Christ Church Lewes

United Reformed and Methodist

The Word of the Lord

Advent and Christmas

3 December 2023 to 7 January 2024

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This booklet is in two parts. The first is a summary of the beliefs that underpin Christian Worship, the meaning of some of the words used in discussing it, and the reason why we, as a church, still find it important after 2000 years. The second provides background information and commentary on the readings heard in Church during the 2023 Advent and Christmas Season. You are welcome to take a copy, whether or not you come to church.

1 Christian Worship

Divine and Human

Every year Christians celebrate their belief in one God: supreme, and changeless. Their two major festival seasons, *Christmas* and *Easter*, are preceded by a period of preparation, and end with a Sunday that proclaims Good News.

Advent Christmas Epiphany

Lent Easter Pentecost

God is understood as *Father* to the whole human race; in some respects, men and women reflect his nature. They may turn away from him and follow their own way, but he remains faithful, generous and forgiving to those who return. This bringing together of the *divine* and the *human* in the life of the Jewish teacher Jesus is expressed in the words *Incarnation*, i.e. becoming *flesh* (part of the physical world), and *Resurrection*, i.e. conquering *death* (separation from God). Incarnation is associated with Christmas and Resurrection with Easter, but they really represent different perspectives of the key insight at the heart of Christian faith, namely, that our God was perceived specifically in the human being Jesus. See below.

The *divine*, sometimes referred to as *holy* or *sacred*, and the *human* are brought together in *worship* and *prayer*. The sacred cannot be defined, measured or studied by science, but that does not mean that statements about it are nonsense. Humans can discuss it rationally and take it into account in making decisions.

This booklet is written with two groups of people in mind:

- Those who over many years have made regular worship a key part of their life but have got stuck in their way of thinking about it.
- Those who are interested in religious belief and attracted towards it but are held back by what they perceive as arbitrary assumptions associated with religion, but unsupported by scientific evidence.

Opinion polls indicate that a majority in the UK consider themselves to be non-believers. However, the same polls show that whereas most non-believers think that Christians routinely take the Bible literally and accept its pre-scientific worldview, only a minority of believers do so. As there is considerable misunderstanding and ignorance of Christian belief, this booklet provides background information about the passages read aloud in Church during the Christmas festival. It argues that modern biblical scholarship makes it possible to understand the readings in a way that is consistent with 21st century thought, and that the message proclaimed in them is as fresh and relevant as ever. Some of the words used in discussion of worship have specific meanings that are different from those in common usage. These are printed in italics and defined through their context.

Scripture

The Bible is not a book, but a *library* of books written over almost 1000 years. During this time there was considerable development in the understanding of the relationship between the sacred and natural worlds. Jews, particularly, learnt from their troubled history and periods of exile that their God was not limited to a specific territory and tribe, but sovereign everywhere. Through the life and death of Jesus the nature of God was perceived in a human being. His followers spoke of him as *Son* and *Lord* and found that, through their relationship with him, it was possible for them to become adopted sons and daughters so that in the *Church*, God lives for ever, from generation to generation.

The books of the Bible are not arranged in the order in which they were written. This may be discerned from their content, style, references to contemporary events, and cross references (quotations from previous authors). After intense study over the last 200 years scholars are generally agreed about the order in which most of the books were written, but this is subject to modification by discoveries of lost manuscripts and improved scientific methods for their evaluation.

In the collection of books that we call the Old Testament, there are passages on which the Jews believed they could base the kind of society that God intended. These included specific directions, e.g. the Ten Commandments, detailed rules about food, and histories of people that showed God's role in their lives. All of this is called *Law* because it contains instruction about living in an ordered society focused on God.

In addition to the Law, there is further history, poetry, psalms (for quiet meditation or sung during worship), and the words of *prophets* (commentators on current events and moral issues). Over the centuries all these have been edited and modified.

The *Hebrew* text was translated into Greek after the conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean by

Greece about 300BC, and Hebrew as an everyday language died out (it was reintroduced as a modern

language in contemporary Israel). The New Testament writers quoted from the *Greek* version of the Old Testament (the *Septuagint*, 300-100 BC), which sometimes seems to be on the brink of early Christian thought. See further below.

The original Hebrew manuscripts were in separate scrolls. In the first century AD, a book form called *codex* (plural *codices*) was invented so it was possible for the Jews to make an agreed collection of books that became known as the *canon* of the *Old Testament*. The text in our English bibles was translated from this.

The canon of the *New Testament* was derived in a similar way. It included letters (*epistles*), general teaching, and a remarkable new literary genre comprising extended narratives known as *gospels* or '*good news*'. Four, out of those available, were included in the canon. Most scholars 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 backgrounds of the writers, as the Church expanded beyond the confines of Jerusalem and became part of the culture of the then known world.

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. The tentative canon of the second century was confirmed only after a further 250 years, when Christianity became the established religion and the Emperor demanded clarity. The Old and New Testaments together, as handed down over the centuries, are known as *Scripture.*

The documents were translated into Latin by St. Jerome (347-420). His version is known as the *Vulgate*, meaning 'for the common people' but it was really for the educated, because most people were illiterate. Hand-copied books

inevitably contained small mistakes and additions. They were also expensive, so, for 1000 years until the invention of printing around 1450, scripture had to be interpreted by priests, itinerant preachers, and teachers. In the late Middle Ages, the Vulgate was translated into the common European languages by people such as Wycliffe (ca. 1390). With increased travel during the Renaissance, educated leaders, such as Erasmus, could learn Greek and Hebrew, and translate Scripture from the original languages [e.g. Tyndale (1536) in England and Luther (1522 New Testament; 1534 Old Testament) in Germany]. Manuscripts could be compared with texts in Syriac, Coptic and Aramaic made by the churches of the Eastern Part of the Roman Empire. The introduction of printing meant that bibles could be produced reliably and made available to more and more people.

