

# Sermon notes and prayers for Advent and Christmas

## Sermon notes

### **From the stable to the Temple:** the tensions and paradoxes of God with us

#### Reading: Luke 2

Our Bible passage this Advent and Christmas brings to our minds stories that must be some of the best known in Christendom. But *our* focus will look below the surface and imaginatively consider the reflective mother, the maturing child and whether these images, and others like them, allow us a greater understanding of the plight of mothers and children in places such as South Sudan. It is an exercise that will introduce us to some of the most challenging – and revealing – tensions and paradoxes in the gospels.

#### Poverty and princship (Luke 2:1-7)

Perhaps the initial impact, when reading Luke 2, is the degree to which the theme of poverty is brought to the fore. The child is born and placed in little more than a trough and in a stable that may well have been open to the elements. We hear he is wrapped in what sounds to us like offcuts of cloth and there is a discomfort to be had, knowing as we do, that the infant in swaddling eventually becomes the man covered in a shroud over his post-crucifixion and pre-resurrection corpse.

Indeed, it is a scene freighted with spiritual mystery and potent symbolism and we can trace a theme through to the end of his life. Not only was there no room at the inn, but there was nowhere for the Son of Man to lay his head and no throne for the King of the Jews: but there was a manger, homelessness, and a cross to be nailed to.

Sobering stuff. But incarnation was never going to be easy.

So, in the most obscure, perhaps even the most banal of circumstances, Christ, the saviour of the world who inaugurates God's Kingdom here on earth, the Prince of Peace, is born in a poverty-laden situation to a prophecy-laden mother. It is an exquisite example of what John Nolland calls the 'paradox of divine condescension'.

We have a woman giving birth in the most primitive of circumstances and we wonder at the pain and isolation she must have endured. Is it a feeling that mothers experience in South Sudan? With the lack of maternity care, pain medication and clean surroundings we may say that they would more than empathise. It is where, chillingly, such existential poverty that we witness in the gospels remains alive and ill 2,000 years later. A place where conflict, climate and Covid have conspired to create a growing humanitarian and hunger crisis.

It was a feeling of pain and a sense of aloneness that Mary would periodically return to throughout her life as she watched her son grow from poverty to princship.

To help people in such situations, Christian Aid's Humanitarian Programme Plan (HPP) in South Sudan is partnering with the Support for Peace and Education Development Program (SPEDP) to bring support to families and farmers, and is our primary focus this Christmas.



## Clarity and confusion (Luke 2:8-20)

With Mary having been told that she would give birth to a child who would be the Son of the Highest, the point at which she eventually gave birth shoulder-to-shoulder with cattle must have provoked more than a degree of confusion; perhaps exacerbated when the initial public announcement of the birth was to shepherds on a hillside. An unusual choice, considering the way they were so despised for their lack of religious observance.

Jesus may have been born under the stars, but his first visitors arrived from society's gutter.

Having left their fields to visit the child, there is clearly something about him that convinces the shepherds of who he is, even in such unorthodox grandeur. It is odd, and not the least bit exciting, that the most important birth announcement in history was left to some of society's 'least'. In addition, it's likely that they initially shared the news with people of a similar social standing, and so provide an early example of God demonstrating a 'preference for the poor' - and with it a foretaste of divine preferences to come.

As Mary absorbs all that is happening around her, she ponders on the words and actions she has seen and heard, and we imagine her turning them over in her mind as one would a precious gem, noting the spectrum and sharp clarity of the light refracted.

Our focus this year is the subject of 'climate change', a title that no longer satisfactorily explains the situation. We now do well to speak of 'crisis', 'emergency', and 'disaster'. South Sudan exists in a dark cycle of flood to drought and back again - with some one million people impacted. The floods and droughts have disrupted access to food, drinking water, livestock and livelihoods, and mothers in South Sudan face a disorientating tension, as did Mary.

People such as Mary Ajoung, who sees her tools, seeds, cattle and any hope of a harvest taken away in the floods. Working with our local partner, SPEDP, we can replace the things that are lost and provide training to help people get up and running again. We have now helped some 1,900 households learn how to grow new crops such as kale, okra and tomatoes and are now better equipped to bounce back quicker when the rains come again.

