

Worship for 4th Sunday of Advent (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Welcome to worship for the 4th Sunday of Advent Sunday. We are grateful to all who are taking part this week; to Roger Thompson and Jan Tyrrell for the readings and to Sally Jones for the word. I am Iain Ballard and I am your Worship Leader for the service.

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessèd are those who will come from east and west, from north and south, to feast in the kingdom of God.

Hymn: StF 706 – Longing for Light

- 1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.**
Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.
- 2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.**
Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.

- 3. Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.**
Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.
- 4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.**
Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.
- 5. Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.**
Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.

Bernadette Farrell (b. 1957)

Opening Prayers

God of all glory, you brought the universe into existence, and raised up witnesses to your greatness and love.

We praise you and adore you.

Grant that by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit we may worship and serve you, and praise your holy name;

through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Let us confess our sins to God, trusting in his mercy and forgiveness.

**Holy and forgiving God,
we have sinned against you and each other
in thought and word and deed.**

**We have turned from your life-giving word,
and ignored the message of your Son.**

**Have mercy upon us and forgive us,
that strengthened by your love
we may serve you more faithfully;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen.

Silence

'I am making all things new,' says the Lord.

This is Christ's gracious word:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Hymn: StF 175 – Light of the World

**1. Light of the world,
you stepped down into darkness,
opened my eyes, let me see
beauty that made this heart adore you,
hope of a life spent with you.**

*So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.*

**2. King of all days
oh so highly exalted,
glorious in heaven above.**

**Humbly you came
to the earth you created,
all for love's sake became poor.**

*So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.*

**And I'll never know how much it cost
to see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost
to see my sin upon that cross.**

*So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.*

Tim Hughes

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Micah 5:2-5 (NRSVA)

The Ruler from Bethlehem

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the
strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be

great
to the ends of the earth;
⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

If the Assyrians come into our land
and tread upon our soil,
we will raise against them seven shepherds
and eight installed as rulers.

Hebrews 10:5-10 (NRSVA)

⁵Consequently, when Christ came into the world,
he said,

‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;

⁶in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

⁷Then I said, “See, God, I have come to do your
will, O God”

(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).’

⁸When he said above, ‘You have neither desired
nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and
burnt-offerings and sin-offerings’ (these are
offered according to the law), ⁹then he added,
‘See, I have come to do your will.’ He abolishes
the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it
is by God’s will that we have been sanctified
through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ
once for all.

Hymn: StF 701 – Heaven Shall Not Wait

- 1. Heaven shall not wait
for the poor to lose their patience,
the scorned to smile, the despised to find a
friend:
Jesus is Lord;
he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice confronts its timely end.**
- 2. Heaven shall not wait
for the rich to share their fortunes,
the proud to fall, the élite to tend the least:
Jesus is Lord;**

**he has shown the master's privilege —
to kneel and wash servants' feet before they
feast.**

- 3. Heaven shall not wait
for the dawn of great ideas,
thoughts of compassion divorced from cries
of pain:
Jesus is Lord;
he has married word and action;
his cross and company make his purpose
plain.**
- 4. Heaven shall not wait
for triumphant Hallelujahs,
when earth has passed and we reach
another shore:
Jesus is Lord
in our present imperfection;
his power and love are for now, and then for
evermore.**

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

Luke 1:39-55 (NRSVA)

Mary Visits Elizabeth

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste
to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she
entered the house of Zechariah and greeted
Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s
greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And
Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and
exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you
among women, and blessed is the fruit of your
womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that
the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as
soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the
child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is
she who believed that there would be a
fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the
Lord.’

Mary’s Song of Praise

⁴⁶And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸for he has looked with favour on the lowliness
of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call
me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for
me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of
their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our
ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Sermon

Hello everyone, my warmest Advent greetings to
you all,

There's a tingle of expectation in the air in our
readings today. It's a spark, a crackle, the briefest
glimpse of something extraordinary, which will
be found in the most ordinary, commonplace
setting. In our reading from Micah, it is one of
the 'little clans of Judah' that will be the setting
for 'one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is
from of old, from ancient days'. There is a sense
of fulfilment being near, a sense of fruition, and
with it a feeling of expectancy, of anticipation. A
new vision is about to be fulfilled.

