

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Jonathan Dean. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.



Call to Worship – using the Advent Liturgy (see the video and accompanying text) followed by:

Sing out my soul,
sing of the holiness of God:
who has delighted in a woman,
lifted up the poor,
satisfied the hungry,
given voice to the silent,

grounded the oppressor,
blessed the full-bellied with emptiness,

and with the gift of tears
those who have never wept;
who has desired the darkness of the womb,
and inhabited our flesh.
Sing of the longing of God,
sing out, my soul. *(Janet Morley, paraphrasing Luke 1: 46-55)*

Opening Hymn: Into the Darkness of this world (StF 173)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xh89fzSEXbE>

Into the darkness of this world,
into the shadows of the night;
into this loveless place you came,
lightened our burdens, eased our pain,
and made these hearts your home.
into the darkness once again –
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with our love
to make us whole,
come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Into the longing of our souls,
into these heavy hearts of stone,
shine on us now your piercing light,
order our lives and souls aright,
by grace and love unknown,
until in you our hearts unity –
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with our love
to make us whole,
come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

O Holy Child, Emmanuel,
hope of the ages, God with us,
visit again this broken place,
till all the earth declares your praise
and your great mercies own.
Now let your love be born in us,
O come, Lord Jesus, come.

*Come with our love
to make us whole,
come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Maggi Dawn (b.1959)

Prayers

Praise to you, our God, this day:
for the wonder of creation in its infinite beauty, variety and
constant newness of life;
for the wonder of our life together, in its joy and responsibility;
for the wonder of your love for us, revealed to Mary by an angel;
for the wonder of your Son Jesus, our brother, who leads us into
new life.

Praise to you, our God, this day:
for the Advent call to hope;
for the coming of your light amidst our darkness;
for the revelation of your grace, the balm for our wounds;
for the truth of Christ, who redeems us, and all creation.

Praise to you, our God, this day.

And, in this season of preparation, prepare us Lord:
uproot from our lives the habits which keep us from fulfilment and
true joy;
cause us to realise afresh our oneness with all you have made;
lead us again to Jesus, son of Mary, son of God, our brother,
who shows us what a human life can be,
who brings in your reign of justice, peace and truth.
Forgive us, for all that we do, to damage creation, deny your image
in us, and halt the growth of your Kingdom.

Hear God's words of grace, made flesh in Christ the son of Mary:
Your sins are forgiven.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

The Reading: Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection on the Reading

I inherited from my Dad a book he'd read and enjoyed when a boy. It was a book I adored, and I still consult it when I'm back home. It's the 1953 edition of *Ripley's Mammoth Book of Believe It or Not!*, which is chock-full of strange, absurd and downright incredible true stories. Some of those bizarre claims and outlandish facts remain with me: such as the fact that artist Giotto once drew a perfect circle freehand. Or that an explorer who was lost at sea was nevertheless honoured back home with a tomb, filled with dirt from every place he had ever visited, in the hope that some particle of his would somehow be interred there.

In our Gospel reading, Luke goes several better than Mr. Ripley. He doesn't need a mammoth book; he needs just these 13 verses, to knock us sideways with the extraordinary claims he's making. I'm actually not primarily talking about the fact that Mary is a virgin, although that's obviously a strange enough claim. There's lots and lots written about what that means, and I'll not get into it here. Except to say: it's quite a claim. No, I'm more concerned about all the other surprises, all the other incredible claims, that Luke makes in these few verses. It's worth a moment to unpick them.

Firstly, there's Mary age: she was almost certainly very young, maybe even a teenager. And she is the only one, apparently, with

sufficient wisdom and faith and insight to be able to bring into the world God's means of saving the whole human race. Then, there are her circumstances: unmarried, a person of no standing or consequence or influence at all in the world, or even her own little society. An unwed teenager. Not a very auspicious start. But then, thirdly, her geography: she lives in an out-of-the-way backwater in a remote part of a fairly obscure Roman province, which even the Romans sometimes wondered why they'd bothered to conquer, so unruly and unproductive a place it was. Which prompts me to mention her origin: a Jewish girl, and thus a member of an occupied nation, and of a despised racial group, very small in number and almost entirely inconsequential in the great machinery of the all-powerful Roman Empire. Within months, of course, she'll be a refugee, too.

So, believe it or not: this is how God enters the world. This is how God comes to save us. In these few verses, Luke presents us with at least half a dozen reasons to be entirely suspicious of his tale, and incredulous about the claims he's making. It's worth just re-reading those verses again, and seeing, beneath the accumulated familiarity and therefore lack of perception with which we read them, how absurd they are.