## Prophecy and prognosis (Luke 2:21-51)

Within days of his birth Jesus is taken to the Temple by his parents and we are told that the sacrifice they make is the one offered by paupers. Then, as now, there were cultural and religious signifiers that publicly indicated who the underclass was and Luke continues to layer that image of poverty.

In the Temple, they meet Simeon, the man on whom it is said the Spirit of God rested - an unusual honour in the New Testament. As he cradles the Christ-child he pronounces that the boy is 'the salvation for all God's people', 'the light for the revelation to the Gentiles' and 'the one who will glorify God's people, Israel'. However, his oration is not undilutedly positive and his words ebb and flow, bringing dark and light as he further proclaims that the life of this child will be far from easy.

Mary's child will cause Israel to fall, as well as to rise - a seditious suggestion at the very least - people were executed for less. Jesus will be reduced, or elevated perhaps, to be a 'sign', one that will be spoken against and yet one who will reveal the secrets of many hearts. His life will be lived under a cruciform shadow and Mary, as his mother, will suffer vicariously with her son.

Salvation will be bought, but it will come at an eye-wateringly high price.

It is a scene that twists and turns, going from the ecstatic to the tragic. What was going through the minds of Mary and Joseph is anybody's guess, and it takes little imagination to conjure the internal conflict they must have felt with such dire portents looming over their son. What else has been pre-decided? What else is out of their hands? Whatever the future was to bring these announcements must have been difficult to grasp.

Mary would have felt a profound and complex tension as she was buffeted by prophecies that seemed to promise a form of glorious failure for her son. It is an uncomfortable subject, what is and what will come, and it would have been a tension Mary revisited years later when she found Jesus debating in the temple - at the age of twelve. Would he have looked like one who was to have such a profound life and powerful end? What a terrible prognosis to carry. To have to speak of the end of your child's life so soon after their birth.

Climate change brings fears for our future in the global North, but what is the prognosis for children in South Sudan? For a mother to watch her child playing with friends knowing what she knows about the likelihood for the future must carry with it an existential pain. Such energy now, but what will the climate do to them over the coming decades? There is that terrible scruffy relationship between what their lives should look like and what they probably will look like. What a horrible dissonance to live with, one where parents try and reconcile the should, the maybe and the likely of their children's lives.

It is to alleviate such a pain that we support mothers such as Abuk Ayat Ajing, who lost her business and any hope of an education or brighter future for her children. Working with SPEDP, we have helped establish a community savings project that helps people start their own businesses so they can move away from the daily grind of that choice of essentials for their children today or putting building blocks in place, such as an education, for a better tomorrow.

### Challenge and choice

One of the great themes of Christmas is choice. That perennial favourite, Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, revolves around the subject. As the night ends, Scrooge is left with that sense of challenge: who will you serve this day? What choice will you make? Will you engage with life with generosity and compassion or with a miserly spirit and a calcified heart?

Our passage in Luke has themes that show Mary battle with poverty and prophetic promise, live with a disorientating confusion in the present and feel a despair for tomorrow. This Advent and Christmas we are focussing on women and children in a country where days are filled with the most horrendous of choices.

Choices brought about as much by climate chaos as anything else. They, too, look at their infants with one eye on the possible truncation of their lives. Choices in places where the heat and drought are life-threatening, yet when water does come, it announces itself by washing away everything not tied down. It is, perhaps, the most heart-wrenching choice of all: the choice between unimaginable thirst or drinking water that is likely to contain dangerous contaminants. We may wince when we think of the pain of the mother whose children rely on her to make that decision.

### Adut

**Adut and her children Maria, Simon and Charles.**



### Mary

**Mary and her children Aguot, Ayook and Arek.**



### Abuk

**Abuk and her child Ken.**



As one mum, Adut Mariu, says, 'We were in desperate need...to look after my children, they had to drink the dirty river water. The water has many diseases. There is cows' dung, there is donkeys' dung... People also washed in there.' But today she can say, 'Now we get water from the hand pump. We don't send our children into the river anymore. The water from the hand pump is very good. It's disease free. We drink it with peace of mind.'

