthened every day.

1 January 2023 The Second Sunday of Christmas

There are two **collects**

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.

God of power and life,
the glory of all who believe in you,
fill the world with your splendour,
and show the nations the light of your
truth,
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who lives 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 specific 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*. He was still there though his people were far from home.

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 comforter (one who gives strength) in times of sorrow (v 13). From the earliest times the Church has seen this pre-Christian poetry as expressing their confidence in the ministry of Jesus, God's Anointed One.

The notion of God as Father of a whole people (v 9) is found from time to time in the Old Testament, but it is vastly extended in Christian theology. God is addressed as 'Father' by Jesus, and as 'Father' of his people, by the Church. In time, the Church saw Jesus as having the same nature as God and began to refer to him as God's *Son*.

Psalm 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 80 and 100 AD, after Paul's authentic letters had been put 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 incorporated into God's eternal purpose. 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 Christ we are redeemed, forgiven (v 7), and empowered by his grace, freely shared with us (v 8). As his sons and daughters, we each have a specific place "in him" (v 10). This assurance enabled his first followers to be witnesses to his glory (v 12) and to proclaim the good news of his presence, despite his crucifixion and burial. 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 70 AD. 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 affected 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*, irrespective of their background or culture. The prologue to the gospel deals with what theologians call the *Mystery of the Incarnation*. The word mystery is used in its most profound sense. It means that words are inherently inadequate. The short words in the English translation disguise the importance and depth 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 humanity (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 describes 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 humanity 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 a human being, a Son.

The powerful first **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 second **Collect** from *The Divine Office Revised* was published in 1978. It focuses on the one supreme God who shows his sovereignty and creative power through the life of a human being: Jesus Christ. In him the whole of humanity is given a place in bringing healing, new understanding and new possibilities that display God's glory, grace, and truth.

6 January 2022 The Epiphany

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.

The Feast of the Epiphany was probably the earliest winter celebration of the Christian religion. and remains the 'Christmas' of the Eastern Church. Epiphany means 'revelation', 'manifestation', 'seeing things in a new way', 'perceiving new possibilities.' The metaphor, *Light*, links the lectionary readings.

Isaiah 60:1-6

The prophet known as the second Isaiah encourages his hearers by saying that the years of war, captivity, and exile that they have endured will come to an end. *Light*, which can be understood as 'insight' or 'understanding' will sweep aside 'the darkness that has covered the earth'. The prophet interprets light as evidence of God's glory, i.e., of his goodness and forbearance throughout the turmoil of history. The phrase "glory of the Lord" is used in a similar sense in the Christmas Day readings e.g., Luke 2:8 and John 1:14. The light will be recognised by all nations and their kings (v 3). Those who have been scattered by war and 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 and frankincense. Matthew (See below) weaves these details into his Christmas narrative.

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 supports the helpless (v 12), who pities and rescues the weak (v 13), frees them from exploitation and violence, and counts them as precious in his sight (v 14). The king with these qualities commands the respect of other nations, who acknowledge the justice and peace that he brings. They accord him tribute to express their allegiance.

Ephesians 3:1-12

General information about the Epistle to the Ephesians has been given in commentary on the Second Sunday of Christmas.

This passage refers more than once (vv 3, 4, 9) to the “mystery of Christ” (See commentary on John 1 in the readings for the Second Sunday of Christmas), suggesting that, though his Incarnation can be explored again and again, its full meaning can never be fully grasped. The true significance of this mystery was not obvious to previous generations (v 5). Now that the Church had grown, its thinking had been nurtured “by the Spirit” (v 5). This was how the early church expressed its sense that the continued deepening of its understanding indicated the ongoing presence of God. This presence had been evident from the beginning of time and dramatically displayed in the life and death of Jesus. It had become clear that he 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’), and emphasising the heirs’ *full* participation in the Church. They share the same inheritance; they are one people; they together participate in all that Jesus Christ has achieved. With Paul and through the Church, they join in making known his greatness (v 8), his manifestation in history (v 9), his wisdom (v 10), and the eternal purpose of God realised through him (v 11). By the time Ephesians was written, the meaning of the word *Christ* had been vastly deepened from that of *Messiah* in the Old Testament. Through this new understanding, the Church proclaimed that Jesus, both Lord and Christ, gave believers, even the most self-effacing, confidence in their approach to God (v 11-12). It was part of God’s nature to notice and care for the poorest and most marginalised members of the community, and to give them a place as active partners in his kingdom.

