

ANGELIC INTERRUPTIONS!

Advent 2021

Notes for Life Group use & personal reflection

Advent 2021

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28th November – 26th December 2021

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation. Might you anticipate afresh this year?

"Into this world, this demented inn in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited." Thomas Merton.

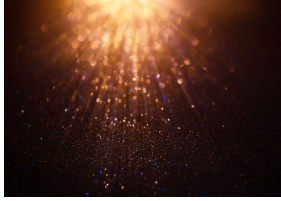
"Every year we celebrate the holy season of Advent, O God. Every year we pray those beautiful prayers of longing and waiting, and sing those lovely songs of hope and promise." Karl Rahner.

"Advent, like its cousin Lent, is a season for prayer and reformation of our hearts." Edward Hays

Advent is the season of the seed: the seed, Christ said, is the word of God sown in the human heart. What will grow in you this Christmas time?



**St PETER'S
& St PAUL'S**
HEXTABLE & SWANLEY VILLAGE



Angelic Interruptions

Celebrating Christmas, on a cold day in England, for many seems idyllic and magical. We often think of Christmas trees, snow, carols, families sitting around the fire, and presents piled under the tree. However, this perfect scene for some is another's fear. In the West, it has become a time to spend large amounts of money, while frantically shopping, feasting excessively, and becoming stressed and feeling the strain of keeping up with others. Both Christians and non-Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the centre of the festival, amongst the commercialisation and culture. The original Christmas story, which is told many times in Nativity plays, relates to the events depicted in the Gospels, and the prophecy foretold in the Old Testament. However, how has the first Christmas, and the birth of Jesus, snowballed into an international festival celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike? Through this series, it is an opportunity to interrupt the busyness of life, to explore the Heavenly interruptions surrounding Advent and the Christmas story.

As we enter the season of Advent we prepare for Christmas, remembering the coming of the Lord Jesus as a baby, the Almighty God taking human form at a point in history for the express purpose of reconciling humankind to God. We also look forward to Jesus' second coming when He will return at the end of time when every knee will bow and every tongue confesses... We look at how the angels were present at Jesus' birth acting as divine messengers.

Both Luke and Matthew's Gospels describe 'the coming' and tell us about the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary. The scholar and bishop NT Wright highlights that Advent isn't just about getting ready for Jesus to be born, it's also about getting ready for Jesus to come back.

Advent is marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, of longing. There is a yearning for deliverance from the evils of the world, first expressed by Israelite slaves in Egypt as they cried out from their bitter oppression. It is the cry of those who have experienced the tyranny of injustice in a world under the curse of sin, and yet who have hope of deliverance by a God who has heard the cries of oppressed slaves and brought deliverance! It is that hope, however faint at times, and that God, however distant He sometimes seems, which brings to the world the anticipation of a King who will rule with truth and justice and righteousness over His people and in His creation.

It is that hope that once anticipated, and now anticipates anew, the reign of an Anointed One, a Messiah, who will bring peace and justice and righteousness to the world. Part of the expectation also anticipates a judgment on sin and a calling of the world to accountability before God. We long for God to come and set the world right! Yet, as the prophet Amos warned, the expectation of a coming judgment at the "Day of the Lord" may not be the day of light that we might want, because the penetrating light of God's judgment on sin will shine just as brightly on God's people.

In Jewish and early Christian writings there is much about angels and from these much of the popular ideas about angels come. We must as in all matters of faith return to the bible as our authority, where angels are mentioned nearly three hundred times. As we study these ideas we must always remember that the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things.

So we are taught in Col 1:16 that God created Angels and all things in heaven and earth. In Psalm 91 we are told that God commanded them to care and look after us. In Revelation thousand thousands of angels worship God on his throne. We are told they don't marry and they are not part of the salvation story as they are not humans. They can therefore not experience the joy of salvation and be sons and daughters or be joint-heirs with Jesus in his kingdom. We encounter angels in Genesis in the Garden of Eden and we are told they will be present at the resurrection on the last day. They were present at all the major events from Sinai to Jesus' resurrection and we would expect them to appear at Jesus' birth....the incarnation when God intervened in human history on a certain day in a poor village in an occupied country....we know the story so well, we sometimes fail to be amazed by it!