And yet: they are at the very heart of our faith. Ponder that for

a moment, Christian people. They represent the very central claim of who we are, and of the God we worship, or say we do. That, for all our varied understandings and interpretations of that claim, God lived and dwelt among us, not in the form of someone mighty or wealthy or powerful or even noteworthy in worldly terms, but in the form of Jesus. Jesus, the illegitimate son of a poor Jewish girl from Galilee, who was thus himself an obscure member of a hated, conquered tribe, in a remote corner of a far-flung province of the Roman Empire. This is how God brings redemption for us all? Never mind it being tough to believe: it's scandalous.

And I think that scandalous is exactly what it needs to be. Firstly, because God *is* pretty scandalous, if only we'd been paying attention up to now. And secondly, because nothing else will get our attention, shake us out of our complacency and ruin, force us to look up and take note, and be brought face to face with the absurdity, the unbelievability, of our God and the way God works. Except for a bit of a scandal.

'Scandal' is in fact a good New Testament word. The Greek word from which we derive it is simply, 'skandalon'. And it literally means, 'a stumbling block'; a banana skin, if you like. Something you slip up on, or fall over. Paul used this very word, in talking to the churches in Rome and in Corinth about Jesus, and especially about his belief, his claim, that Jesus was God, with us. God in

human flesh. God's ultimate answer to the human predicament. God's recreation of Israel, for the saving of the world. And Paul agreed that only a stumbling block, only a scandalous Messiah, could do the trick. Because God somehow has to break through all the accumulated lies of our life together, and all the built-up resistance we have to God's Kingdom, and all our learned refusal to really see where God is, and how God is at work.

Of course, in explaining the Gospel in these ways to the early Christians, Paul was only spelling out something which the girl at the root of the whole scandal had already seen and known for herself, right from the start. Read on a few verses from Gabriel's visit to Mary, and you'll find her, singing a triumphant song of the unlikely, incredible, bizarre, unbelievable, downright scandalous Kingdom of God her disgraceful child will inaugurate. It's a Kingdom of topsy-turvy; of the upending of all human wisdom; of the scandal of equality and justice and righteousness becoming real, in the flesh-and-blood, here and now, world we all inhabit, not merely in some far-off heavenly Utopia. Read the Magnificat again, and revisit the sheer scandal of it all!

Mary, taking her cue from Gabriel, makes it very clear: if you want to see where God shows up, if you want to know how God works, if you want glimpse the Kingdom, you have to start by looking in surprising places. You have to prepare to be scandalised.

So: are there Gabriels today, bringing surprising news of God's presence, still entering and inhabiting our world? Are there scandalous young women like Mary, still shocking us with signs of the Kingdom? Is Jesus still here, and God still with us?

I think so. And I think I've glimpsed all this, in ways that show me also how I am to try to bring God to birth, in my place and time, in my turn.

First glimpse: Pope Francis, breaking with centuries of tradition, and kneeling on Maundy Thursday to wash the feet of some Muslim refugees, including women, in a detention centre just outside Rome. The Vatican establishment goes mad with disgust and rage and fury – and scandal. But God is with us.

Second glimpse: hundreds and thousands of folks this year, who've disregarded their own comfort, their own safety, their own material interests, their own preferences, their own lives even, to care for others at a time of fearful disease. Care workers, medical personnel, teachers, all those who have tried to ensure that the rest of us are safe. They have ignored the received wisdom to look after Number One, and that charity begins (and stays) at home. In normal times their sacrifice would be a scandal we can't relate to. In these times, it's been life and death: and a sign that God is with us.

Third glimpse: I've mentioned her before to some of you, but my friend, Magda, who died this summer. Born a Hungarian Jew in the 1920s, she survived a ghetto, Auschwitz, a death march, and slavery in a Nazi armaments factory, was a refugee without any surviving family, and ended up, by some miracle, devoting her life, even to her death at 95, to a message of love, of hope, and of forgiveness. Asked once by a class of mine where God was in the camp, she replied, without hesitation: "*with* me, despite the horror. I never doubted it." I will cherish her memory for ever: for she was, in human terms, a scandal of grace, and a sign that God is indeed with us all, in all circumstances.

Where are you glimpsing it? What is Gabriel whispering in your ear?