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 was centred on the Law and the Synagogue. Some commentators have suggested that the Christian convert Matthew was associated with a group of Jews that gathered at a town on the Mediterranean coast after the destruction of Jerusalem. They set themselves the task of recovering what they could of the Jewish faith and practice. This would account for the Jewishness of Matthew’s

gospel, which is structured like the five books of the Jewish Law. In the lectionary Matthew 2 forms an independent alternative version of the Christmas story. If the passages in Luke and Matthew are taken as simple narratives, i.e., one episode after another, there is no overlap and Matthew's text can be presented as a *sequel* to Luke's, as it is in some modern Christmas services. If, however, the first-century narratives are about the timeless significance of the Incarnation, the two gospel writers make much the same points (Compare the analysis below with that for Luke 2 on Christmas Day).

Matthew (like Luke), begins by placing the birth of Jesus firmly in history "in the days of Herod the king." Jesus was a real human being. To say this seems odd today, but it was important in the first century to make it clear, as the Church expanded to include people familiar with myths in which gods became human (See, for example, Acts 14:11) or spirits (e.g., 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 7).

The "wise men from the East" are often depicted as kings. The term may have been taken from the allusion (v 11) to Isaiah 60:3, 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).

Jesus would not be like the self-important kings of Judah such as Herod. He would not be born 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 leave Herod (v 9). "They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" as the light of the star directed them. They fell to their knees in worship. Matthew draws on Isaiah 60:6 to describe their gifts: gold symbolising kingship and power, incense symbolising holiness. Significantly, Matthew adds myrrh to symbolise suffering. In that one sentence he summarises the content of the narrative ahead. The wise men depart "by another way"; not just by taking another road, but by leaving behind them, at the court of Herod, their preconceived view about the nature of kingship. They left Herod's self-glorification, his blindness, his refusal to see himself for what he was: a Roman puppet. They left his cruelty (Matthew 2:16), his disregard for those for whom he was responsible. Matthew's words "another way" would resonate with Matthew's readers, who referred to themselves as followers "in the Way" as a reference to Jesus himself (John 14:6).

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 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 [Jesus Christ’s] 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 is seen by later generations as a sign that our ever-faithful God will never forsake his people. Centuries later, Paul in the Letter to the Romans, read on the Sunday before Christmas, 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 is alive in their midst. Later, Matthew and Luke wrote their superficially simple, but theologically profound, narratives that are sometimes called the 'Christmas story'. 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: that the "God of Glory ... came to share our humanity so we may share his divinity." This is the amazing, 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.

If you are a regular reader of the Bible, we hope that this booklet has encouraged you to reread the familiar Christmas passages, to dig a little deeper, and to find something that you have not previously noticed.

If you are not a regular Bible reader, we hope you have begun to understand that Christian belief is less arbitrary, unreasonable, and irrational than you feared. If you with us turn from analysis of the world we know, and which the Bible calls *flesh*, we can glimpse the changeless Word whose sovereignty cannot be measured. Sacred writings can be read at one level as factual and precise, but at a deeper level as symbolic, metaphorical, and interactive. In looking *beyond* the scientifically describable '*flesh*', we glimpse the changeless *Word*, whose sovereignty cannot be measured or analysed. In our Christmas celebrations, the glory and sovereignty that sustain the whole Universe are revealed in the grace and compassion of a human face. "The Word became flesh and we beheld his glory" (John1:14).

St Ephrem (AD 306-373) The Word of the Lord 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.

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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