Week 1: November 28th 2021 - Be Silent - Luke 1:11-20

The story of Zechariah is often overlooked, as many people prefer the story of Mary, whose fiat to the angel Gabriel stood in contrast to Zechariah's doubt. Mary had passion and faith, while Zechariah seemed uncertain. There is a huge contrast in Zechariah's disbelief when he hears the angel tell him that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son, compared to Mary's belief in what Gabriel tells her. After all, Gabriel tells Zechariah, "And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time" (Luke 1:20). While at first glance, Gabriel's words can seem like a punishment, it may be an invitation. The content of the angel's message is about the fulfillment of God's word. God's faith in Zechariah is enough, even when Zechariah's faith falters.

In the time of silence, when Zechariah was unable to speak, something changes within him. Despite the scripture not speaking about that time, it is an opportunity to wonder: what happened between Zechariah and God then? What turned Zechariah from being a person who argued with the angel that he was simply an old man with an old wife, to one who offers a canticle proclaiming praise, salvation, and freedom (Luke 1:68-79)?

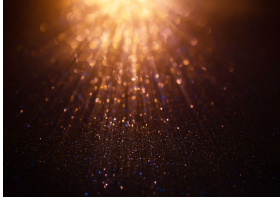
In our prayer lives, too, God often speaks most clearly to us in moments when we can quiet our own minds and voices. Silence makes room for the fullness of God's dynamic and healing power. God invites us to enter more deeply into times of silence. In the quiet, God is still at work. God's power exceeds our own ability to name, capture, or control the events in our lives. In entering into silence, we enter more deeply into God's mystery. Like Zechariah, we learn to trust in God's transforming power taking place in the as-yet-unknown. In the busy weeks before Christmas, it is easy to get lost in the busyness of commercialism, family life, or simply becoming overwhelmed with preparations – STOP! Silence and stillness are vitally important.

Questions & Reflections

1. Read Luke 1:11-20 from two different translations – what stands out to you?
2. Who was Zechariah and what was he doing when he saw the angel Gabriel?
3. What keyword is striking in this passage?
4. Is silence important to you and your prayer life?
5. Brother Thomas Merton highlights the importance of Contemplative Prayer and Meditation as an important aspect to avoid the noise and busyness of modern life. Having busy lives can be a distraction to prayer and listening to God. How do you manage this?
6. Jesus embraced places of silence and solitude for prayer – silence is key. (Mark 1:35).
7. Jesus taught his disciples about developing an *'inner cell'* for the *'prayer of the heart'* (Matt 6:6), remembering that God is to be found in the *'sound of sheer silence'* (1 Kings 19:12) and *'be present to him who transfigures all things in the cloud of unknowing'* (Luke 9:34).
8. Where do you meet God? Do you listen? or do you ignore it?

Points to Ponder

- If you were Zachariah – would you have listened?
- What happens to Zachariah during the moments of silence? What changes him? Why?
- How can you embrace silence this Advent?



Week 2: December 5th 2021 - Reconsider - Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph is a man of faith, completely embraced by the works of God. He was busy planning to marry Mary when his plans began to fall apart. Mary's pregnancy forced Joseph to make a new plan. Matthew identified Joseph as Mary's husband because during the period of betrothal he was considered to be her husband. When he became aware of Mary's pregnancy, he decided to cause Mary as little humiliation as possible, even though he initially believed she had been unfaithful to him. Then he had the dream. The expectation of a Messiah was an integral part of Joseph's faith as a Jew. This dream confirmed the baby Mary was carrying would be that very Messiah.

As a righteous man, he was not perfect but sought to keep the law. He was upright and strove to live according to God's laws. He also knew that under the law, Mary could be stoned to death for adultery. He must have loved Mary deeply, for he combined compassion with his determination to do the right thing. He felt he could not go through with the marriage, but he did not choose to be harsh with Mary. He would do what was right but in a way that would protect Mary.

