

## **Worship for Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021:** Fourth in Advent

### **Call to worship**

It is a late December Sunday, and the day is dark, and short.

But the love of God is bright and long, and we have come to celebrate it.

We look to Christmases past, with nostalgia, and to the one that is coming, with mixed feelings: so much to do, or nothing to do.

But there *is* plenty to do in the days that are coming, and we are glad.

We are here with one another to ponder and delight in love.

There are cards to read, each with its own message of friendly, family love.

And there is candlelight, and conversation, and carols and calm, here in the house of God.

With a few days to go, we claim this time to worship: to read, to sing, to pray, to encourage one another, and to wait in the presence of our incomparable, majestic and mighty God.

### **Hymn 314: Child in the manger**

1 Child in the manger,  
infant of Mary;  
outcast and stranger,  
Lord of all!

Child who inherits  
all our transgressions,  
all our demerits  
on him fall.

2 Once the most holy  
child of salvation  
gently and lowly  
lived below;

Mary Macdonald (1789–1872)  
*translated* Lachlan Macbean (1853–1931)

now, as our glorious  
mighty Redeemer,  
see him victorious  
o'er each foe.

3 Prophets foretold him,  
infant of wonder;  
angels behold him  
on his throne;  
worthy our Saviour  
of all their praises;  
happy for ever  
are his own.

### **Prayer**

*Eternal God, who comes and comes again, we who are in the waiting time confess: we are not very good at waiting. We make an investment of time, money or effort, and expect a return quite quickly. But you work to different timescales, outside of time. As the psalm writer declared: one day and a thousand years are not much different to you. But we, your people, are people of the day, the hour, the minute.*

*Almighty God, in this Advent time we might have learned to wait, but new troubles are upon us, and we want to do everything before the opportunity is gone, before it is too late. And so those of us, who are able to be, are in a rush. We would like to know everything now, see everything now, do everything now. But you, O God, ask us to*

*wait, even as Mary and Joseph and all your people had to wait, for the baby to be born, for Christ to come, for the means of salvation to arrive. And so, even though it goes against the grain, we thank you for the waiting, for, at the end of it, good things will come. Jesus will be born in our hearts again, our spirits will lift and, who knows, even our voices may soar in praise and carols.*

*Living God, in the waiting time, may our hands not be empty, our voices silent, or our lives purposeless. Fill our lives with thoughts of the newness Christ brings: fullness of life, freedom from dark powers, challenges that, if accepted, change lives. Help us, in the time that remains between now and Christmas, not be overwhelmed by the uncertainty that grips us, nor paralysed by fear, nor irritated by our inability to make things different. Instead, let us hold fast to what we do know: that you, our God, are coming again and have already come, and love us intimately, compassionately, unconditionally and forever. **Amen.***

### **Hymn 282: Christmas is coming! (Verses 1, 2, 3 and 4)**

*'Christmas is coming! ',  
the Church is glad to sing,  
and let the advent candles  
brightly burn in a ring.*

1 The first is for God's promise  
to put the wrong things right,  
and bring to earth's darkness  
the hope of love and light.

*'Christmas is coming! ',  
the Church is glad to sing,  
and let the advent candles  
brightly burn in a ring.*

2 The second for the prophets,  
who said that Christ would come  
with good news for many  
and angry words for some.

*'Christmas is coming! ',  
the Church is glad to sing,*

John L. Bell

*and let the advent candles  
brightly burn in a ring.*

3 The third is for the Baptist,  
who cried, 'Prepare the way.  
Be ready for Jesus,  
today and every day.'

*'Christmas is coming! ',  
the Church is glad to sing,  
and let the advent candles  
brightly burn in a ring.*

4 The fourth is for the Virgin,  
who mothered God's own Son  
and sang how God's justice  
was meant for everyone.

*'Christmas is coming! ',  
the Church is glad to sing,  
and let the advent candles  
brightly burn in a ring.*

**Reading: Luke 1 verses 39 – 55**

**Additional reading**

## **Hymn: Elizabeth of priestly birth (*Tune: Sussex Carol, No 294*)**

1 Elizabeth, of priestly birth,  
Devout and humble, now called forth  
To bear a child despite her years,  
Despite old Zechariah's fears.  
Then speaks the angel Gabriel:  
"God's spirit shall within him dwell"

2 Elizabeth, so spirit-infused  
Now welcomes Mary, still confused.  
These two expectant mothers meet  
And in the womb one babe did leap.  
Then speaks the mother of this child:  
"Our Lord's promise has been prescribed"

3 Elizabeth now names him John  
For 'God is gracious', and upon  
His life the hand of God will rest.  
His Baptist life is truly blessed.  
Then speak the voices throughout the land:  
"Can it be God's time is at hand?"