The best-known English translation from the original languages was commissioned from a committee of scholars in 1604 and published in 1611. It is known as the *King James Bible* or the *Authorised Version* because it was authorised to be read aloud in church services. It is characterised by fine seventeenth century cadences, which, together with those of the contemporary Shakespeare, had lasting influence on the English language. It is still widely used in worship and quoted, not least by non-churchgoers.

Other translations have been made to take account of changed meanings of words, or to attract people by use of slang. Scholars tend to favour translations that as closely as possible convey the meaning of the biblical writers themselves.

Writers, copiers, lectionary compilers (see below) all influence and enrich what we call the *Word of the Lord*, the foundation of Christian teaching and read every day in worship.

Most Christians do not claim that Scripture includes everything that can be said about their faith. However, they do claim that every statement that purports to be *Christian* must be consistent with Scripture *as a whole.*

People sometimes ask: “Why do we still need the Old Testament, then? Hasn’t the New Testament superseded it?” The lectionary readings discussed in this booklet remind us that Jesus was a faithful Jew, grounded in Jewish scripture. His teaching gave new direction to the traditional concepts of Law and Covenant. The characteristics of a tribal god, e.g. vengeance and disdain for aliens, were side-lined and belief in one God for all people was emphasised. The followers of Jesus remained attached to synagogues for 50 years and adopted aspects of synagogue worship, e.g. readings from the Law, the Prophets and

other Old Testament writers and the use of Psalms. We cannot understand Christian worship without this background.

In the language of modern psychology, Scripture is a living, *interactive* text, not an unchangeable rule book. St Ephrem (306-373) said that it is an "inexhaustible fountain" that people can drink again and again as they grow older, and still leave something for next time.

The orders of service used in worship are called *liturgy*; the word means "public work," so the emphasis is on *what is done*. The readings are usually determined by schedules known as *lectionaries*, which have been used from at least the fourth century. They have been modified over the years, but the general pattern has been maintained. Our version is published in the *Methodist Worship Book*. It uses a three-year cycle like that followed by Catholics, Anglicans and members of most of the other major denominations. The lectionary ensures (i) that all the important passages of Scripture are heard at least once every three years, (ii) that there is not excessive repetition, and (iii) that 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 this year are from Year 2, when most of those from the gospel are from Mark. Even if they are familiar, we hope you will read them again. Scripture can always be explored but its meaning is never *fully* grasped. Narrative passages that appear to be historical accounts are found to show multiple layers of meaning. Words that appear to be factual are found on rereading to be metaphorical. In any case, no one is quite the same person as they were three years ago, when the readings were last read in church.

2 Commentary on the 2023 Advent and Christmas Readings Year 2

Celebration of the birth of Jesus became widespread much later than celebration of the Resurrection. By the fourth century AD the Church was freed from imperial persecution. The church in Rome shrewdly rebranded the pagan feast of the Unconquered Sun, celebrated at the winter solstice, as a celebration of the birth of Jesus. [In some ways the modern secular festival is reverting to what it was in pre-Christian times.] Christians saw Jesus as light in darkness, turning the cold of winter into the warmth, hope and new life of spring.

From a liturgical perspective the period covered by this commentary is divided into three parts:

Advent	3 December 2023 to 24 December 2023
Christmas	25 December 2023 to 6 January 2024
Epiphany	7 January 2024

The word *Advent*, covering the first four Sundays, simply means 'Coming', but several distinct themes are displayed in the lectionary readings.

1 The Church celebrates the coming of Jesus, born in obscurity but acknowledged as revealing the *glory*, i.e., the true nature, of God whom he called Father. Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676), in his widely sung hymn (RS 140), asks "O Lord, how shall I meet you?" and replies: by self-examination, *repentance* (changing direction), making a new start in a sort of winter cleaning. It means setting aside the features of our lives that distract us from noticing and responding to others, in whom the image of Jesus may be shown to us. It means stretching our potential as human beings "to do in spirit lowly/all that may please you best." Significantly, the Church has traditionally sung these words to a Passiontide tune. Repentance does not mean life will be comfortable. It is sometimes costly.

In congregations (including occasionally at Christ Church) where those leading the worship indicate the season by the colours of their clothing, the green of the previous Sundays is changed to purple during Advent and Lent, to indicate periods of penitence.

2 The readings from the Jewish prophets speak of a new hope, a light that shines in the darkness and of an anointed leader or *Messiah* who will shepherd them and bring them peace. John the Baptist proclaims that the Messiah is at hand and urges his hearers to repent, in order to be properly prepared.

3 Luke's narratives present Mary as an image and prototype of the *Church*, as she offers herself as the means by which Jesus can be born, nurtured and his presence made known.