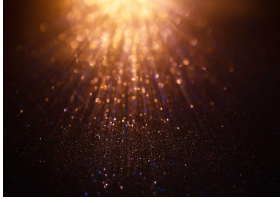
God asked Joseph to do two crucial things. First, He cleared the way for Joseph to go ahead and marry, assuring him Mary was still a virgin, and this baby was a miracle of God. Second, God gave Joseph the responsibility of naming the child "Jesus." It was Jewish custom for naming a child to be the father's job. The fact that God chose Jesus' name authenticated the baby's miraculous origin to Joseph: Mary's pregnancy was a work of the Holy Spirit. Joseph embraced his role as trainer for the child and example of fatherly love to Him. Within the dream, Joseph was reassured and did what God had commanded him to do. This reconsideration was important.

Questions & Reflections

1. What do you learn about Joseph from these verses?
2. How does Joseph's story encourage you to cooperate with God even when He wants you to do something very difficult?
3. Can you imagine being Joseph and finding what your fiancée is expecting? What emotions do you feel? He came to a decision....was that reasonable?
4. How does Joseph's story encourage you that God knows what He's doing even if you don't understand?
5. How would you know God is calling you? What does it feel like?
6. How can you decide between your plan and God's plan? Will God tell you in a dream? How does God guide us?
7. Is there something God has asked you to do that you haven't followed through on? How could you take steps toward obedience this week?
8. We don't hear much about Joseph as Jesus grows up. Do you ever feel that you no longer have a part to play in the unfolding story? Do you long to play a bigger part in the story of God in this place?
9. As we prepare for Christmas how do we focus on the 'Coming of Christ'? How do we ignore the pulling of commercialism etc?
10. Would you happily change your life plans to follow a dream?

Points to Ponder

- How does God guide you? Have you seen or heard guidance?
- When will you know it is time to reconsider?



Week 3: 12th December 2021 - Surprise - Luke 1:26-38

This is one of the most famous Christian stories ever told, which is recreated in seasonal school plays across the world. God sends a surprise to a young unmarried teenager in Nazareth. This would have been a huge surprise for her. God chose to use ordinary human beings with all their problems and possibilities, and Mary was an ordinary teenager. However, without this surprise and Mary's story, the Christmas story would not have occurred.

I wonder what made Mary so special. God needed just the right person: someone who was unspoiled and full of faith; someone who was open to God and willing to say 'yes'. Mary's 'yes' to God was the one-word answer that allowed Jesus to come to earth. Just imagine if Mary had said 'no'!

Every day, each of us is presented with the choice of saying 'yes' or 'no' to the many requests that come our way. On occasions, we make decisions quickly, unexpectedly, and without thinking of the consequences.

Luke places the story of Gabriel's visit to Mary straight after that of his visit to Zechariah. He is inviting a comparison of how they both responded to the good news they were told: the priest wants some proof and his question (Luke 1:18) betrays his disbelief, while the young girl is curious to know how God will do this (not whether God will) and her final words reveal a very deep faith indeed (Luke 1:38).

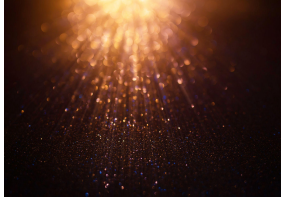
On occasions surprises do occur, some filled with joy, others filled with tragedy or sadness. Mary responded to this surprise appropriately, but would others?

Questions & Reflections

1. What strikes you most in the bible passages and spoken input from Sunday?
2. Why do you think God chose Mary?
3. What is the difference between Mary's call and Zechariah's call? And if so, why?
4. Who was Jesus, a good man, a prophet -teacher, or the Son of God. On which scripture do you base this?
5. What emotions did Mary feel? Try to imagine what her situation was like.
6. Verse 37 says nothing is impossible with God. Do we really believe this?
7. Verse 38. Is this always our response to God?
8. Read v 46-55. Mary's song (the Magnificat) How does this show that Mary understood what the angel told her?
9. How was God involved in Mary's conception?
10. What of the story of Mary, do you need to take away from today?

Points to Ponder

- Has God been asking you something – have you accepted the challenge or said no?
- On occasions we say no to God, or “not yet”, but God will keep nudging you until you accept what he is asking of you.
- God often calls you through others, this isn't a 'booming voice', rather discrete words that you will recognise and make sense of.



Week 4: 19th December - Come and See - Luke 2:1-20

The shepherds were the first to hear, directly from angels, about the birth of Jesus, the saviour of the world. The role of the shepherd was a whole life commitment. Sheep, and therefore shepherds, were central to the economy in Jesus' day. Sheep provided food, milk, meat and wool, and were essential to the Old Testament sacrificial system. However, caring for sheep involved a nomadic lifestyle, moving around, because of the available pasture.

