**13th December 2020**

A gathering prayer with candle lighting

Magnificat! Magnificat!
Gathered here today, from many places,
we are together on this joyful Sunday of Advent
to celebrate the light that we light,
to mark that hope is always present among us,
even when we do not see it.
Call to worship

Come, let us rejoice before God.
Let us honour the name of the Most High.
God has looked on us, and brought us
to be a people of light celebrating the light.
Our souls magnify God: blessed is the name of God for ever.
Let us lift up holy hands and be glad.
Amen.

HYMN: Joy to the World



A prayer of approach

Some of us are weary or downhearted.
Still we say: let our hearts be glad, God is always here.
Let us approach God with confidence, because
God has always been with us.
Let our hearts be glad!
Amen.



A prayer of confession

God, you hovered over chaos,
like a brooding hen, bringing order over chaos.
But we – through thought, deed, misdeed and omission –
have quenched the spirit of life that you give us.
We have turned our faces away.
And now, we turn our faces back to you,
light of all light,
God of all gods,
and ask for the light of your life to lift us again.
Bring us out of chaos into the order of creation,
for your name’s sake,
and for the sake of your goodness among us.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Jesus, son of God and son of Mary,
you came among us, baptizing with fire and light,
calling us to the true vocation of humanity:
to reflect the glory of our creator.
We thank you for your work among us,
how you gathered, how you spoke,
how you ate and drank, how you left us your Spirit
to lift us up and hold us in the light.
We praise you, because you came to us,
and keep coming to us,
because of your great love.
Amen.



Lord’s Prayer

**Psalm 126; John 1. 6–8, 19–28**

**O Come and join the dance**

Psalm 126.5: Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy –

On Tuesday UK grandmother Margaret Keenan, who turns 91 next week, [became the first person in the world to be given the Pfizer Covid-19 jab](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55227325) as part of a mass vaccination programme. Many heralded the event as the beginning of the end of this pandemic – the start of the fightback, even though it will take a long while yet before we are over the worst. Some newspapers described Margaret as inspirational – think that maybe going a bit far – she had to roll up her sleeve and seemed to enjoy the attention – but someone has to go first.

The same day came the bittersweet story of a **man who was given the Covid vaccine, days after his wife died after contracting the virus[[1]](#endnote-1).**

Rae Whitehead, 79, died on 1 December after testing positive for Covid-19 at her care home in East Yorkshire.

On Tuesday her husband Edward, 84, was one of the first to receive the jab at Middlesbrough's James Cook Hospital.

The couple's surgeon son Dr David Whitehead, 49, said he felt relief his father had had the jab but "heartbreak" his mother could not be saved.

"My father and I are deeply saddened that, had we not put my mother in a nursing home, she would maybe be alive today and could have had the vaccine.

"Her life slipped away - a week later the vaccine is being rolled out."

Dr Whitehead said the NHS rollout of the vaccine had made him proud.

"This is the good thing about the NHS - because it's nationalized we have this ability and power to have these interactions with the large pharmaceutical companies so that this sort of thing can happen," he said.

There are many tales of tears and joy at this time of year.

A small church in a small community was struggling to make ends meet and were on the brink of closing. A commercial firm offered to supply free hymn books, provided they insert a bit of discreet advertising into the hymn books. The minister was reluctant but out of desperation finally agreed, when the hymn books arrived, the minister eagerly examined them and was delighted to find no brash advertisements on or inside the covers. The next Sunday, his flock began to sing from the hymn books. All went well until the third song, in which the congregation lifted their voices in unison to the melodious notes of;

‘Hark the herald angels sing,

Hanson’s pills are just the thing;

Peace on earth and mercy mild,

Two for men and one for child’

The commercialisation of Christmas. True joy!

Carol singing is partially banned this year. Hopefully, we will have some people singing at our carol service next Sunday. If I sang it might bring tears to your eyes.

One night a woman called Freda went carol singing. She knocked on the door of a house and began to sing. A man with a violin in his hand came to the door. Within half a minute tears were streaming down his face! Encouraged by this Freda went on singing for half an hour, every carol she knew – and some she didn’t.

At last, she stopped.

‘’I understand’ she said softly, ‘you’re upset because you’re remembering your happy childhood Christmas days. You’re a sentimentalist!’

‘No’ he snivelled, ‘I’m a musician!’

Our scripture reading Psalm 126, speaks about shouts and songs of joy. Where once there was tears, there is now laughter; where there was weeping there are now songs of joy.