4 Elizabeth, beliefs renewed,  
Now understands what God will do:  
The hungry will be satisfied;  
The humble poor be lifted high.  
Then speaks creation with one accord:  
"John prepares the way of the Lord"

Words by John Millar

### **Sermonette**

**Luke 1 verse 46: And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant".**

I'll always remember my colleague, Sarah Smith, with fondness. In the strange configuration of the Student Services Department at Glasgow Caledonian University, in which I worked, she occupied the desk that sat just beyond my office. Indeed, the desk and chair were occupied in quite quick succession by three people – Pat and Helen being the other two. They were all capable, talented young women contemplating the great feat of working while bringing up a family. I think it was Helen, first, who went off and gave birth to Rachel. Then Pat, who had three and who, when I meet her now in the post office I visit, tells me that all three have left the nest. But I remember Sarah because of this: late in pregnancy, she would open my door, usually in the late afternoon, and seek refuge on one of the low comfortable chairs in my large office. On one such occasion, she told me the baby was kicking, which, for me, seemed quite exciting enough, but then she said, "Would you like to feel it?" So, seconds later, there I was, like some obstetrician on an emergency call out, applying my hands somewhat firmly to both sides of Sarah's vast abdomen. The baby kicked. I felt thrilled! (And I confess, relieved that she was in Sarah's tummy, and not mine!). And then we laughed. We laughed at a moment of shared happiness and laughed as we wondered what might have been made of the scene by anyone who chanced by my office door. It became a standing joke in the office that it was the chair that did it: three women, one after another, pregnant after sitting in the chair. I liked to think it

was sitting so close to the chaplain, a ready source (not!) of divine inspiration, that did it.

Today, in scripture, two women meet, and both are pregnant. I hear the sound of laughter and tears when I picture it, hear the babble of amazed and joyful voices as the two women delight in one another. It is Elizabeth, the older one, who feels her baby leap in her womb. For completely different reasons, neither woman can quite believe what is happening to her, but initially it's Elizabeth who does the talking.

What's going on here? It sounds as if Mary is receiving confirmation and encouragement from her young relative. But perhaps Mary also went to *offer* them. Bede, writing a homily on the gospels, wrote this: *[Mary] went so that she could offer congratulations concerning the gift which she had learned her fellow servant had received. This was not in order to prove the word of the angel by the attestation of a woman. Rather it was so that as an attentive young virgin she might commit herself to ministry to a woman of advanced age.* I hadn't thought of it in that way, but Bede's reflection on it makes me realise that there is mutual humility on display here. Elizabeth cannot quite believe that her young family member has travelled eighty miles to visit her, and exclaims: **But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?** And it is Mary who did the seeking out and the doubtless difficult journeying, equally humble.

It is Mary on whom we are invited to focus, as today's verses include her song, what we call "The Magnificat", of course, though the translation here has the word **glorifies** rather than "magnifies". And it is Mary who, if this were not a perverse way to put it, wears her humility on her sleeve. We left her last week, in conversation with an angel, and affirming that she was the Lord's servant. And as we tune in now to her song, we discover that she is starting where left off. She has no sooner begun than we hear her say that God **has been mindful of the humble state of her servant.**

"Humble" is an out of place word in today's world. It really means "it's not about me", but as so many worship at the shrine of self, it's pretty clear that, very often, it is about me, the individual. To be humble means to know, at acknowledge, to act as if you know you're part of something bigger. Mary knew that all through her life, even as she knew that, because of the role God has thrust upon her, she would be blessed in every generation. We, as Protestants, have failed somewhat miserably in that respect, I fear.

But Mary knew more than that. She knew that the way God had acted towards her was a statement of how God would act across society and in history as a whole. On the fourth Sunday in Advent, it will likely make uncomfortable reading for anyone who majors in personal wealth, status, self-reliance, or power, but very good news indeed for others. And notice this, as we consider it: Mary speaks as if what she describes is already happening.

First, she announces that **the proud** have already been **scattered**. That's not so hard to believe! Not many of us choose bumptious, over-bearing, egotistical folk for friends, and they are left to seek solace among the like-minded. In churches, such folk have their own small circle of folk more ready to attribute a favourable life to their own efforts than to the grace of God or even the tolerance of others. As a consequence, they end up quite lonely, few folk beating a path to their door.

