

A song of praise



Katharine Smith *reflects on* Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

Last week we were out in the wilderness listening to John the Baptist calling people to repent and be baptised. We heard him talking about the One who was to come after him, a powerful one, who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Today Jesus is still unborn, held in his mother's womb – an unexpected but longed-for baby, to be born in fulfilment of God's promises. And the powerful One who is to come after John, Jesus, is also held in his mother's womb – an unexpected baby to be born because Mary said "yes" and accepted God's will for her. Even before their birth, John it seems is aware of the presence of Jesus and lets his mother know as much.

Both mothers-to-be are filled with joy and praise God for his great faithfulness and goodness to them and to their people. Mary sings of God's compassion and mercy and the justice God brings to all people.

We don't know if Elizabeth is still alive when her son meets his violent death. We do know that Mary's heart is pierced with bitter agony and grief when her son is nailed to the cross. And we can imagine that, when Jesus is raised from the dead, Mary again sings the songs of joy and praise that we hear today. 🙏

Lord Jesus, help us to follow the example of your blessed mother Mary, who humbly accepted God's will. In all our joys and sorrows may we know your loving presence alongside us, our saviour and our friend. Amen.

Walking with Rosie

by Gillian Cooper

Rosie and I go to the garden centre, where shrubs and trowels have given way to Christmas decorations. We walk past the indoor plants into a dark space filled with lights – red, gold, green and blue – twinkling and glowing, overwhelming and magical. I know they are there to encourage me to spend money. Yet in the dark days of the year the lights are like the fire in the cave of our ancient

ancestors, the stars in the night sky. Rosie and I stand there, entranced. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," says St John. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," proclaims Isaiah. Soon we will hear of shepherds and their angels, magi and their star. In a world where darkness and danger seem so near, the light of the Christ Child is still shining. 🙏

“God is coming! God is coming! All the element we swim in, this existence, echoes ahead the advent. God is coming! Can't you feel it?”

Walter Wangerin Jr (1944-2021), American author and educator

Advent

Part 4 – Forest Green, a village in Surrey

by Julian Smith

In 1866 the American clergyman Phillips Brooks spent Christmas in Bethlehem. Moved by that experience he later wrote the carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem". The carol was published in *The English Hymnal* in 1906 set to a tune composed by Ralph Vaughan Williams.

RVW had collected the folk song "The Ploughboy's Dream" from Henry Garman of Forest Green, Surrey, in 1903 and he adapted the tune to fit the

carol. He called the tune "Forest Green". The folk song is a robust cautionary tale of a negligent ploughboy who shirks work and abuses the horses. Its message is that hard work is the lot of every ploughboy.

Christmas is eternal. This Christmas is about the here and now, all the Christmases we've experienced and all that have ever been. The folk music that sits deep in our consciousness, familiar without our knowing it, links us to that eternal Christmas. 🙏

The holy family

Katharine Smith *reflects on* Luke 2:41-end

We can imagine that when Jesus, Mary and Joseph leave Jerusalem, each is lost in his or her own thoughts. Joseph remembers Jesus speaking in the Temple: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" He'd always known he wasn't the "real" father of Jesus, yet he couldn't have loved him more had he been his own son. He knew, because Mary had told him, that the angel had told her who Jesus really was. Today that knowledge has moved from his head to his heart, and Joseph is surprised at how much it hurts.

Mary, too, remembers those words, "my Father's house". Her little boy is growing

up fast and she must begin to let him go, commending him into his Father's hands. She is so proud of him but she's afraid for him, too. She hasn't forgotten Simeon's words, "a sword will pierce your own soul too".

Jesus looks back over the city and already longs to return to the Temple. He is so aware of his Father's presence in that place, and he's becoming more aware of God calling him into a special relationship. He will respond to that calling – he couldn't resist even if he wanted to – but where will it take him?

Together the little family returns to Nazareth, knowing that somehow life will never be the same for them after Jerusalem. 🙏



Lord Jesus, help us to grow in our understanding of who you are and in our relationship with you. Reveal to us the love of our heavenly Father and help us to respond to God's calling faithfully and with courage. Amen.

John Wyclif, the "Morning Star" of the Reformation

by Caroline Hodgson

The fourteenth-century English theologian and reformer John Wyclif is commemorated on Tuesday. An Oxford scholar, he was a pivotal figure in the prelude to the Protestant Reformation. His commitment to reforming the Church led him to challenge established doctrines and his ground-breaking translation of the Bible into English aimed to make scripture accessible to the ordinary person, challenging the Church's monopoly on interpretation.

Wyclif criticised the wealth and corruption of the clergy, advocating for a return to the simplicity of early Christianity. His dissenting views earned both admiration and opposition, yet his legacy endured through the Lollards, his followers. Wyclif's emphasis on the authority of the Bible and his uncompromising stance on the need for reform set the scene for profound changes within the Church, influencing other reformers such as Jan Hus and Martin Luther, and contributing to the transformation of Christianity in Europe. 🙏

“ I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.”

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

A new take on the new year

by Caroline Hodgson

Are you fed up with resolutions you know you won't be able to keep even before you've started? Rather than let yourself down this year, why not devote your energy to deciding on what's actually achievable in the coming twelve months? At this point, your only resolution is to commit just a few minutes at regular intervals. What works for you? Could you spare a few minutes a day, or half an hour a week?

Apart from time, the only other thing you'll need in the first instance is some kind

of notebook or a computer document. Start by using whatever time you've allocated to identifying and listing the things you want to change. Allow this process to be fairly leisurely, but do set challenges – give yourself, say, a fortnight to come up with a list. Then let it evolve into a workable action plan – flesh it out with details, write, or draw, or invite other people to take part with you.

As with everything, prayer is the key to doing this well. Ask for God's guidance and support in your endeavours. What you are doing, in fact, is putting faith into practice – so make it realistic and enjoyable! 🙏