

A sign of grace



Heather Smith *reflects on* Isaiah 7:10-16
and Romans 1:1-7

King Ahaz has signed away Judah's liberty; they are now a vassal state of Assyria. Isaiah has come to give God's word to Ahaz and he is offered a sign. Surely a sign from God is a good thing? But Ahaz refuses it.

An Old Testament sign explains something that cannot be readily understood. So for example the sabbath is a sign of God's covenant. Signs like these usually end up forcing someone to change their mind or move forward in a way they haven't quite intended.

God gives Ahaz a sign anyway. We know it as a prophecy foretelling the birth of Christ: "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son", but it also refers to God's plan to liberate Judah from Assyria. Ahaz has taken a line-of-least-resistance approach to ruling, allowing pagan practices to flourish. God's deliverance might require Ahaz to stand up for what is right, not something for which he has shown much inclination so far.

We understand the sign of Christ's birth to the young woman Mary as grace – unearned favour from God. Opening his letter, Paul greets the Romans with the words "Grace to you", which seems a comfortable reassuring greeting. But it is just like the sign. God's unearned favour requires us to make a change in the way we live. 🍵

God of grace, help us respond to your sign this Christmas. Show us how to change the direction of our lives and to stand up for what is righteous and true. Amen.

Christmas decorations

Part 3 – the star

by Gillian Cooper

The star is in its usual place on the top of the tree. It properly belongs to Epiphany, not Christmas – the wise men will not follow it until January. But there it is, a piece of tradition, interchangeable with a fairy. Both star and fairy are magical. Both are the stuff of stories. Both have the traditional appeal to children. But the star has

a magic far deeper and more true. It tells us that there is a plan. That God has prepared for this moment, and has put the signposts in place. It tells us that for those with eyes to see, there is a path to salvation. It opens up access to all outside the Jewish community of Bethlehem and Nazareth. It marks the point in time and space where heaven and earth meet, and our way to heaven is secured. No fairy wand can do that kind of magic. 🍵

“The eternal Son became a child so that I might become a child again and so re-enter with him into the kingdom of the Father.”

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), Dutch Roman Catholic priest, writer and theologian

Walking with Rosie

Waiting

by Gillian Cooper

It is the dark time of the year – light appearing late and leaving early. Rosie and I walk often in the dawn or the twilight. Rosie is not bothered by the gloom – she knows that there is a treat from the Advent calendar awaiting her at home. The streets and shops are adorned with Christmas lights to cheer us up. But I must ignore them for now.

We are in the season of waiting. Advent calls us to resist the lure of the tinsel and the carols until the right time. We are asked to consider the most serious things of human life – heaven, hell, death and judgement. We are encouraged to watch and listen for signs of light and hope, not denying the depths of the darkness around us on the earth. Only then will we be ready to welcome the light of the world, born for us again. 🍵

