

FROM HEAVEN YOU CAME



Bible readings for
Advent and Christmas

2017

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25 Nov Luke 1:5-10 Zechariah the priest

5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. 8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Sorrow comes in many forms, but one of the most the painful is surely the disappointment of being childless. This was the everyday reality for Zechariah and Elizabeth, despite their love for God. Zechariah was attending to his priestly duties on what seemed like an ordinary day, but it was not. God's great plan of salvation was about to get underway, and they would have a part to play. Furthermore, their prayers were to be answered in a most amazing way. We should never give up hope when we have such a mighty and compassionate God. He knows our needs, and he cares, even when we think he has forgotten us!

26 Nov Luke 1:11-17 John's birth foretold

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Zechariah was both startled and afraid when the angel appeared to him, but the news was good—God had heard their prayers and in their old age they would have a son. The child would have a special part to play in preparing the way for the Saviour to be born, and they would have the responsibility to bring him up in such a way that he would be ready for his mission. Even in old age God has things for us to do, and we should always be ready to be used by God.

27 Nov Luke 1:18-22 Zechariah's unbelief

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ 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 appointed time." ²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Not surprisingly Zechariah is stunned by the angel's announcement, and his response is one of unbelief. To him it seems impossible, but to the angel Gabriel it is certain and will come to pass. We should look at things from heaven's perspective, not our own, otherwise we too can become captive to unbelief. Zechariah is made dumb so he cannot pass on his unbelief to others at such a crucial moment. His enforced silence will give him time to ponder and to bring his thinking in line with God's. Sometimes silence is better than words! For those waiting outside the temple his inability to speak will be a sign to them that something unusual has happened.

28 Nov Luke 1:23-25 Elizabeth's joy

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people."

We now meet Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, who all these years has suffered the shame and disgrace that went along with being childless in her culture. She must have been totally amazed to realise that she was pregnant, but she does not have the same doubts as her husband—her body cannot lie! Her response is one of joy and amazement that God should have been so kind and gracious to her. All that has happened she attributes to God. Her note of thankfulness is one we can cultivate in our own lives too. We have so much to be grateful for, so many evidence of God's love. Let's be careful to give God the glory he deserves, be quick to praise him, and ready to tell others of his goodness

29 Nov Luke 1:26-33 The angel and Mary

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² 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, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

We now see another strand in what God is doing when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, a young girl in Nazareth. She is the one who will give birth to God's son, a unique and very special privilege. We do not know why Mary was chosen for such a high calling. Perhaps it was because she was especially devoted to God and full of faith. What we do know is that God chooses to work through people, in particular those whose lives are given over to him. Mary was young, but that was not a barrier. She was ready and willing to be part of God's salvation plan. Hopefully, we are too.

30 Nov Luke 1:34-38 Mary's submission

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Mary wonders how it is that this conception can come about since she is not yet married, but that is not the same as unbelief. The miracle will happen by the power of the Holy Spirit. As an encouragement to her, her cousin Elizabeth will also be with child despite her advanced age. Mary's submission to God and willingness to play the part God has assigned to her is an example to us all. She does so with the confidence that God's word will never fail. Ask God to make you willing to be wholly available to him. It is not our ability that matters, as much as our availability. If we offer ourselves to God he will use us for his glory. You can be sure of that.

1 Dec Luke 1:29-45 Mary visits Elizabeth

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Mary's instinctive response to her new situation is to go and seek comfort and counsel from her cousin Elizabeth, to hear what has happened to her, and to share what God is doing in her life as well. This kind of honest and open sharing is so helpful to spiritual growth. It perhaps comes more easily to women than it does to men, but we can all benefit from the kind of friendship we see at work here. For Mary there is a real confirmation that her pregnancy is indeed of God, and she is also commended for her faith. How important it is to encourage one another. Be the kind of person who is always encouraging others, and you will find you are encouraged too.

