

## Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year C

**Sunday 22 December 2024**

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank the Very Reverend Sally Foster-Fulton, on behalf of Christian Aid Scotland, for her thoughts on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website: <https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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## Introduction

Everyone approaches this creative time differently, so lean into what works for you. When I write, I move myself to a different space if I can – a café, another room in the house, somewhere away from my usual go-to distractions. I find reading the texts through several times gives me a sense of direction. After a few reads, I start noting what strikes me, what questions I find myself asking, what themes stretch across the lectionary package. If there is a word or phrase I'm not clear on, I research it – sometimes there's gold dust in that wee niggle. I find it helpful to read different versions of the text. Unless we go to the original text in Hebrew or Greek (which can offer a depth, even if you use an interlinear), we are reading a translation; so, getting more than one take on the words helps open them to you. It is important to read the texts with current events and challenges alongside them. Make what you say and share relevant to what people are experiencing in their every day, and help them make the connections to the bigger picture. So close to Christmas, it is tempting to rush to the birth, but if you can, hold the waiting space. Even if you have to use those birth narratives, keep Advent alive – there is something sacred in expectant waiting.

### [Micah 5:2-5a](#)

'Bethlehem of Ephrathah' (v2) literally means 'fruitful house of bread'. That translation gives a particular resonance with a ruler who will 'feed his flock.' This feeding will be rich and plentiful and generous – the benefit will be felt to 'the ends of the earth'. There is also an important link between Bethlehem and the 'King' imagery. It is a backwater, but not without kudos. This is the birthplace of King David, so the imagery is strong. We can make the connection between David, the Shepherd King, and the One who is to come. From this unexpected corner came a great King and it is from the unlikely that peace will come. This peace will extend to the ends of the earth. It is important to note that many would not read this text as referring to Jesus. It holds its own as a text meant to comfort those in exile, those who have been oppressed and overlooked. Whether we read this eschatologically or see it in its original context, the message is powerful. An upending of the status quo is coming from somewhere unexpected.

Another important nuance to unpack is the phrase, "whose origin is from old." In the original text, the word is 'olam', a nebulous word that can mean ancient days, but is also used in Ecclesiastes (3:11), claiming that God puts 'olam' into human minds (or souls), that we are embedded in a long history and story, that we move in this space we call now and, all the while, we are reaching out towards the future. This nebulous, but provocative word suggests that our souls will recognise this ruler. Linking this awareness, this olam, to the story in Luke when the infant in Elizabeth's womb leaps with recognition, offers the

preacher fertile ground to consider our response to the love of God and the leadership of Jesus.

## [Luke 1:46b-55](#)

What do our souls magnify?

Like our text in Micah, there is a strong hint that important messages and the upending of the status quo are coming from the unexpected and unlikely. The story focuses on two vulnerable women. One an old woman, barren through her most fertile years, who finds herself pregnant. Will she live to see the fruit of her womb grow to maturity? The other is no more than a child herself, and now she will have one of her own. Unmarried, her position is precarious. Both these women know what it feels like to be sidelined, isolated, overlooked. And, in the face of this, what do they do? Firstly, Elizabeth praises Mary for her 'yes.' All will call her blessed because she, in spite of how vulnerable her 'yes' made her, was willing to be daring for God. It raises the question: how might we respond when the reality of God's new vision turns up unexpectedly on our doorstep – what leaps inside us? Joy, expectation, suspicion, fear?

And Mary? Mary is a prophet. She carries the Word of God in her body. Like other prophets before her, she expresses surprise and feels unprepared, but she says 'yes' and then she does something even more unexpected – Mary sings! And not only does she sing, but her song is one of resistance, defiance, a song saying that a reversal of fortunes for the poorest and most vulnerable is coming. She is audacious in her declaration. Let's not underestimate what she is saying:

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (vv51-53).

From the perspective of the powerful, (if they took her seriously) she needs to be silenced. Those who have arrived, do not want to be moved. The powerful like their seat at the table and are not going to give it up without a fight. Measure the state of the world (highlight what is happening in the news and in your communities) against Mary's claim. Does it give you hope, or does it make you nervous? Where would you place yourself in the world order she articulates?

I have included links to the Christian Aid Christmas materials, as they include lived experience from our partners and communities in South Sudan. They speak truths we need

to hear. They live with challenges not of their creation, and their truth calls us to upend structures, systems and behaviours that divide us.