For many people, the weeks before Christmas are not a happy time. Many are too busy and feel the pressure to make their Christmas celebrations memorable. Some are experiencing the loss of loved ones, the breakdown of relationships, serious illness, and economic uncertainty. Some are not looking forward to being alone at Christmas and not sharing time with their family. Some find the artificial jollity of the season painful to bear. What is the word of good news in such situations?

The Jewish historian Josephus records how in the year 4BC there was an uprising against the Romans in the town of Sepphoris in the Galilee region. Sepphoris was just a few miles north of Nazareth. The Romans were ruthless in putting down the insurrection. Three legions marched into the region killing every young male they came across, making prisoners of women and children and plundering property. For Nazareth in 4BC either there was a timely flight to hiding places or its males were murdered, its females raped, and its children enslaved. The Romans had a policy – they brought peace by force – the saying was ‘The Romans make a desert and call it peace’.

Most historians date the birth of Jesus just before the death of Herod in 4BC. The events of the Sepphoris suppression may have given rise to the accounts of Mary and Joseph leaving Nazareth for Bethlehem, and then fleeing as refugees to Egypt. They would return to Nazareth but as Jesus grew up in that place the major event in his village’s life was *the day the Romans came.* He would have heard, again and again about the day of the Romans – who had escaped and who had not, who had lived and who had died. This was his coming of age.

When the gospel writers tell of the accounts of Jesus, his birth, his ministry, his death and resurrection, this is the context. This is the historical context. Its a million miles away from children dressing up in tea towels and bed sheets, turkey and tinsel. Not that we shouldn’t have a good time and lots of fun – that’s great. But don’t be conned like the rest of the world into thinking that the Nativity story is a sentimental irrelevance.

It was good news to people who were living in violent and harsh times, who were so desperate they didn’t have the luxury not to hope in God for deliverance. These people knew tears but now they believed that God had come to save them bringing peace, not through violence, but with joy and justice.

**Our reading from the gospel of John 1:6–8, 19–28** introduces John the Baptizer,

sent by God as a witness to the Light of God that was

coming into the world. John is not the Messiah, but

one who prepares the way for God’s coming among

us.

It is an almost comical Monty Pythonesque exchange:

 ‘I am not the Messiah.says John’

The priest and the Levites asked him, ‘Then who are you? Are you Elijah?’

He said, ‘I am not.’

‘Are you the Prophet?’

He answered, ‘No.’

**22**Finally they said, ‘Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’

**23**John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way for the Lord’.

He’s not the Messiah, just a very naughty boy!

The question ‘who are you?’ is a very profound one. At my Christian Doctrine study group on Thursday night we were looking at the Doctrine of Humanity. Who are we? How do you define yourself?

If there were Christmas parties to go to, you may have ended up playing the ‘who am I game”

It’s the one where you have a sticky note and you Write different well-known/celebrity names onto sticky notes –  e.g., Boris Johnson, Prince Harry, Roger Federer, Lady Gaga. Stick a note (name) on the forehead of each volunteer, without letting them see what is written on the note. Their task is to discover who they are. The rules are that they are allowed to ask just one question of each other person playing the game, to which the answer must be either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The game is a simple reminder of the importance of taking notice of clues about who a person is.

Who are you? If we are asked this question, we probably answer with our name, or where we come from, or whose sibling we are, or something like that.

At Christmas time we are often defined by our consumption. We are economic consumers. Shop to save the economy, to save jobs we are urged by the government.

At this time when the reality of Brexit is going to hit us, we may now define ourselves as British and not European anymore.

Various secular disciplines try to describe ‘who we are’. Biology, sociology, cultural anthropology, political and economic science es all can tell us important things about ourselves and how we behave. If we know that all truth comes from God, we need not be afraid to learn things from these secular disciplines. But the claim of the Christian faith is that all these disciplines only give us a one sided, fragmentary, partial, and therefore distorted understanding of human life from one particular perspective. And importantly all these disciplines understand what it is to be human without reference to God. Christians believe that in entering into human life and history, God revealed not only who God is but also who we are. Although our faith does not replace (but in fact needs) all we can learn about ourselves from all kinds of sources, it does add a dimension to our self-understanding we can discover no place else. Furthermore, and most importantly, it gives a basis for our inherent value and worth as created in the image of God. The basis for our human rights and dignity. No Christmas – and all those claims of equality and dignity and worth is on shaky grounds. People may ignore or reject God, but they live as if God existed and that we matter.

