

## A service for Advent 4 – 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 2024 (StF)

### Advent liturgy: The light of calling

O come, O come, Emmanuel.

**Come, Lord Jesus.**

*The fourth candle is lit.*

We affirm the calling of God and light a light to say 'Yes' to that vocation in our lives.  
When life seems empty or meaningless, we embrace that gift of calling.

In a world of conflicting ambitions and drives,  
**Let it be with me according to your word.**

With Mary may we say,

**Let it be with me according to your word.**

We light a candle in the darkness,

**Let it be with me according to your word.**

O come, O come, Emmanuel.

**Come, Lord Jesus.**

### Call to Worship: Micah chapter 5 verses 2 to 5a

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.  
He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace. Amen.

*As Advent is a time of newness and renewal, I've chosen a hymn that has a catchy setting and fine words by Clare Stainsby. Revd. Clare Stainsby is a Methodist minister. As a former music teacher, she composes the melodies of the hymns she has written. She is a hymn-writer to look out for in the future. Although, strictly-speaking, we ought to sing only the first five verses, I propose we sing the whole hymn. Let us sing hymn number 174, 'Light a candle in a darkened place,'*

**1. Light a candle in a darkened place,**

**In its flame see hope on every face**

**Christ our Saviour will be born,**

**Heralding a brand new dawn,**

**So let it burn.**

**2. In the darkness, see the coming light,**

**Word of God speaks through the darkest night,**

**Keep a watch, the time is near,**

**Time for hope and not for fear,**

**So let it burn.**

**3. Stepping through each page of history,**

**Prophets contemplate this mystery,**

**Celebrate the coming King,**

**Words of joy and hope they bring,**

**So let it burn.**

**4. In the desert now the waiting's done,  
Make things ready for your King, says John,  
See, his glory is revealed,  
And the hope for all is sealed,  
So let it burn.**

**5. Mary found true favour with the Lord,  
Yet she trembled at his strange reward,  
Knew this was the special One,  
Hope for many through God's Son,  
So let it burn.**

**6. Do not fear, today I bring good cheer,  
Jesus Christ, the Saviour now is here,  
God has lit his flame of love,  
Through his Son from Heaven above.  
So let it burn.**

© Clare Stainsby (born 1959)

***Let us pray.***

Heavenly Father, Lord of creation and Saviour of the world, we have come to worship and adore you, for you are the Word who spoke life into being, whose wisdom and might are as boundless as your love. We acknowledge that you are the one true God, who in loving-kindness provides our daily needs. You are also the loving heavenly parent, who from the beginning, has tried to draw human beings close to you: first through the prophets and patriarchs, who gave us your law and showed us how we ought to live; yet, when we rebelled against you, at the right time, you gave sinners like us the most precious gift of all, your only Son, Jesus.

In Advent, we remember how you took human form and lived among us to show in words and actions how we should live. We also look forward to Christ's return in glory and seek to prepare ourselves for that time. Come into our hearts, dear Lord, guide and empower us in our discipleship, so our worship, our service and the way we live are pleasing to you, proclaiming your glory, through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

***In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'Hear our prayer'.***

Merciful God, we know how deep is our need to set ourselves right with you, for often we fail to love and serve you as we ought, through weakness, sinfulness, wilfulness, carelessness or fear. Help us change our ways, so we put you at the centre of our lives. For our disobedience and faithlessness, we ask your forgiveness.

Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

In shame and sadness, we recall occasions when we have failed to care for neighbours who were lonely, distressed, needy or troubled, because of our selfishness, pride, anger, cold-heartedness or indifference. Help us lead Christ-centred, not self-centred lives. For our failure to share your love with others, we ask your forgiveness.

Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

Gracious God, whose redemptive love took Christ to die at Calvary for the world's sinfulness, we believe your gracious word that our sins have been forgiven. Renew us in your grace and empower us to serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

***We shall say the Lord's Prayer:***

**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.

*We lead into our prayers of intercession with a hymn by Gerald Coates and Noel Richards that reminds us of our need for Jesus in this lovely, but sin-darkened world. It was this darkness that John the Baptist spoke out against, darkness that Jesus brought the light of divine love to defeat and the same light which we are charged to continue to bear in his name. Hymn number 405, 'Great is the darkness that covers the earth'.*

**1. Great is the darkness that covers the earth,  
Oppression, injustice and pain  
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,  
Though many have come in your name.  
Watching while sanity dies,  
Touched by the madness and lies. *Chorus:***

*Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,  
Pour out your spirit we pray.  
Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,  
Pour out your spirit on us today.*

**2. May now your church rise with power and love,  
This glorious gospel proclaim.  
In every nation salvation will come  
To those who believe in your name.  
Help us bring light to this world  
That we might speed your return. *Chorus:***

**Great celebrations on that final day  
When out of the heavens you come  
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end  
And rulers will bow at your throne.  
Our great commission complete,**

**Then face to face we shall meet. *Chorus: Gerald Coates (b. 1944) & Noel Richards (b. 1955)***

*We come to our prayers of intercession when we bring our concerns for people nearby and far away to our Lord. When I say, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' please say 'Come Lord Jesus'.*

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

Loving Lord, come to your world as King of the nations, to bring peace, built upon justice and mercy, to all countries. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern in the world, so that they turn away from using violence as a means of having their own way. We pray for wise and compassionate treatment of the victims of war, terrorism, persecution and of refugees. Help them find both support and courage, so they may find healing and rebuild their lives.

We pray for just and lasting resolutions to the wars in Ukraine the Holy Land, Syria, Sudan and Somalia. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many victims of conflicts: the lost lives; those injured in body, mind and spirit, widows and orphans and not least the many refugees who face exploitation and vilification.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord, before you rulers will stand in silence. Guide the leaders of the wealthy nations and the World Bank to show mercy to the people of Developing Nations, where indescribable poverty exists. Inspire them to offer practical support to break the chains of poverty once and for all, thereby granting our poorer brothers and sisters both security and dignity.

Hear our prayer, too, for those in our own country who are unemployed, homeless, or who need to use food banks to survive. Bless all who provide food for and all who run food banks, and other organizations which serve the poor. Create in our politicians and business leaders a vision for a fairer society in which the poor and disfranchised are given hope and grant that we, too, may contribute to such a great work.

Come Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Lord of shalom, come to your people as healer and bearer of pain. We pray for people from this church, for families and friends, for people from work, or from our community who are ill, lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In a time of silence, we bring you names of people for whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will know their needs. ....

Loving Lord, in your grace, enfold us all in your love, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come, Lord of creation, for we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Come Father God, as Christmas nears, we pray for ourselves. We don't know what others will ask of us so we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

Come, Lord Jesus. **Come, Lord Jesus.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us and our families. Keep us safe and fill us with the love and grace of Christ Jesus, so that our thoughts, words and deeds offer peace and love to people around us, bringing you glory in his holy name. Amen.

### **Our first reading is Luke chapter 1 verses 26 to 38**

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said,

"Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your

relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. Amen.

**Our second reading is the Magnificat, Mary's song of joy and faith. Luke chapter 1 verses 46b to 55**

"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. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers." Amen.

*Our next hymn was written by Revd. Sabine Baring-Gould as a paraphrase of a Basque carol and was published in 1922, two years before his death at the age of ninety. He also wrote 'Onward Christian soldiers' and collected old Devonian folk songs, including 'Old uncle Tom Cobley and all'. This carol, shows that he was to the Catholic side of the Church of England, but that's not necessarily a bad thing, as it is lovely! Hymn number 187, 'The angel Gabriel from heaven came'.*

1. 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!*

2. '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!*

3. 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!*

4. 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)

**Sermon: "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God". Luke 1: 30**

What a remarkable woman Mary was! Although she was young and inexperienced, she had faith enough to accept the awesome responsibility of bearing God's Son, the longed-for Messiah. I doubt if many women, however experienced, would have been confident enough, yet when the angel Gabriel told Mary about God's intentions, instead of refusing point-blank, in amazement, she simply asked how she could bear God's Son because she was unmarried. Gabriel's reply would probably not have convinced most modern women, yet he told Mary that a relative Elizabeth was expecting a child, although she was beyond the age for motherhood, adding, '**nothing is impossible with God**'. Mary displayed an amazing trust in God by making herself wholly available to his

will and simply replied, **'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.'** In other words, she was prepared to take on the world, its finger-pointing, spiteful condemnation, disgrace and ostracism to do God's will, for she knew the consequences of becoming pregnant outside marriage.