I'm fascinated and a little stirred by the artist Banksy, who has a very subversive, even scandalous, way of doing public art. I found myself amused, I confess, by the way he duped the world's fabulously wealthy art dealers into bidding for an original, which then shredded as soon as it was bought, for an astronomically high price. I loved the way he painted a mural on the side of a council house, and thus made its working class owners millionaires. There's something about the way he holds a mirror up to our folly and unfairness that I've come to appreciate. Last year, on a tour of Israel and Palestine, I was in the occupied West Bank. On a walk along the separation wall, we came across Banksy's mural, *Wall and Peace*. It

depicts a freedom fighter, his face masked. His left arm is outstretched, to balance himself as he prepares to throw a missile from his other hand. But, as you look, it's not a bomb, or a Molotov cocktail, but a bouquet of flowers. A subversive message, of love, and hope. Our hatreds and divisions can be overcome.

In Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth to her miracle child, I was less moved by the star in the floor of the Church of the Nativity than by another Banksy original, in a hotel next to the separation wall. It's called *Scar of Bethlehem*. A shell hole stands starkly in a section of the wall, a sign of fighting, violence and discord. But, beneath it, Mary and Joseph are huddled around their infant son, in his manger, and the shell hole is immediately transformed into a star, a point of light in a dark sky, a transformed and transforming message of hope amid the world's animosity and hatred. God is with us.

God is still with us, still coming among us, subverting our ingrained sin, scandalising us with grace and peace and truth, causing us to stumble, that we might pick ourselves up and set out in a different direction. The angels ask us to listen to the whispers and rumours of God's scandalous presence. And they ask us to consent to sharing in Jesus's continued work of recreation. Believe it or not, God is with us.

[You can find the Banksy images [here](#) and [here](#).]

Hymn: Gabriel's Message (StF 187)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQ5wmFi9sfA>

The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady'.
Gloria!

'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold;
most highly favoured lady'.
Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name:'
most highly favoured lady'.
Gloria!

Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world will ever say,
most highly favoured lady'.
Gloria! Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924)

A Time of Prayer

And so, with Gabriel's message to Mary in our ears too, we turn to prayer.

We pray for those who do not feel that God is with them:
the lonely and marginalised;
the abandoned and abused;
the fearful and frightened,
those who find themselves the victims of our intolerance,
indifference, and casual cruelty.

Here we are, the Servants of God:
Let it be with us according to your Word, O Lord.

We pray for all who are waiting this Christmas for the birth of something new:
those who long for health;
those who search for hope;
those who grieve;
those whose cherished dreams and plans have been shattered in recent months.

Here we are, the Servants of God:
Let it be with us according to your Word, O Lord.

We pray for all who long for a new reign of love:
the world's refugees, and those caught up in war and violence;

all who experience discrimination and hatred because of who they are;
those who live hunger, want and neglect, when there is enough for all;
the very creation itself, suffering from our wanton destruction.

Here we are, the Servants of God:

Let it be with us according to your Word, O Lord.

And let us pray for ourselves and our churches this Christmas:
for the Holy Spirit to fall again on us;
for a rebirth of holiness in us and in our witness and work;
for a willingness to believe in a God who makes the impossible possible;
for a measure of Mary's courage, and prophetic vision,
for a share in her obedience and fearless hope,
that your Kingdom may come, and your life be seen,
in us.

Here we are, the Servants of God:

Let it be with us according to your Word, O Lord.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Closing Hymn: Who would think that what was needed (StF 222)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCvWqNZI-7w>

Who would think that what was needed
to transform and save the earth
might not be a plan or army,
proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
that a child might lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
coming here on Christmas Day.

Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,
monarchs scorn and angels sing;
such a place as none would reckon

hosts a holy helpless thing.
Stable beasts and by-passed strangers
watch a baby laid in hay:
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.

Centuries of skill and science
span the past from which we move,
yet experience questions whether,
with such progress, we improve.
While the human lot we ponder,
lest our hopes and humour fray,
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.

John L. Bell (b. 1949) & Graham Maule (b. 1958)

Closing Responses and Blessing

Mysterious God, confounding our expectations,
meeting us where we least expect to find you:
stay with us now.

Child of the manger, healing our pain,
sharing our weakness:
stay with us now.

Source of life, and birth of God within our own experience:
stay with us now.

Stay with us in our frailty.
Stay with us on our journey.
Walk beside us. Live within us.
Lead us to glory. Lead us home.

And may the blessing of our God,
who comes us in infinite love and constant surprise,
the Source of Being, the Eternal Word, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and those you love and pray for,
today and always.
Amen.

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