2 Dec Luke 1:46-49 Mary glorifies God (1)

⁴⁶ And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

This spontaneous burst of praise is known as The Magnificat (because the first word in Latin is 'Magnificat'), and it is Mary's attempt to put into words all that she feels at this moment. She is full of praise to God that she of all people, given her humble background, should have been chosen for such a special purpose. This song of praise comes from deep within her and is focussed on the greatness and goodness of God. It is a helpful discipline to pause and consider how God has worked in our own lives, and to see that as a springboard for our own song of praise. Let's never take for granted the way God works in our lives. Let's make sure there is always a song of praise on our lips, whatever our circumstances.

3 Dec Luke 1:50-56 Mary glorifies God (2)

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." ⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Mary's song now gives attention to the way God has worked in the history of his people, especially in the Old Testament. He has always been on the side of the poor, the humble, the needy; he has always been faithful to his promises to Abraham as well. Mary has the sense of being caught up in a plan and purpose that goes back to the very beginning of time, and she is right, for God's plan of salvation was first revealed in the Garden of Eden when sin first entered the world. Her little story is part of God's bigger story. This is a sense of perspective we can all share as we reflect on our salvation. And God remains the same too—merciful, faithful and caring.

4 Dec Luke 1:57-60 He is to be called John

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. ⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”

As Mary returns to Nazareth the focus of the story now moves back to Zechariah and Elizabeth. The birth of the child brings great joy to this elderly couple and their friends as well. The assumption is that he will be named after his father, but Elizabeth, keen to be obedient to the instructions of the angel, is adamant his name shall be John (1:13). How easy it is to allow peer pressure or popular opinion to push us off course when it comes to obeying God. Like Elizabeth we need the strength of conviction to be able to say ‘No’ sometimes. If not we can find ourselves compromising on important principles. We do not say ‘No’ to be awkward, but in order to say ‘Yes’ to God. Don’t be afraid to swim against the tide. The majority are not always right.

5 Dec Luke 1:61-66 His name is John

⁶¹ They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.” ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

Zechariah has been unable to speak since the day the angel appeared to him, but the time has not been wasted. His enforced silence has given his space to align his thinking with God’s and to grow in faith concerning God’s plan for them. Now we see how in harmony they are with God, and with each other, in that Zechariah also confirms the boy is to be called John. At that moment his tongue is freed and he immediately begins to praise God. A torrent of praise pours forth as his spirit is released and his faith demonstrated. Obedience always brings joy and freedom, which is why it is so important. If you want your life to be blessed by God be obedient and let praise be a way of life for you.

6 Dec Luke 1:67-75 Zechariah’s praise

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—

⁷² to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Zechariah’s liberty of spirit is expressed in this psalm of praise that recognises the great truth that God has come to save his people. This is a promise that goes right back to Abraham and shows how faithful God is to the covenant he made with his people Israel. These words are way beyond the realm of Zechariah’s own understanding. These insights have been given him by the Holy Spirit and they remind us what God is always about—redemption, salvation and rescue. We are those who inherit all these great promises. We have just as much reason to praise God enthusiastically when we realise what God has done for us.

7 Dec Luke 1:76-79 Zechariah's prophecy

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Zechariah is now inspired by the Holy Spirit to look to the future and to foretell what ministry his new born son will have. He will grow up to be the one who prepares the way for the promised Saviour. His job will be to get people ready by making them aware of their need for forgiveness and then pointing them in the direction of the One who alone can meet that need. A new day is dawning, and when the Saviour comes people will no longer be in darkness. All of us share in John's calling since we too are to point the way to Jesus; by our lives and our witness we are to prepare the way for the people we know to find the Saviour.