At the time of Gabriel's visit, Mary was betrothed to Joseph which means more than being engaged, for in First Century Judea girls of twelve and a half or over could legally cohabit when betrothed and it was so solemn a commitment that it needed a letter of divorce to break it. Until that moment, she would have been planning to build a good life with Joseph, so Gabriel's message raised serious issues for Mary, as her pregnancy might have led to charges of infidelity levelled against her, especially if Joseph denied that he was the father. It is unlikely she would have been stoned in those circumstances, yet adultery was technically punishable by death. Nevertheless, at the least, Mary would have borne public disgrace for bearing a child outside marriage and, had Joseph rejected her, she would have become an outcast like the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well.

Let us consider God's choice of Mary as mother of his Son. We know that Mary was related to Elizabeth, wife of the priest, Zechariah and mother of John the Baptist, that Elizabeth was descended from a priestly family, so it is reasonable to surmise that Mary, too, came from a Levite background. She had a strong grasp of the scriptures which was important, for Hebrew mothers were expected to ground their children in the faith, whilst the husbands worked to provide for the family. Remember how the scholars in the temple were astounded by twelve-year-old Jesus' grasp of Torah and the prophets. That was Mary's work, so God knew what he was doing. It was also Mary's remarkable faith which led her to trust God in such a venture; to put herself at his disposal because she believed what he said is true and would come to be. It is all the more remarkable because women were dominated by their husbands and had little to no part in decision-making. Mary wasn't naïve nor foolish. She knew the cost of obedience and was willing to pay it for the Lord's sake – for the redemption of Israel. It is hardly surprising that her Son, Jesus, was obedient, even to death on a cross, trusting only in God's saving grace after being raised by such a mother.

Another way we know that Mary had a good grasp of the Scriptures, is through the **Magnificat**, her hymn of praise, in which develops the song of **Hannah after she conceived Samuel**, from Hannah's words of triumph over her enemies to Mary's praise for the goodness and grace of God towards the downtrodden and poor. In **"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation"**, the word, **'chesed'** which our text gives as **'mercy'** can also be translated as **'loving-kindness'** and Jesus came to offer loving-kindness especially to the despised and marginalised in society.

The Roman Catholic Church has a radically different view of Jesus' mother, Mary to those of Protestant churches, for Mary has been venerated above all saints. **In 1854**, basing his decision on early Church tradition, **Pope Pius IX issued a papal bull**, or order of faith, that the Virgin Mary was conceived free from sin, because she was to bear God's Son, that she never sinned throughout her life and remained a virgin – despite her marriage to Joseph and the birth of a number of children besides Jesus. I find the elevation of Mary sad rather than ridiculous, because the bull denied Mary her humanity and cast a slur of sexual relations. Even the finest people fall short of God's glory and the papal insistence on virginity can be traced back to Gnostics, heretics who held that anything earthly, including sexuality was sinful. **No, it is far better to see what God saw in Mary, to all appearances an ordinary woman, yet in fact an extraordinary woman whom God chose to bear and raise Christ Jesus.** I agree, however, that

Mary is the 'new Eve', as Jesus is the 'new Adam' who restored fallen humankind to his Father, God.

The story of Mary challenges us to examine our commitment to God's kingdom. Are we willing to make big changes to our lives, to set aside our station in life, to risk our reputation and friendships to answer a call from God? I've known a few people who have given up well-paid, prestigious jobs to serve as presbyters or deacons, or to serve the church in other ways and I haven't found one who laments that he or she could have been wealthy or powerful, because serving Christ is reward in itself. Are you, are we, willing to honour these words from the Methodist's Covenant Prayer with a sincere 'Amen'?

**I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you, or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing: I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.**

**And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.**

**May God grant us the trust and faith of Mary to make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our lives, to serve him unquestioningly. Amen.**

*In 1961, Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith read a review copy of the New Testament of the New English Bible which is not noted for its poetry. Nevertheless, he was so moved by the first line of the Magnificat, he used it as the opening of a poem and, in his own words, he 'speedily wrote the rest'. We close our service as we sing hymn number 186, '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!**

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### ***Benediction***

**May the joy of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, the worship of the wise men and the peace of the Christ child be ours not only at Christmas, but for evermore. And may the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit remain with us always. Amen.**