4 Some of the New Testament writers considered that after the Crucifixion the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah meant that he would soon return to judge humankind and to rule in majesty. This *Second Coming* was thought to be imminent; it could happen without warning, at any time. Two thousand years later, we talk less about a scientifically observable Second Coming, but the idea remains as an important metaphor in the Advent readings and Collects. In our individual lives, we are all tarnished by self-serving, but the Incarnation shows us that we have the potential to become more kind, truthful and forgiving, more like our Father.

3 December 2023 Advent Sunday

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 64:1-9

Most biblical scholars agree that the book of Isaiah is not the work of a single author. The first part (chapters 1-39 or so) is associated with an 8th century BC prophet, who warned the Jewish king and his people of coming disaster. The rest of the book appears, from its style, vocabulary, outlook, and references to contemporary events, to be the work of more than one author. It was written while the people were captive in Babylon or just after they returned to Judaea in 596BC, but its magnificent poetry and vivid language are for all time.

Today's reading comes from this second section. The writer (*deutero*-Isaiah) looks on the world around him with dismay. He sees the destruction wrought by earthquakes and fire from volcanoes (vv 1-2) as evidence of the wrath of God (v 3) because his people have *sinned* (v 5). In Jewish thought 'sinned' meant 'turned away from the Law and writings of the Prophets.' But he believes that God is merciful and supports those who try to be true to him (v 5). He refers to God as Father (v 8). He depicts him as a potter with the skill to mould the clay of humanity into a people that is fit to be called his own (v 9).

Again and again, the New Testament writers emphasise that their Good News is not a break with Jewish tradition. In frequent allusions or direct quotations, they see Jesus as fulfilling or embodying the hope that prophets such as Isaiah found in the dark days of defeat and exile. The lectionary compilers draw attention to these links in their choice of readings each Sunday.

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

The psalmist is reproachful. “Come to save us” (v 2), he says. “How long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?” (v 5). Yet underneath his self-pity his faith is shown by the metaphors he uses. He speaks of “the *Shepherd* of Israel” (v 1); the “*face*” of God and his power to *restore* his people (vv 3,7,19). The God who is *enthroned* above all (v 1) cares for all his people. In v 17 the psalmist speaks of “the man of [God’s] *right hand,*” i.e. his own agent, as *son of man*, a human being, “made strong for [himself]”. As in the above passage from Isaiah, the psalm is perceived by New Testament writers and lectionary compilers as a reference to Jesus Christ, who is described in the Creed, the formal statement of Christian belief, as “seated at the right hand of the Father”.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

The letters of Paul, who died about 64 AD, predated the gospels of Matthew and Luke, so they show us some of the earliest insight into the coming of Jesus.

The opening salutation (v 3), is used within the Church as a greeting or farewell. Each word is important. Paul sees the coming of Jesus as a gift of *grace* and peace (v 4). In Christian thinking, grace within people describes the characteristics that lead others to discern the power and presence of God in them. Jesus is recognised and proclaimed as *Christ*, the Greek word for the Messiah, an anointed leader or king who would bring peace, justice and purpose. Jesus is *Lord*, sovereign like God himself. Jesus shows the nature of the Father in his own life so that he could be called a *Son* (v 9). Paul had also seen the nature of the Father in the people to whom the letter was written (vv 6,7) and this was the basis of their *fellowship* (v 9). The phrase ‘Day of the Lord’ (v 8) was commonly used in Jewish literature to refer to the time when God would judge his people, punish those who had been disloyal, and reward the faithful. It was thought that judgment would be initiated by the return of the Messiah and this idea was reinforced by the attribution of divine status to Jesus.

Mark 13:24-37

The 13th chapter of Mark’s gospel is a collection of teaching about the ‘last things.’ [There are similar passages in both Matthew and Luke; the technical term for them is *eschatology*.]

Mark’s chapter is part of his Passion narrative, recording the final days of Jesus’ life. The disciples are filled with foreboding as the world that they have built around him seemed to be collapsing (v 24-25). But Mark is writing from the perspective of 30 years later. He knew that, as the old world passed away, a new one appeared. Jesus died, but lived on in the lives of his followers “from

the ends of earth to the ends of heaven" (v 27). The Crucifixion was not the end of Jesus' story. Mark seemed to expect an imminent return of Jesus (v 30) and so issues a stern warning: "Take heed, watch!" expressed in two parables.

- In vv 28-31, he says: 'Notice what is happening'. When trees begin to fruit, summer is here. Remember your commitments as disciples. Don't delay. Now is the time to act.
- In vv 32-37 he points out that none of the followers of Jesus can predict when they will be called to account. A watchman's job is to watch, not to sleep!

The message is repeated as we pass through the Advent Season to Christmas.

The Collect comes from the Book of Common Prayer (1662) but it is based on a shorter 8th century text. We pray that we may turn from darkness to light now, in our present transient life. Our attention is drawn to the "great humility" of his humanity and the "glorious majesty" of his divinity, brought together in Jesus Christ. We pray that, when our own lives are judged, we may be considered fit to remain with him always.