Who are you? It is a profound question that the Christian faith answers by saying you are created and loved by God and calls us into relationship with our creator and within the community of human life in all its diversity. Who are you?

When John is asked this question, his first response is to say who he is not. He is not the Messiah? But perhaps more important than John saying what he is not, is what he said next: that the true Messiah is already among them.

We should perhaps remember that in Jewish history there were several ‘messiahs’ (those who claimed to be anointed ones). Nevertheless, this raises an important question: who among us is God’s anointed one?

It is tempting to ascribe negative purposes to the religious leaders here, but just for a moment imagine that they have come with curiosity that finally, in their day, the Messiah might have appeared. From such a perspective, there may be sadness in John’s confession that he is not who they are looking for. There is a challenge here for contemporary readers of this text to examine what exactly it is we are looking for when we look for Jesus, and what we do when the reality disappoints us.

When the leaders ask a fourth time and demand an answer from John (v.22), growing increasingly desperate and not wanting to return to the others with a negative answer, John finally gives a positive statement as to his identity. He leaves them with an intriguing and cryptic answer, ‘Among you stands one whom you do not know’ (v.26).

Again, it is not clear whether this answer is shutting down a line of questioning or opening one up. The information they (and we) have gleaned from John amounts to this: ‘I am not the One…he is to come…and he is already among you, but you don’t know him.’

This is entirely consistent with Jewish tradition that the Messiah could be anyone, therefore be careful. It could be the person standing beside you; so, treat that person as if he or she were the Messiah.

Among you stands one you do not know. Just outside ‘arrivals’ at an airport, greeters hold signs of welcome to those passengers they are there to collect. They know the person’s name, but usually have no idea what they look like. Can you imagine standing there, gazing at all the passengers walking through the arrival gates – wondering: is this the one? Yet, barring the occasional travel mishap, the one they look for is among them. The Messiah was expected. The prophets foretold his coming. He was among them, though they did not know it yet. But the time was drawing close when he would finally be revealed.

Maybe you are looking for a Saviour. Maybe the Saviour has come?

There is a Jewish custom that says you should always leave a corner or some part of your house unfinished as a reminder that all is temporary. Many of our hopes and dreams are incomplete and we await their fulfilment. Advent is a time of waiting, expectantly in hope, for those dreams to be fulfilled.

Vaccinations have started – but hopes are incomplete yet.

Joy is founded on the confidence that God is in

the midst of our lives, unfolding the promises that

have been spoken in our living. God has done great things for us, and will do them again, even though we may not see that clearly now.

I finish with some words by *Ann Weems From her book* Kneeling in Bethlehem*.. (Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press.)*

The Christmas spirit

is that hope

which tenaciously clings

to the hearts of the faithful

and announces

in the face

of any Herod the world can produce

and all the inn doors slammed in our faces

and all the dark nights of our souls

that with God

all things still are possible,

that even now

unto us

a Child is born!

Prayers of intercession

Creator God,
you have made us who we each are,
individual, distinctive, endowed with varied gifts and skills.
Help us to value others for what we each bring to any given situation.
And help us to value ourselves for what we may be able to offer
as we seek to follow the way of Jesus.
**Amen.**

*Remember in your prayers those affected by the decisions on Brexit, we pray for ongoing co-operation between nations and good relationshipos with our European neighbours despite not being able to find a trade deal.*

*Remember also those struggling with the need to do Christmas differently in these strange times as Covid-19 still stalks our world.*

*And remember to give thanks for the work of doctors and other health workers, for scientists who have created vaccines and for those managing the logistics of delivering them.*

We pray today for all who are downtrodden, all who are oppressed, all who know the heavy hand of marginalisation on them. God, we turn to you, remembering the words of Mary, praying that you will lift up the lowly, you will raise the voice of justice, and you will scatter oppression. May all who are oppressed be set free.
We ask this, in joy and gratitude.
In your name we pray.

We pray that we might find rhythms of life that sustain us here. Rhythms for cultivating and renewing the earth; human community; jus-tice; and creativity.
We ask this, in joy and gratitude.
In your name we pray.
Amen.

**Tell out my soul**



A sending out prayer

Sent us out Lord in the assurance that your Word lasts for ever, and your promises are true and we are loved.
Let the lowly be lifted up.
Let the hungry be fed.
Let the mighty listen:

Blessing

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tees-55248902> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)