8 Dec Luke 1:80 John's preparation

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

This single verse spans a period of thirty years during which time John would have grown as a child, become a teenager, and then a man. All the time his growth and development were watched over by Zechariah and Elizabeth in accordance with the instructions given them by the angel (1:14-15), but also by the Holy Spirit who was also at work in the young boy. The result was that he became 'strong in spirit', that is spiritually mature and robust. As he grew older he spent time in the desert, allowing the solitude and harshness of the environment to refine him even more so that he was ready for the challenges that would lie ahead of him. Much of his life was hidden, but the day would come when he would step onto the stage and prepare the way of the Lord. Remember that God is always preparing his people and training us for whatever work he has for us to do. The more willing we are to be trained and disciplined by God, the greater will be his ability to use us.

9 Dec Matthew 1:18-21 Joseph's dilemma

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

It is not clear at what point Mary told Joseph the news of her pregnancy, but when she did it came as a bombshell. What should he do, knowing the child was not his? Could her story be true? He was however a righteous man, and he sought God for direction rather than acting impulsively. God spoke to him through a dream, confirming that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and this gave him the courage to stand by her, and take her as his wife. It was a brave decision, but he now knew that the child would be the One to save people from their sins. It is easy when we have hard decisions to make to be impetuous or hasty, but the best decisions are made slowly and with prayer. When you are making important choice ask God to guide you clearly, and to give you the courage to do what is right.

10 Dec Matthew 1:22-25 Jesus is born

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The plan of salvation that we are seeing unfold is intimately connected to the Old Testament, and events are happening in fulfilment of prophecies made long ago, such as that by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). Joseph is to be commended for his swift obedience in taking Mary to be his wife, and then when the child is born, to giving him the name Jesus. What a precious name that is! It means ‘Saviour’ for his work will be to provide salvation for the whole world from the curse of sin. God was sending his Son into the world that we might be saved. That is the good news this Christmas time. Don’t let it be forgotten in the midst of the hurly-burly.

11 Dec Luke 2:1-7 Bethlehem

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke provides us with more information about the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Political decisions dictated that the young couple should travel to Bethlehem, and there the child was born in the most humble of circumstances. This is perhaps the most familiar picture we have of the Christmas event—but remember what was happening. This was no ordinary child. In Jesus God became a human being and dwelt among us, perhaps the greatest miracle (and mystery) of all. As you visualise the scene again, let worship arise in your heart: *‘From heaven you came, helpless Babe, entered our world your glory veiled.’* Emmanuel, God with us! The Servant King, worthy of all our adoration and love.

12 Dec Luke 2:8-12 The Shepherds arrive

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The first visitors are not VIPs but humble shepherds who have been summoned by an angelic visitor. To these poor working class people this magnificent news is given: a Saviour has been born, the promised Messiah. This is good news indeed, and rightly understood, the source of great joy. I wonder if you can feel that gladness right now in your heart? For those who have eyes to see, there hidden in the manger beneath the blankets, is the Son of God, the one sent by the Father to be the Saviour of the world. Not all were aware of what took place that night in Bethlehem. Only those with faith can recognise the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah.

13 Dec

Luke 2:13-15

Angel hosts

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

The darkness of the Judean hillside is lit up by the appearance of a great angelic choir, messengers sent to herald the birth of the Saviour. Their song breaks the stillness of the night, first in praise of God for his act of mercy in sending the Son, and then in proclamation of the peace the Child will bring to earth. Once their job is done they return to heaven again for they do not want to be a distraction to the shepherds who now decide together to do the unthinkable – leave their flocks and head off into town to see the new born King. Such is the drawing power of the Saviour. Perhaps you have known that attraction too, the pull of a Saviour’s love calling you to worship him? Sometimes there are things we too must leave behind if we are to follow his call, but whatever sacrifice is needed, it will be worth it just to find him for ourselves.

14 Dec

Luke 2:16-20

Mary ponders

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

For the shepherds the experience they had that night was something that had to be shared, and with haste. They became the first evangelists, heralding the good news, and they couldn’t wait to tell their families and friends about all they had seen and heard. That was their response, and it should be ours too. For Mary there follows a time of reflection. She gathers up in her mind all her impressions, and all that the shepherds had shared about the angelic visit, like treasure not to be lost. Then she quietly ponders in her heart the meaning and significant of all that had happened so she would not forget. Exuberant witness and quiet contemplation are not opposites. They are in fact good companions in the spiritual life.