10 December 2023 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 40:1-11

The Jewish people have been taken captive in Babylon, but a voice in the wilderness gives hope (v 1). The mercy of God is beyond measure, more than enough to forgive the failure of his chosen people to keep their part of the commitment they have made (v 2) to follow God's Law, the way of life God intended. For rulers who conquered desert areas it was important to have well-built roads as links between cities. The extended metaphor of vv 3-4 suggests that the exiles will find a secure way back to their own cities and their broken relationship will be restored. All nations shall see the glory of God (v 5), i.e. his power to heal and make new. In vv 6-8, the frailty of humanity is contrasted with God's changeless strength. But for all his awesome power (vv 9-10) God is tender as a shepherd, caring for each person as an individual (v 11). The voice in the wilderness (v 3) is identified with that of John the Baptist in today's gospel. This is another example showing that the New Testament writers were convinced that in Jesus of Nazareth, in a way that they could not fully articulate, they had seen God himself (v 9. See last week's commentary). They turned to the poetry of 600 years earlier to underpin their case.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

God forgives and restores his people (vv 1-2). He brings peace (v 8) to those who turn to him, i.e. seek to keep his Law. The message reinforces the previous reading from Isaiah. God brings salvation "to those who fear him" (v 9). 'Salvation' means healing wounds, reviving what is good, and revealing new possibilities. In Jewish worship the phrase 'fear of the Lord' came to mean 'taking note of God' or 'responding to the Law'. Over the time that Scripture was put together, the Jewish understanding of God matured. The tribal god evident in the earliest passages became a universal God who governed and

upheld all peoples. It was no longer necessary to think of him as vengeful by nature. His attributes here are listed as steadfast love, faithfulness (v 10), righteousness ('rightness') (vv 10, 12), peace (v 8), and generosity (v 12). The psalmist suggests that the commitment between God and his people, described (v 9) as his glory, is revealed in the commitment between individuals. Verse 13 has also been translated "He shall direct his going in the way" or "He shall set us in the way of his steps", i.e. the psalmist is shown God's way through the Law. In the New Testament, belief in Jesus as Christ is described as the *Way* (John 14:6).

2 Peter 3:8-15a

The second epistle of Peter is called 'general' because it was written for wide circulation, not for any specific congregation. The text suggests that it was almost certainly not written by Peter the Apostle [e.g. it refers to the Church as it was after Peter's death in 65 AD].

The writer, like Mark (See last Sunday's commentary), says that the day of the Lord will "come like a thief", without warning, and that the world will soon come to a melodramatic end (vv 10-11). God, however, is not limited by time, as measured by human experience (vv 8-9): "One day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day". He is not vindictive (v 9). He would rather people turn to him in repentance than perish. Throughout the passage the readers of the epistle are enjoined to live generous and responsible lives *now, in the present*. Instead of worrying about the end of the world they should wait in patience, earnestly desiring ('hastening') the coming of the day of God (v 12), while living without spot or blemish (v 14), at peace with one another, and trusting in God's generosity, mercy and kindness to cleanse and renew (v 15a). The implication is that the presence of God is manifest *in the Church*, consistent with the view that the epistle was written in the second century, when the church as a community had been established.

Mark 1:1-8

The gospel according to Mark has nothing to say about the birth of Jesus. As far as we are aware, there were no contemporaneous writers noting the details of events in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Traditions about these events may have been handed down orally over the 30 or so years between the Crucifixion and the writing of Mark and it is possible that elderly witnesses had survived. But, at present, this is speculation.

In the absence of historical detail, a more likely explanation for the absence of a Christmas story is that it was not a priority for Mark and his contemporaries. They were concerned, not with what happened at Bethlehem, but with the

gospel of Jesus and the significance of his life and death (See below). As a new generation grew up, Jerusalem was destroyed (70AD), and the Church was scattered, it became more important than previously to collect as much information as possible about the central person of Jesus Christ. The gospel writers Luke and Matthew wrote extended accounts of the birth of Jesus that take account of his significance as perceived by the Church about 85 AD. This open-ended, developing understanding enriches the readings for Christmas week (See below) and lifts them above factual reports. It gives them life that allows us, after 2000 years, to read and reread them without the sense that we have already grasped all the good news that they have to bring.

The dramatic first line of today's reading makes it clear that Jesus Christ *is himself* the *euangelion* (The Greek word literally means 'good news' but it is translated into English as 'gospel'). As there is only one gospel, viz, the life and work of Jesus, it is more accurate to use the formulation 'The gospel according to Mark …' rather than 'Mark's gospel.' Scholars have explored the meaning of *euangelion* in other contexts that show some of the nuances embodied in its use. For example, it was also used to describe the Messianic message of hope (See Isaiah 40:9 above), imperial proclamations, or messages brought home by runners about victories on the battlefield.

The word *Chris*t has been discussed in comments on the epistle for Advent Sunday. There is some speculation about whether the words 'Son of God' were included in the original text. They may have been added later, neatly reflecting the concluding words of the centurion (Mark 15:39): "Truly this man was a son of God."

Mark passes breathlessly from this opening headline to the message of hope proclaimed by Isaiah. Like the other gospel writers (Matthew 3:3; Luke 3:3; John 1:23), Mark immediately identifies the voice in the wilderness as that of John the Baptist, who claims to be merely the forerunner of one who is greater than he was. Compared to Jesus, he is like the slave who undoes the sandal of his rich master (v 7).

When Mark wrote his gospel, *baptism* had become the defining initiation into the Church, but the meaning of the rite had been made much more profound than shown by John the Baptist. The emphasis was no longer on looking back, or on cleansing by the waters of the Jordan. The emphasis in the Church 30 years after the Crucifixion is on the future. Baptism involves "death to sin" (Romans 6:2). Setting aside the past means a permanent change of direction, so that,

over the years, through life and worship within the Church (v 8), the person baptised is transformed and purified by God's presence.