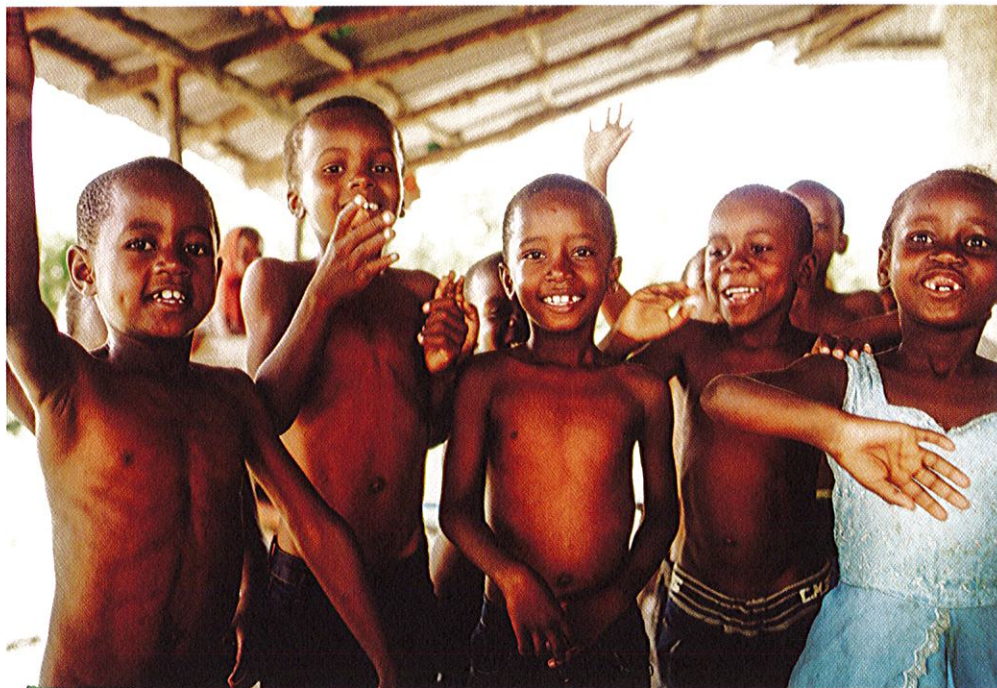
All about children

Heather Smith *reflects on* Isaiah 63:7-9, Matthew 2:13-end and Hebrews 2:10-end

Today's readings are about children, both flesh and blood and spiritual. The Holy Family flees into Egypt. How ironic to return there, when the founding stories of the nation tell us that the Israelites escaped from Egypt with great drama many years before? In an equally dramatic escape Joseph flees with Mary and Jesus in the middle of the night – surely a terrible path to have to take. We can imagine Mary saying, "Egypt? Are you really sure?" It must have seemed like a physical and spiritual backward step.

Like the Holy Family, we flesh-and-blood children are vulnerable beings. For the infant Christ, human inhumanity caused misery and danger, and still does for so many today. But we are also spiritual children of God, saved, Isaiah tells us, by God's presence. And God's presence brings together the physical and spiritual. The letter to the Hebrews explains that it takes the form of Christ, who became like us in every respect.

Our responsibility is to bring God's presence, both physical and spiritual, to those who suffer, confident of Christ's saving grace in their lives and ours. Even those who have fled, like the Holy Family, from physical or spiritual danger, can find God's saving presence if we point them in the right direction. 🌱



Saving God, give us courage to recognise those who are living in danger and to stand beside them, pointing them in the direction of your saving presence. May we follow your word, wherever it leads, confident that we are your beloved children. Amen.

People of the New Testament

Luke

by Caroline Fletcher

Luke's Gospel; Acts; Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:9-11; Philemon 23-24

Most of us associate Luke with the third Gospel. But he also wrote the Acts of the Apostles and contributed around a quarter of the New Testament – even more than Paul.

Luke appears to have been a modest and faithful man who was a tremendous support to Paul and recorded momentous events in church history without feeling the need to draw undue attention to his own involvement in those

events. We certainly owe him a great deal. His Gospel has left us much better informed about Jesus' life, providing a wealth of information, including details about Jesus' birth, that isn't found in the other Gospels.

In Acts, Luke documents the years that followed Christ's death, including the growth of the early Church and its spread to the Gentiles. Without him we'd know far less about the work of Paul and other early Christians, who helped the Gospel move out from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. 🌱

Christmas isn't over

by Ricarda Witcombe

Even if your tree may have lost its needles and your festive food has all been eaten, the truth of Christmas is here to stay. As the African-American writer Howard Thurman put it: "When the song of the angels is stilled, 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."

What might that mean in your own context, as this year draws to its end but the light of the Christmas star continues to shine? We may carry all sorts of fears and stresses into 2026, but the truth of Christmas changes things. God is with us, making a home right in the midst of our lives. That gives us such a deep place from which to draw strength and life, for ourselves and others. 🌱

“The object of a new year is not that we should have a new year, but rather that we should have a new soul.”

G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), writer, philosopher, theologian and critic