Next, Mary says, God **has brought down rulers from their thrones**. If you thought that was the job of the press, newspapers, the internet and social media, you might be right. But really, the reason phoney monarchs and their hangers-on in their circles are exposed is because most folk think that the rules that apply in society should apply evenly to all. That's at the heart of the political debate that is being conducted in relation to the Prime Minister, and what lay behind the muted outrage directed at so many "world leaders" who turned up at COP 26 by private plane to lecture the rest of us on cutting carbon emissions. The only puzzle is why so many of the people of God appear so ready to maintain the status quo. We might fool some of the (gullible) people some of the time, but we fool God absolutely none of the time.

Then, sings Mary: **He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty**. Comparatively, we are "the rich". Can Mary really mean that God sends *us* away empty? Or will a few selection boxes donated to Drumchapel food bank, once a year, cut it? I suspect not. Maybe, like Mary, it's time to get real, to recognise that we are not individuals, but part of something bigger, connected, dependent, utterly reliant on each other; dare I say it: time to recognise that those folk queuing at the food bank are our sisters and brothers. We wouldn't let our family starve, would we? Only if we were proud. God forbid. Mary told us what will happen to the proud. God will scatter them.

And then finally, before it all gets too much, Mary seems to turn the tables. God who dismisses the proud has no truck with haughty monarchs, and always, always, favours the poor over the rich, is, wait for it, merciful! Merciful to **his servant Israel**, merciful to those who trust God, who are faithful, and who wait with patience for God to fulfil his promises.

Mary's song, then, draws a line: the haughty on one side, the humble on the other. It is God's line. And she invites a question: on which side of it will we place ourselves. Where would you and I feel more at home, more comfortable, more able to be ourselves? You will know.

The sobering thing is, God will know too. Christmas is the time for making choices, ones, indeed, that will change our lives. The baby will be born to humble parents in humble circumstances. Shepherds and animals will attend, though kings will come later. Life will be a struggle from the off, and every day a challenge. So here's the question: are you ready to be found there, beside the holy family, whom, as yet, no-one credits, in the cheapest accommodation, out the back of the inn, the smell of beasts in the chilly air, second hand clothes waiting for the infant. If you really want to see Jesus this Christmas, better be prepared to rough it.

### **Hymn 286: Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord**

1 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!  
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;  
tender to me the promise of his word;  
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!  
Make known his might, the deeds his arm  
has done;  
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;  
his holy Name, the Lord, the Mighty One.

3 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!  
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.  
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,  
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4 Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!  
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.  
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
to children's children and for evermore!

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926), based on the Magnificat from The New English Bible

### **Offering brought forward and dedicated**

#### **Prayer**

*God who is both inside time and beyond it, we simply can't believe that a whole year has passed and we are back where we started. In our naive, hopeful, and occasionally slightly superior way, we thought we'd beat the virus, conquered the force of nature that has been expressing itself all year as the tiny thing creates havoc, disrupts and destroys. And now our lives are upside down, plans are being reshaped, and we are disconcerted.*

*Lord God, nevertheless, we come in prayer and keep on coming. We have known our powerlessness over it, our deep dependence on others, and have been dismayed. And so, we turn to you and upon you lay all our worries, fears, disappointments and uncertainties. Give us peace, acceptance of what we cannot change, and the will to work for good to change whatever we can for the better.*

*God of love, we pray for those in dire straits. We think of those who, once more, are unable or too frightened to travel to meet family and friends, those earning their living in the hospitality and supply industries, and those in the health service and working in social care and care homes who, having faced the worst, have more to face. In quietness we take time out from our own Christmas-coming-near concerns to hold them all up to you, and ask for them strength, perseverance, and, eventually, respite and rest.*

*God who is inside time in the days that we have left between now and Christmas, in quietness again we bring our prayers for ourselves. May we delight in the baby's coming, and in the arrival of all babies. May we know your stillness in the bustle, and your enlivening presence if life is too quiet. If our friends and families have deep concerns that seem intractable, we pray for them, knowing you hear and have an answer in the offing. And if it is your will, use you, and use us mightily, in the answer to the prayers we make. **Amen.***

### **Hymn 318: Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour**

1 Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour,  
yet, for love's sake, became so poor ;  
leaving your throne in glad surrender,  
sapphire-paved courts for stable floor :  
Lord, you were rich beyond all splendour,  
yet, for love's sake, became so poor.

2 You are our God beyond all praising,  
yet, for love's sake, became a man ;  
stooping so low, but sinners raising

heavenwards, by your eternal plan :  
you are our God, beyond all praising,  
yet for love's sake, became a man.

3 Lord, you are love beyond all telling,  
Saviour and King, we worship you ;  
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,  
make us and keep us pure and true :  
Lord, you are love beyond all telling,  
Saviour and King, we worship you.

### **Benediction**

*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.*

**Amen.**