In the (modern) **Collect** we remember the holiness and steadfastness of God. We pray that our hope in him may be renewed as we wait until his justice and kindness are acknowledged throughout the world, and his kingdom is fully come. We recognise our personal responsibility: Jesus is our *Judge* (by his life our own is measured) and our *Saviour* (we need his support and mercy to enable us to set aside what holds us back from being worthy citizens of God's kingdom).

17 December 2023 The Third Sunday in Advent

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.

In some parts of the Church, the third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* (Rejoice!) Sunday, when the sombre purple Advent vestments are replaced by richly embroidered robes with a rose background. The word 'Rejoice!' rings out in the first word of the *Preface* (introductory text of the service), in the words of the prophet and the epistle here, and in the epistle designated for *Gaudete* in Year 3 (Philippians 4:4).

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Both Matthew (11:5) and Luke (4:18-19) quote this passage to support their claim that Jesus is Messiah. He is presented as expressing "the Spirit of the Lord God" (v 1) and his coming marks the Year of the Lord (v 2) that brings justice and renewal. The poetry is carried along by vivid metaphors. The pain of the poor and broken-hearted will be relieved; captives and prisoners will be freed from their chains. The oppressed will have a place in the new society. Those who mourn in Zion (i.e. those who are saddened by the state of their nation) will be strengthened and become like oaks (v 3). The sacked city will be rebuilt (v 4), justice (fairness) will be restored (v 8), the Covenant between God and his people will be restored through the new ruler (v 8), and their descendants will flourish (v 9). All this is cause for exuberant rejoicing (v 10) as shown in festive wedding garments, or in the new vegetation and colour of spring (v 11).

It is interesting that vv 5-7, which are not quoted by the New Testament writers and not included here, represent a less generous world view. This illustrates how the thinking of the early church, and the lectionary, is *both* embedded in the Jewish scriptures *and moves on from them*.

Psalm 126

By 539 BC the Jews' Babylonian rulers had been conquered by Cyrus, King of Persia. He decided to allow captives of all nations (not just Jews) to return to their own lands. The first verse of the psalm suggests that it was a song of rejoicing for this liberation. *Zion* in Jewish and Christian literature means 'Jerusalem', or (as here) 'the Jewish people.' Their relief is shown in laughter and shouts of joy (v 2) that are mingled with a prayer that God's goodness will continue (vv 4- 5).

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

These words conclude what may be the earliest of the Pauline letters. The recipients were presumably mainly Greeks or Gentiles, who may not have had the Jewish background of the psalms or of prophets like Isaiah. Paul, brought up as a Jew, captures the excitement of the early church as he describes the new life of his converts. *Gaudete*! He exhorts them to rejoice at the new direction of their lives and the mutual support that helps them to turn aside from thoughts and actions that separate them from God (vv 16-22). Throughout the passage the readers are enjoined to live generous and responsible lives *now, in the present*. The letter ends with a blessing. Paul prays that his readers may find peace (v 23), that they may *grow in holiness* (i.e. become more like God himself), and that they be made fit to be one with Jesus Christ.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The prologue of the gospel according to John, that proclaims the divinity of Jesus, is interrupted by a short passage (vv 6-8), which, in today's reading, is linked with a longer reference to John the Baptist. The gospel writer shifts the emphasis from John as *Baptist*, as in the other gospels, to John as forerunner of the much more important *Jesus as Messiah or Christ* (v 6). John the Baptist was 'a witness to the *light*, pointing to "the light (that) shines in the darkness" (v 5). John, like Mark (See gospel last week), refers to John the Baptist as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (v 23), but places this identification within an interrogation, first by the *priests and Levites* (religious authorities, v 19), and then by the *Pharisees* (a sect particularly dedicated to keeping the Law in every detail, v 24). They sensed that he might be the Messiah or his predecessor Elijah, who has come to announce him. But John the Baptist says he has no formal standing. He is just a voice in the wilderness. His significance is in pointing to the one who is coming (v 27) and who is far, far more worthy. The gospel moves the encounter from the desert to Bethany, near to Jerusalem, a place associated with confrontations described in John 8 and 11, in which

Scribes and Pharisees recognise Jesus as a *teacher* but fail to understand that he is *Christ*. The change of venue reinforces John 1:11; "[Jesus'] own people received him not."

The **Collect**, like that for the previous Sunday, is modern. The themes are similar: repentance (turning away from past errors), 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.

24 December 2023 The Fourth Sunday of Advent Christmas Eve

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.

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

This passage is an example of a narrative that has several layers of meaning. See discussion of *Law* in the Part 1 of this booklet. Most simply it can be read as an account of a conversation between the Jewish king David (at the height of his power and influence about 1000 BC), and the prophet Nathan, who, in modern jargon would be described as an aide, advisor, counsellor, or senior civil servant. Should David consider building a house for the sacred scrolls setting out the Law and the Covenant, symbols of the presence of God with his people?

Often, however, a historian (or gospel writer) seeks not simply to describe a historical event "exactly as it happened," but to show what the event meant for a later generation. So here we learn something of David's character and what a better king would do. The New Testament writers saw this better king in David's descendant, Jesus.