Scholars have concluded that Chapters 5 and 6 of
Micah were written by a different author (or
authors) to the beginning of the book, and
probably during or after the destruction of
Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Read through this lens of
siege and captivity, the words take on a new
poignancy. Little Bethlehem, unremarkable and
unexceptional, will bring forth another ruler,
who will redeem the people from their current
desperate position; 'he shall be the one of
peace'. How God's people must have longed for
that redemption; and today, we too long for 'the
one of peace' to come to this earth again. How
exciting it is when we consider that God can and
does use the most unexceptional times, places,
and people to carry out God's divine purposes.

Often the lectionary can surprise us, and the
passage from Hebrews that is set for today is one
of those surprises. Here we are in the midst of
Advent, the time of preparation and waiting, that
time of anticipation and expectation when we
wait for the 'soles of Christ's feet to touch the
ground, when [he] will become one of us/to be
at one with us', in the words of Kate McIlhagga.
And yet the Hebrews passage propels us forward
in our thinking; here, we are asked to consider
why this tiny baby comes, and what his purpose
will be. The shadow of the cross looms over the
manger; the visitors from the East will
understand this, as their gifts will show. As
Graham Kendrick wrote, there are indeed
'Thorns in the Straw'. This tiny defenceless baby,
whose birth we long for, and whose coming
again we long for, will be the perfect sinless
sacrifice, the once-for-all redemption of
humankind. Jesus will offer himself, and in so
doing he will establish a whole new order. In the
old way, sacrifices were offered that could not
perfect the conscience of the worshipper. The
old rituals were not enough – the sacrifices had
no lasting value. They had to be repeated, again

and again and again. But Jesus, by his death, by his perfect sacrifice, changed all that. And today's reading from Hebrews reminds us of this sacred purpose even before Jesus has been born. As it does so, it removes any trace of sentimentality around the birth of Jesus. Gone are the cute images of Christmas cards – instead, we are brought back to the magnitude of why Jesus chooses to step down, and to become one of us, to be Immanuel.

There is so much to ponder in Mary's role in all of this. Does her response to the angel's news provoke a response in us? Perhaps it's a challenging passage, or a difficult passage for us. Perhaps we've heard that particular part of the story so many times before that the words just wash over us, we're so accustomed to them.

However we react, whatever our emotions when we read the Christmas story, whatever our questions and challenges and doubts, they probably pale into insignificance when we consider how Mary must have felt. She is still so very young; scholars estimate she was in her early teens, perhaps even as young as twelve. And yet she has received this most monumental news: she will give birth to the living God. She understands the full import of what she is being asked to undertake; she understands the danger and the heartbreak of what N. T. Wright describes as her 'wonderful and terrible vocation'. Yet her quiet courage and her determination shine out - although her mind must have been in turmoil, she is calm, gracious and gentle, and measured in her response. She is fully obedient. Without knowing what lies ahead, Mary obeys. And in today's passage from Luke's gospel, we see her meet Elizabeth and we read the story of their joyous encounter, of the wonderful connection between the two of them and the two that they carry, and how this

embraces and encompasses the whole world. Perhaps Elizabeth's response confirms Gabriel's message for Mary, and that is what prompts her wonderful song of praise.

N. T. Wright has also written: 'We must... resist the pressure to turn Christmas into a celebration of private feelings and beliefs. That would be to capitulate to our culture's insistence that religion is set apart from Micah's problems, from the pain and politics of the larger world'. In other words, Advent reminds us to look outward. It challenges us be faithful, to work for justice in whatever way we can, to make a difference in a world where we can become blinded by all the glitzy trappings of Christmas, where it's all too easy to ignore the reality of the poor, the lonely and the marginalised.

With all of this in mind, I'd like to recall a beautiful poem written by Howard Thurman, who was an African-American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader.