15 Dec

Luke 2:21-24

Jesus consecrated

²¹ On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived. ²² When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

As young parents Mary and Joseph are keen to do for the child everything the religious law required of them. This reflects their own devotion, but also the fact that it was necessary for the Saviour to be obedient to the law. To ‘consecrate’ is to set apart for a holy purpose, and by bringing the baby to the Temple in this way they were handing him over to God for the special purpose that was his destiny. As he grew up as a child Jesus would later make this consecration his own as he accepted the calling on his life. For now, Mary and Joseph show by their actions that they are willing to bring the child up in the ways of God. There can be no better start in life than to have parents who desire God’s best for their children. There can be no better response to God’s grace in our own lives that to consecrate ourselves to his service.

16 Dec Luke 2:25-26 Simeon

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

We are introduced now to two elderly people who will be witnesses to Mary and Joseph about the destiny of the child. The first is Simeon, a godly man whose whole life had been given to serving God and whose great desire it to see Israel once again blessed by God. A beautiful thing is said of him: 'the Holy Spirit was on him'. Remember this is before the day of Pentecost, and the gift of the Spirit. This was an unusual description, and it shows the closeness of his walk with God. It also shows that the Holy Spirit is not interested only in young people! Every one of us, no matter what our age, can live in the fullness of God's blessing through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Don't be afraid to long for revival, or to ask that the Spirit will rest upon you!

17 Dec Luke 2:27-32 Simeon prays

²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit Simeon enters the Temple, as he had done many times before, but this time it is different. By 'coincidence' he arrives there at the same time as Mary and Joseph and the child. It is a divine encounter, the moment he had waited for all his life. Spontaneously he prays over the child, recognising him to be the promised Messiah through whom salvation will come to Jew and Gentile alike. It is a moment when he realises his life's work is done—he is ready now to die in peace. What an encouragement his prayers would have been to the young couple. Ask God to make you sensitive to such divine encounters as you go about your daily life, and when you recognise a God-given opportunity, take it with both hands!

18 Dec Luke 2:33-35 Simeon prophesies

³³ The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Simeon moves seamlessly from prayer to prophecy as he foretells that the child's destiny includes suffering. No parent wants to see their child suffer, and at this stage Mary and Joseph probably did not understand the meaning of Simeon's words. Much later, as Mary watched her son on the cross, these words would prove to have come true, and she would feel her heart pierced as she watched him die. We cannot separate the manger from the cross, or his birth from his death. Jesus was the man born to die. It meant suffering for him, but salvation for the world, and he accepted his destiny willingly. How grateful we should be that he was willing to pay the price that we might be saved.

19 Dec Luke 2:36-38 Anna's testimony

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

The second witness to the destiny and identity of the child is the prophetess, Anna. Tragedy had been in her life as she had lost her husband after only a short time of marriage, yet she bore no grudge towards God. Rather, her devotion intensified and as she grew older spent more and more time in the Temple. She loved nothing better than to worship, and to express her longings for Israel through fasting and prayer. She too has a divine encounter with the young family, and recognised the child to be the longed for Messiah. Naturally she tells her friends what she has experienced. What an example this elderly lady is of whole-hearted devotion to God. The fire of love for God burned very strongly in her heart. May her witness 'kindle a flame of sacred love' in our hearts also!

20 Dec Matthew 2:1-2 Wise Men seeking Jesus

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

The story moves on, perhaps by as much as two years. Although they are still in Bethlehem, we learn that the young family are now in a house (2:11). The Magi, usually referred to as the Wise Men, are stargazers and in a remarkable way God has spoken to them through their astrology. They have seen a special star in the night sky and according to their understanding it speaks about the birth of a King. Desiring to worship this special child, they travel from the East (probably Persia) and arrive in Jerusalem, the obvious place to look. Two things stand out here: (1) God has many ways of speaking to people, some of them quite surprising, and (2) those who sincerely seek the truth will find it. The coming of the first Gentiles reminds us that all are welcome in the kingdom of God. That is why there is place for you and !!