David considers building a house for the worship of God. Nathan dissuades him. David thinks of himself as doing something gracious for God, forgetting that all his past success (vv 6-9) has been possible only with God's help. In this respect he was deviating from a key idea in Jewish thinking: that the people owed obedience to God because *He* had brought them from slavery in Egypt to their Promised Land (v 6). Allegiance to God is more important than a building (v 7). *God* will make David a house (v 11) in the sense that his descendants will continue to rule (v 16). The Hebrew word for 'house' could also mean 'temple', 'household' or 'family'.

By placing this story in the Christmas readings, the lectionary compilers contrast David and Mary. David wanted to build a house of cedar, that would draw

attention to himself, but ultimately rot and collapse. In contrast, Mary was able to make possible the revelation of a new kind of house, the *Church*. It would last for ever and be fit for the indwelling of God himself. Mary's son Jesus would be the cornerstone. In this new house(hold) there was a place for all who sincerely wished to follow him.

Luke 1: 46b-55

The psalm is replaced by a *canticle* i.e. a passage in the form of a song, but not included in the book of psalms. 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 is known by the first word in the Latin text, *Magnificat*, 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 the leadership of Jesus Christ and seek to follow him as disciples. The unchanging relevance of the *Magnificat* means that it is still, with the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32. See further below), given central place in Evening Prayer, every day, throughout the world,

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. 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 associates the church with Abraham's 'posterity' or 'seed' (v 55), because its members are people whose faith is in the same faithful God. Luke's canticle 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.

or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

The psalmist proclaims the steadfastness of God's support and love that underpins his Covenant with his people. This was made originally with Abraham,

formalised with Moses, and renewed with the Jewish kings. Here it is presented as a Covenant with David (vv 3, 20-26) and his descendants. For Christians the most important descendant is Jesus, whose coming is understood as a continuation and fulfilment of God's original Covenant with the Jewish people. The reference to God as Father (v 26) is significant. The New Testament writers tell us that Jesus himself spoke of God as Father, and we, his followers (perhaps with some trepidation), have dared to use this name ever since.

Romans 16:25-27

The passage forms a *doxology* (a formal ascription of praise and honour) at the conclusion of a long letter. The message of hope that Paul has brought and the teaching of the Messiah Jesus (v 25) has shed new light on the changeless God, who is referred to as *mystery*. This means something that can never, *ever* be fully described; the term is much stronger than it is in everyday use, where it sometimes means something that is not *yet* explained. Through Jesus the words of the prophets have been brought to fulfilment and made known, not only to the Jews, but to the whole human race (v 26). In Jesus Christ, revealed through Paul's long, lovingly complied list (vv 1-23) of companions and fellow-disciples, the glory of the one supreme God has been revealed for all time (v 27).

Luke 1:26-38

The episode depicted in this passage has been commemorated on 25 March since the earliest years of the Church. Some have suggested that this determined the choice of 25 December (rather than the precise date of the winter solstice) as Christmas Day. The passage has been illustrated in countless paintings even though conversations between humans and angels are not intended to be taken as simple history. Each line of Luke's account makes a serious *theological* statement, i.e., expresses something of the writer's understanding of the nature of God. By weaving all these statements together, Luke provides the basis for what is meant by the words in the Creed: that "the Lord Jesus Christ…by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the virgin Mary and became man".

In v 31 we have "you shall call his name Jesus". This is a Greek form of the common Jewish name Joshua. It means 'God saves'. In him men and women find new and everlasting life.

In v 32 'He will be called the Son of the Most High' indicates that his life shows the divine nature and character of God.

In v 32 “The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David” indicates that God is present in his people for all time (See the reading from 2 Samuel 7, above).

In v 33 “His kingdom will have no end”, also in the Creed, shows that the sovereignty of God is without limit in space or time. His power does not wax or wane. He does not maintain it by force (John 18:36).

In v 35 “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” gives us a new way of describing God’s presence among his faithful. The Incarnation was a demonstration of God’s continuing creative intention: “to make man in his own image” (Genesis 1:26).

In v 37 “with God nothing will be impossible” asserts that the power of God is stronger than that of any other power.

In v 38 the response “I am the handmaid of the Lord” indicates that Mary is the willing agent through whom God’s presence is made evident. She is the first to hear the Good News and is often presented as a symbol of the Church.

These statements in Luke’s gospel were brought together 250 years later in the doctrine of *God as Trinity*, as expressed each week in the concluding words of the Collects.

The petition in the **Collect** is that we may be filled with the presence of God (*grace*). It draws together three points: that God’s presence had made Israel his people; that his presence was to be expressed in Mary; and that, as we in the Church seek with her to offer ourselves as the means by which God’s holy will may be fulfilled, we are associated with her rejoicing.

25 December 2023 Christmas Day

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 52: 7-10

The Jewish people, disconsolate in their captivity, hear that their exile is about to end and that they will be able to return to Jerusalem. The "good news" is shouted by the watchmen as they together see the approaching procession. The people break into song and their joy is irrepressible. The city will be rebuilt from its "waste places" (ruins). Peace will be re-established. Their *redemption* (freedom to make a new start) and *salvation* (healing of their wounds as their suffering is ended) are unequivocally attributed to their God, who reigns supreme above all nations. It is not surprising that the Church incorporates this incomparable poetry into Christmas celebrations.

Psalm 98

This, one of the most joyful of all the psalms, is also used in the Easter season. It is best read slowly, so that its images can be savoured. The Lord's victory (vv 1-3) is clear to all people. He has shown his tenderness and faithfulness to his people Israel and all creation sings with joy and praise (vv 4-8). The celebration of Christmas is lifted into the context of the purpose of God in the whole universe. He guards, upholds, renews and judges, not only the people of Israel, but the whole human race (v 9).