It's called '**The Work of Christmas**':

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their
flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

I'd like to encourage us all to try and go beyond the usual trappings, to look beyond the cute Nativity scenes on cards, and the decorations, to the work of Christmas. We are all called to this

work, no matter our age, or situation, or any of the many labels that humans try and pin on each other. The work of Christmas begins now, and we are all called to be part of this glorious adventure, through prayer, through action, through stillness, through friendship, through the familiar and through the unexpected – through any means that God chooses.

So my prayer on this, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, is that we might echo Mary's yes, that we might mirror her trust, that our hearts also might bring forth a song of praise to our astonishing God, who defies all expectations when born as a defenceless baby. Only then can the work of Christmas begin.

May God bless us as we journey towards the Christ-child during Advent, and direct us and empower us as we begin the work of Christmas.
AMEN

For our next song I've chosen Tim Hughes' 'God of Justice'. I think this is a wonderful song which echoes the themes of Howard Thurman's poem, and other parts of the book of the prophet Micah. I pray that as we read or listen or sing, we will be filled up with God's Spirit, and be readied to be sent out to do the will of our precious Immanuel. So here's 'God of Justice'.

Hymn: God of Justice (Tim Hughes)

**God of Justice, Saviour to all
Came to rescue the weak and the poor
Chose to serve and not be served**

**Jesus, You have called us
Freely we've received
Now freely we will give**

**We must go live to feed the hungry
Stand beside the broken**

**We must go
Stepping forward keep us from just singing
Move us into action
We must go**

**To act justly everyday
Loving mercy in everyway
Walking humbly before You God**

**You have shown us, what You require
Freely we've received
Now freely we will give**

We must go live to feed the hungry

**Stand beside the broken
We must go
Stepping forward keep us from just singing
Move us into action
We must go**

**Fill us up and send us out
Fill us up and send us out
Fill us up and send us out Lord...**

**Acting humbly
Loving mercy
We must go, we must go
To the broken
And the hurting
We must go, we must go**

**We must go live to feed the hungry
Stand beside the broken
We must go
Stepping forward keep us from just singing
Move us into action
We must go**

Tim Hughes

THE RESPONSE

Prayers of intercession

Let us pray.

In joyful expectation of his coming to reign
we pray to our Lord, saying,
Come, Lord Jesus
Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to you world as King of the nations.
We pray for ...
Before you rulers will stand in silence.
Come, Lord Jesus.
Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to your Church as Lord and Judge.
We pray for ...
Help us to live in the light of your coming
and give us a longing to do your will.
Come, Lord Jesus.
Come, Lord Jesus.

Come to us from heaven
with power and great glory,
and lift us up to meet you,
where with all your saints and angels,
we will live with you for ever.
Come, Lord Jesus.
Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Silence

The Lord's Prayer

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

**Our Father who art in heaven
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the
glory,**

**for ever and ever.
Amen**

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 180 – O Come, O Come, Immanuel

- 1. O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.***
- 2. O come, O come, O Lord of might
who to your tribes, on Sinai's height,
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud, and majesty, and awe:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.***
- 3. O come, O Rod of Jesse, free
your own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.***
- 4. O come, O Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.***
- 5. O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.***

Latin, 18th century, based on the ancient *Advent Antiphons*
translated by John Mason Neale (1811–1866)

Prayer & blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness
shine upon us
and prepare our hearts and souls
to meet him when he comes in glory;
and the blessing of God,
the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be ours, now and always.

Amen.

The day of the Lord is surely coming.
Be faithful in worship,
unwavering in hope,
fervent in the work of God's kingdom
and all the more as you see the Day
drawing near.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

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StF 706 – Longing for Light

Bernadette Farrell (b. 1957)

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StF 701 – Heaven Shall Not Wait

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

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StF 175 – Light of the World

Tim Hughes

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God of Justice

Tim Hughes

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StF 180 – O Come, O Come, Immanuel

Latin, 18th century, based on the ancient *Advent Antiphons*
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The Work of Christmas

Howard Thurman

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NRSV & NRSVA

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