The good news is that we have an opportunity to help many more mothers along with Abuk, Mary and Adut to experience that fresh sense of security. It is for these people, and others like them, that we collect this Christmas. So please join us and support those who see their life choices burnt to a cinder or washed away entirely. Let us stand with them as they build a poverty-free life, improve their present situation and find hope for their tomorrows.

Words provided by Dr Mark Johnson, Community Engagement Fundraising Officer for Sussex and Kent

# Advent prayers

When we awake on Christmas morning how will we be different? How will Advent have shaped us and our world? How will our prayers in Advent help us to refocus after the climate change talks in Glasgow (COP26) and get ready for the next stage of the journey to climate justice?

Let us wait together for the one who comes to us.

## First Sunday in Advent

Give us your perspective, God,  
On all that has been and is to come,  
Or at least as much as we can handle  
Within the limitations of our finite minds,  
Yet with eternity dwelling in our hearts.

Give us your perspective, God,  
With the grace and courage to listen and wait.  
To watch and pray, to stand up and lift our voices,  
To speak out and amplify  
The call for justice for all the earth.

Give us your perspective, God,  
On decisions made and courage delayed.  
Unveil the honesty within the rhetoric,  
Call to humility all boastful complacency  
So your will may be done here on Earth.

Give us your perspective, God,  
On all your creatures and creation.  
A God's eye view of love for the world  
Stretching from a manger in a stable  
To the redeeming expanse of the cross.

Amen.

## Second Sunday in Advent

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.'  
Luke 3:4

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius,  
When Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,  
And Herod was ruler of Galilee,  
And his brother Philip ruler of the region of Itureaea  
and Trachonitis,  
And Lysanias ruler of Abilene,  
During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,  
The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in  
the wilderness.

Advent God,  
Of all the places and all the people  
You chose John,  
Son of devout yet doubting Zechariah,  
To be the bearer of proclamation  
Of a baptism of repentance  
For the forgiveness of sins.

Of all the positions of power  
And places of privilege  
You chose the wilderness  
To be the place of transformation  
Where all comforts and distractions  
Are stripped away  
And all that is true revealed.

As we look to seats of power  
To bring the change for which we long  
Help us not to misplace our hope  
Nor overlook the unexpected and unlikely,  
To dismiss the unconventional and uncomfortable  
Nor avoid the very hope we anticipate  
Found, perhaps, even in the warm stench of a stable.

Amen.

## Third Sunday in Advent

'And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"' Luke 3:10

We have looked to global leaders  
To make the necessary changes  
For the flourishing of the planet  
And abundant life for all humanity.  
In this time of Advent expectation  
We join with the crowds,  
The tax collectors and soldiers  
And ask what was repeatedly asked of John:

'And what should we do?'

And we get the impression, God of grace,  
That the crowds, tax collectors and soldiers  
Knew exactly what they should do.  
John's response was of no surprise:  
Their conscience would have told them as much,  
And in these days of Advent waiting  
As we approach a stable, watching for a star,  
We ask again as those before us:

'And what should we do?'

Not simply looking to the leaders of the world  
Nor only expecting systemic solutions  
Nor taking your grace for granted  
We draw to Advent stillness.  
Here in the depths of a northern hemisphere winter  
We seek your incarnation presence  
To remind us what we should do.

So help us, God. Amen

## Fourth Sunday in Advent

In anticipation of You,  
a girl raised her voice,  
in courage and praise,  
in joy and expectation,  
in resistance and struggle.

In anticipation of You,  
put flesh on our faith  
to put words into action,  
to call for equality,  
to work for justice.

In anticipation of You,  
may the lowly be raised,  
the crushed be restored,  
the bruised be resilient,  
the powerful be restrained.

In anticipation of You,  
may we be filled with hope,  
to say yes to your will,  
to share our gifts and resources,  
to work together for a world reborn.  
In your name we pray, Amen.

## Christmas Day prayer

'But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.' Luke 2:19

Thank you, Incarnate God,  
For the good news of Christmas.  
For the news that dispels fear of the future,  
News that disrupts the status quo,  
That brings hope despite despair,  
Amazement and wonder.  
For news that is truly full of awe, we give you thanks.

May this Good News silence all other news today.

Amen, and thanks be to God.



Find out more about our Christmas appeal at  
[caid.org.uk/christmas](https://caid.org.uk/christmas)