Hebrews 1:1-4

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is unknown. He was almost certainly a Greek Christian with a fine command of language and rhetoric, as is shown by this magnificent opening passage. The writer says that knowledge of God is always fragmentary and incomplete, but now the One who upholds the whole

universe has spoken of himself in a new way. The Jews found God in their history, their Law, and the words of the prophets, but in Jesus he is seen in a *Person*, a Son and heir (See further commentary on Epiphany). Jesus is the true reflection of God's nature, the true measure of his glory, and 'the express image of his person' (v 3a AV). He is esteemed above all. The metaphor of v 3b is incorporated into the Creed: 'he sits at the right hand of the Father', i.e. as an agent of God, with the authority of God.

Two gospel readings are associated with Christmas Day.

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 Luke's account was written 80 years after the events he described, it makes sense to assume that his focus was on *his own day*, and on the *future*, rather than on 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 details of the census quite right (Quirinius wasn't governor when Herod was king) 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 the *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 reminds us of the rest of his story. The divine qualities of Jesus were unrecognised. 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,

indescribable, inaccessible realm of God. 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 group of people 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 of Luke's 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), one showing lowliness and vulnerability and the other representing eternal sovereignty, lie at the heart of our Christmas celebration. The song of the angels, "Glory to God in the Highest", proclaims the bond between God and humans that binds all peoples together in peace. It was incorporated into a hymn known as the *Gloria*, probably by Ambrose (340-397 AD) and is still said or sung daily throughout the world.

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 been excluded from the synagogues (e.g. over food regulations, or because of disagreements about the use of Greek translations of the Old Testament) and had 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 introduced his gospel. In contrast to Matthew and Luke, he focuses almost entirely on the *significance* of the Incarnation in the whole Universe, rather than on *historical detail*. His words were for *all*, Jews and Gentiles alike, including philosophically well-educated people in the Hellenistic world, irrespective of their background or culture. For John the wonder and importance of the Incarnation were beyond precise description. The short words in the English translation disguise its profundity.

The first verse is an echo of the Creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. God is associated with *Logos*, translated into English as 'Word'. A word that is spoken has power; it makes things happen. *Logos* is reminiscent of what was called *Wisdom*, in 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 creative presence of God, beyond time and space, and yet sustaining and breathing 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 See readings for the Third Sunday) 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, but fails to acknowledge its dependence (v 10). Even God's chosen people, the Jews, turned away (v 11). But an amazing promise is made to all who do believe in his Name, i.e., seek to follow his way and 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 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 Collect is again from the Book of Common Prayer. It 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 our relationships may be renewed and strengthened every day.

31 December 2023 The First Sunday of Christmas

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.

Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3

In scintillating metaphors, the words of the book of Isaiah portray the end of the exile as a new start for the Jewish people. As at a wedding the bride and bridegroom appear in their finest clothes, so the freed Jews have the chance to put on new garments representing salvation (healing) and righteousness (keeping true to the Law) (v 10). As the seeds that lie hidden in the ground emerge to life and beauty as spring approaches (v 11), the release from exile shows that God has reaffirmed his trust in his people. The renewed righteousness of the Jews will become a shining example to other people, so bright that the light will shine like a royal diadem (v 3). The gospel writers, and later the lectionary compilers, see the birth of Jesus as a sign of God's continuing *confidence in humanity* and as opening new possibilities for people throughout the whole world.

Psalm 148

The psalm has echoes of the creation story in Genesis 1. The whole universe displays God's purposeful sovereignty, wonder and majesty. People of all nations, their kings, princes and rulers, recognise his greatness and join in his praise, for none is greater than He. "His glory is above earth and heaven." His nature cannot be grasped (v 13) but his presence can be recognised everywhere. The language of v 14 seems strange to modern readers. In pre-Christian literature, the word *horn* was used metaphorically to signify strength and honour, as horns were perceived as the chief weapons of the animals that possessed them. The inclusion of this psalm in Christian worship suggests that as Son of the supreme, eternal God, Jesus provides power and protection to his followers.

Galatians 4:4-7

The Letter to the Galatians was written by Paul during his travels in Asia Minor, perhaps about 54 AD, so this reference to the birth of Jesus is one of the earliest we have. It does not say anything about the pre-existence of Christ, unlike the passages in Hebrews or John that were written later. It does, however, state that the purpose of his birth was to redeem humanity from the constraints imposed "under the law". This phrase seems to indicate the incomplete understanding of God before his revelation in Jesus. The Galatians had been 'got at' by people from Jerusalem who argued that Gentiles must accept Jewish law before they could be baptised as Christians (Galatians 2:11 and 3). Paul says that, as followers of Christ, new converts were adopted sons, so they could call God "*Abba*". *Abba* is the Aramaic word for Father; it is one of the few words that we can be sure was used by Jesus himself. The passage concludes with the extraordinary claim: "So, through God, you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir." See comment on the Collect below and on Epiphany Sunday.

Luke 2:22-40

Here we have the last piece of Luke's Christmas story. He establishes that Jesus' life began in conformity with Jewish practice, which decreed that the first-born be presented to God in the Temple in Jerusalem (vv 22-24), as an image of sacrifice (v 23).