Shepherding was a 24-7 job where the shepherd lived, worked and travelled with the sheep. One implication was that shepherds could not fulfil their religious duties, could not observe the Sabbath, and thus were religious outcasts. 'So it was a radical, that shepherds were the first to hear directly from angels. Everything about that went against religious propriety.'

Asking a group of people on the edge of society to come and witness the birth of Jesus Christ is significant, in fact, was this the first missional and evangelistic task of Jesus.

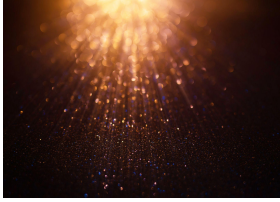
How often do we invite others to come and see? Advent, particularly Christmas Eve, is renowned for being the most attended church service across Britain when people 'come and see'.

Questions & Reflections

1. The shepherds were surrounded first by an angel, then the glory of the Lord shining and finally, we are told that suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared. A normal night on the hillside! How do you think they felt?
2. What do you think is the significance of the angels coming to poor shepherds to announce Jesus' birth?
3. Verse 10. Is the good news for all people? Look up Isaiah 54:5 and Genesis 12:2-3. Did the Jews of Jesus' day feel that they had a mission for the whole world?
4. What was the shepherd's response in v 20. Is that our response to hearing the Good News?
5. The shepherd story only appears in Luke's gospel whereas Matthew tells us the story of the Wise Men. Why are there no angels in the story of the coming of the Wise Men?
6. 'Let God have all the glory, so we may have the peace' Verse 14 - In what way was Jesus message one of peace?
7. In v 11 the angel declares that a Saviour has been born. Many would claim that the world doesn't need a Saviour. Discuss.
8. Verse 19 tells us that Mary treasured up these things and pondered them. Did Mary understand what might happen to her son?

Points to Ponder

- God is always seeking to get our attention...
- What are the Holy Spirit nudges you might wish to resist?
- "In Luke, shepherds go to find Jesus. In Matthew, an unspecified number of wise men, sometimes portrayed as kings, arrive. Nativity plays usually throw all the elements together, with kings and shepherds beating a path to the stable." Alice Roberts



Week 5: 26th December 2021 - Get Up and Go - Matthew 2:13-18

When Joseph was instructed to “get up and go” and to take Mary and Jesus away from Herod is very significant. Several questions emerge from Matthew’s use of Jeremiah 21:15 in relation to Herod’s slaughter of infants of Bethlehem, Some of these concentrates upon Matthew’s use of the Old Testament Scriptures. Other questions and concerns arise from God’s sovereignty and human suffering. How do we explain the suffering the occurred in connection with Jesus’ birth and the escape to Egypt.

Was this necessary? Why did God allow it when it could have been prevented?

Matthew Gospel connects Herod’s orders to slaughter infants in Matt 2:16-18 to Jeremiah’s words in Jer 31:15. These were innocent infants, so why did Matthew link this atrocity to God’s purpose allowing it to occur.

If Joseph, Mary and Jesus had not got up and left, things would have been very different. This scripture describes Joseph actively avoiding ‘innocent suffering’. Why therefore does God include ‘innocent suffering’ within his sovereign will?

Questions & Reflections

1. What strikes you from this passage?
2. The angel appears twice more to Joseph in dreams. What part does Joseph play in this Christmas story?
3. Does this account of a persecuted immigrant family fleeing danger to a foreign land influence your attitude to our present immigration problems?
4. What place does fulfilment of prophecy play in this story?
5. What do you think about Matthew’s link to Jeremiah’s prophecy?
6. Was Joseph instantly obedient or did he take time to consider and make excuses?
7. What event allowed Joseph to depart from Egypt with his family?
8. Why was the “escape to Egypt” significant in the life of Christ?
9. How did Mary & Joseph avoid the Herod Regime?
10. How might our lives be different if Herod’s death plot against Christ had succeeded?

Points to Ponder

- What is your movement and go-ing as you obey God from His word?
- Is there a reason for loss alongside the beginning of new life?
- What does this mean for you at the close of 2021...?