21 Dec Matthew 2:3-8 Directed to Bethlehem

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Herod was a very insecure ruler, so news of the birth of 'another' king disturbed him greatly. Interestingly, the religious leaders knew the prophecy concerning the Messiah's birth (Micah5:2) identified his birthplace as Bethlehem, but they make no effort to see for themselves if the rumours are true or not. Herod, with typical cunning, asks that the Magi return to tell him where the child can be found, apparently that he too may worship but actually that he may get rid of this threat to his throne. We can see here that Simeon's words are already coming to pass, and also the spiritual blindness that prevents some from recognising the Messiah's birth. As John says, 'He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:11).' The Magi for their part continue to follow the light, the only response of true worshippers.

22 Dec Matthew 2:9-12 They worship Jesus

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Here again is another familiar Christmas scene, the Magi worshipping Jesus. These foreign nobles gladly bow the knee to him and willingly open their treasures before him. This is a wonderful picture of true worship—the offering of all that we are, and all that we have, to King Jesus. If we have understood anything at all from the Birth Stories it must surely be this: that the coming of the Saviour, born in such a humble way and identifying himself with us so fully, demands from us a similar response of adoration and self-giving love. Let's bow our knees too in humble adoration

23 Dec Matthew 2:13-15 Escape to Egypt

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” ¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

The Magi have returned to their own country by another way, but the threat from Herod remains. God, however, is aware of the danger and through an angel warns Joseph that it is time to leave Bethlehem and seek refuge in Egypt. So it is that the holy family become refugees and like so many people in this world are forced to leave their native land and seek asylum elsewhere; so it is that they become exiles in a foreign land—again like so many migrant people today. It is reassuring to know that God's own Son did not have an easy start in life and knew what it was like to be homeless, persecuted and living in a foreign land. We remind ourselves that there is no experience of ours that he cannot sympathise with. He has lived our life, and walked in our shoes. Whatever we may be going through, the Son of man understands.

24 Dec Matthew 2:16-18 Weeping and mourning

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸ “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

Herod was a brutal tyrant, well-known for his ruthless cruelty, but in the slaying of these young boys even his cruelty reaches new depths. We must not blame God for the evil that human beings do. God cannot take away our free-will or we would become robots. Even God weeps at the atrocities people suffer in this fallen world, but we know that evil will not ultimately triumph. Rachel was Isaac's wife and she died in childbirth near to Bethlehem (Genesis 35:16-20). The prophet Jeremiah uses her suffering as a reminder of the suffering of all people, at all times, especially mothers of children (Jeremiah 31:15). In her tears we are reminded that God suffers too, and is with us in our own times of grief and loss, however tragic the

circumstances. We shed our tears but we are never alone in our pain. There is a God who understands

25 Dec

Matthew 2:19-23

Home to Galilee

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The journey undertaken by Mary & Joseph now comes full circle when they return to their homeland and settle again in Nazareth. Once more Joseph finds God’s guidance in his dreams and responds in willing obedience to what he discerns as God’s will. Nazareth will be their home from now on and Jesus will grow and develop just like any other child, subject to all the normal stages of human development. See Luke 2:39-40. We will hear no more of him until the visit to Jerusalem for Passover when he is twelve years old (Luke 2:11-12). His childhood will be spent in obscurity and he will need to wait nearly thirty years before his ministry proper will begin. No-one can say that God is in a rush, can they? Perhaps this is a reminder to us in our instant, ready-made society where everything has to happen NOW. The work of God is often a long, slow work and requires patience. God was not in a hurry with his Son, so don’t expect him to be rushing for you!