The centrepiece is the *Nunc Dimittis*, the song of Simeon. The words echo phrases from Isaiah [52:9-10; 49:6; 46:13; 42:6; 40:5] that Luke puts together quite naturally to give a passage that shows one of the most prominent themes in the rest of his gospel and in Acts. The light and understanding revealed in the Messiah represent a gift of the Jewish people to the whole world, including Gentiles. Their gift is their glory (vv 31-32). The *Nunc Dimittis*, like the Song of Mary, the *Magnificat*, is sung or said every day in the Christian Church as part of Evening Prayer. Although it is introduced by Luke as a blessing of an old man at the presentation of a child, it has become a prayer in which all can join. In its liturgical use it is seen as a dedication to God of the work of a day and as a prayer of thanksgiving on behalf of all humanity for the light that has been brought by the Messiah. Anna makes a similar prayer. Luke concludes by hinting at what is to follow (vv 34-35). The way of Jesus, and that of his mother, would be a way of suffering as well as joy.

The **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: *"Grant that as [your Son Jesus Christ] came to share in our humanity, so we may share in the life of his divinity."*

7 January 2024 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. It 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.

Psalm 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), who 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 (vv 10-11).

Ephesians 3:1-12

From the second to the eighteenth century this letter was attributed to Paul, but most modern scholars agree that the author was someone writing between 80 and 100 AD, after Paul's authentic letters had been brought together. Confusion comes from the fact that passages such as this are introduced by "I, Paul" (Ephesians 1:1-2) and there are references to Paul's experience (Ephesians 3:8). However, the style of the letter is different from Paul's; the Greek sentences are long and splendidly crafted; and the thinking (See next paragraph) about the place of Jesus in the whole sweep of history has developed since Paul's time. Christ is now viewed as intimately associated with God, the eternal Father.

The passage refers more than once (vv 3, 4, 9) to the "*mystery* of Christ", suggesting that his incarnation can be explored again and again, but its meaning can never be fully grasped. The true significance of the birth of the Messiah was not obvious to previous generations (v 5). Now that the Church had grown, its thinking had matured 'by the *Spirit*' (v 5). This was how the early church expressed its sense that the continued deepening of its understanding indicated the on-going presence of God, which had been evident from the beginning of time and dramatically displayed in the life and death of Jesus. It was clear that he was not just the anointed leader of the Jews but was born for *all*, who are heirs, partakers of the same body, and partakers of the [same] promise (v 6). The nouns, "heirs"," members" and "partakers" in Greek all begin with the same prefix "*syn-"* (meaning 'with', 'together', 'at the same time'), emphasising the *full and equal* participation of Gentiles in the Church. They share the same inheritance; they are one people; they together participate in all that Christ Jesus has achieved; they join in making known his greatness (v 8), 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 enlarged from that in 1 Corinthians (See commentary on Advent Sunday). 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 then 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 on-going 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”).

For Further Reflection

For the past month we have heard how ancient writers inform our celebration of the Christmas Season.

Most of these writers are from the century following the birth or 'coming' of the extraordinary person Jesus of Nazareth. Some, however, are from 600 or more years earlier; their stories, precepts and poetry express the Jewish faith in which Jesus was brought up. This faith is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. Both the early Church and the Church today turn to these writings to articulate their own message of hope, healing and peace that they describe as *good news*.

Before Jesus was born, the Jews already believed in God, whom they saw as saving and upholding them through years of captivity, tribulations of tribal wars and hardship suffered from bad government. They had the potential to become adopted sons and daughters (Genesis 1:26) but they had been self-serving and faithless. Their Covenant relationship needed to be healed and restored.

The New Testament writers, who described Jesus as coming "from God" or "into the world," implied that the promise of restoration was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The accounts of Jesus' birth, therefore, are much more than reportage of a historical event; their enduring significance lies in the allusions they make to Jesus' whole life, his teaching, death and resurrection.

The emphasis in this booklet has been on how the readings used in Christmas worship came to be written,

and how, taken together, they present a coherent account of Incarnation as the defining feature of Christian belief. The belief that in Jesus the *Word* became *flesh* (John 1:14) has remained the foundation of the Church for 2000 years, despite new discoveries through history and archaeology, and vastly increased understanding of the natural world through science.

The sacred writings that are read in Christian worship are referred to as the *Word of the Lord*, but this is not presented as a series of instructions about what to do and what not to do. Instead we have stories and sayings from a variety of different people, each writing from their own perspective. Often the readings raise questions rather than provide answers. They stimulate us to think for ourselves, rather than follow blindly. The experience of hearing the Word of the Lord is akin to meeting a *Person*, whom we've heard about through other people. That is how we begin to understand God; through Jesus, a fully human person who, *at the same time*, embodies the true nature of his holy, changeless Father. In the formal claim made at the end of a reading in Church, *Word* is

perceived as the Word of John's Gospel, the Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ.

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. 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. At Christmas, the glory and sovereignty that sustain the whole Universe are revealed in the grace and compassion of a human face. Celebrations are continued at Easter, when the promise of Advent is fulfilled.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this booklet please speak to Claire Bell, our layworker [07725 592658 layworker@christ-church-lewes.org] or any member of the church.

This booklet is a revision of a previous one written in 2020, which incorporated detailed comments and criticisms from my late wife Marion. I acknowledge her contribution and thank Michael Frost, who proofread the text, and Neil Fisher, who prepared the booklet for distribution. DS

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