### [Psalm 80:1-7](#)

Firstly, it should be pointed out that this is a corporate lament. The community of faith is crying out together for a restoration of relationship. This is a tumultuous time in the history of early Israel, with the Assyrians attacking the North and its fall to them. It is not an individual cry, but an articulation of the distress of an entire people. As you unpack this text, the anguish of communities in The Middle East, the desolation in places where climate chaos is rampant, the loss felt by communities of refugees who are pushed to the margins of every society in which they seek welcome, and those in our local communities who are marginalised through poverty or prejudice should resonate. “Stir up your might, and come to save us” (v2) is as gut-wrenching today as it would have been when the words were first written. The imagery gives the preacher ample food for thought: as in Micah, we follow a strand of shepherding and feeding; however, this time the people are crying out to a God they think has turned away from them. How do we respond to those cries today? Are we the neighbours who scorn, or the enemies who laugh among themselves? What other bread can we offer in the name of the God of love and justice? We can turn our faces back towards those who are suffering. Perhaps it isn't God who leaves people. Perhaps God's face shines and can be found when we step up, when we corporately repent of the selfishness that excludes some groups, when we look after one another as we have been called to do.

### [Hebrews 10:5-10](#)

At first, I scratched my head and wondered why this text was here, three days before Christmas! What are we supposed to do with this rather dense but nebulous passage? But there is much to grapple with here, and the words are a gift to preachers at Christmas. “I have come to do your will”, Jesus says. That is what His purpose was and is – to do the will of God, and to show us how to live as gifts to the Divine and each other. This is what God's will looks like when it is walking around: “Look to me and learn,” He says; feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, welcome the stranger, forgive seven times seventy. There are powerful systems in place that keep people poor, oppressed, fear-filled – help me do God's will and dismantle them. Hebrews challenges the status quo and conventions of the time – sacrifices and offerings were not what God required, but love and justice, mercy and equity. “I have come to do your will”, this text has Jesus say. We can work with that this Christmas. One word of caution – treat verse 9 with care and sensitivity. It can be misread as a

dismissal of Judaism; however, a more considered approach is to question when we bring tokens to the table rather than ourselves, when we choose carefully what we offer to God – and what we don't.

## Sermon ideas

- There is a natural focus in the texts on the reversal of power structures. Mary's song in Luke is dangerous. This was a time of Roman occupation, when the powers-that-be were always nervous. Those who had arrived did not want to be moved from their comfortable places. Anyone in a position of power or influence in Israel had to collude with Rome and compromise the values of their faith communities. The words put on Mary's lips are words of rebellion and resistance. They are promises of a God who will turn the tables in favour of the poorest and most vulnerable. Exploring that dynamic in light of today's challenges (climate change, displacement of people, war in Ukraine and Russia, in the Middle East, political decisions in response to the cost of living crisis). Study the news, share what is happening today and apply it to this clarion call for the most marginalised. The Micah text fits well with Luke, and they can be used to highlight the power housed in unexpected places. The Bethlehem backwater will offer a King who will bring peace to the ends of the earth. An unmarried pregnant girl knows that her soul magnifies the Lord. What does that mean for us?
- Return to the Call to worship/Opening reflection and go deeper into that image of the child leaping for joy at Mary's greeting. Find stories that offer relevant examples of the difference love, listening, sharing make. You could talk about these actions as gifts we can offer each other this Christmas (it's a wee bit hokey, but you can work with it ...!). Another approach would be to explore the question 'what do our souls magnify and what does it matter?' Again, this offers rich food for thought.
- The passages from Psalm 80 and Hebrews together help us consider what our purpose is as Christians. How will we respond to the collective lament of a community who feel abandoned and forgotten? This is an opportunity to speak prophetically into the fractured world we live in and bring a word of healing. I invite you to be bold in this space, and name the issues your listeners are grappling with. (Follow the links below for further information on Climate/displacement, etc.)
- How do we respond when we hear the words put in Jesus' mouth, "I have come to do your will"? It should resonate as we wait for His arrival.

Here are some links to the Christian Aid website resources. They may help you ground your thoughts in the lived experience of our global neighbours:

[Unfolding crisis on the border with Sudan | Christian Aid](#)

[Prayers for Ukraine | Christian Aid](#)

[Middle East Crisis Prayer Vigil resources](#)

[Faith resources | Christian Aid](#)

Christmas materials will soon be available on <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/>

## Prayers

### Call to worship / Opening reflection

Elizabeth said to Mary: “For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting ... what a provocative phrase!  
It is a visceral, instinctive, unplanned response. What would come unbidden from us?  
What difference would we make to the world if this came – visceral, instinctive, unplanned?

For as soon as I heard the sound of your laughter, I rejoiced in your joy. I brought my gifts to your party and shared in your feast.

For as soon as I heard the sound of your weeping, I sat down beside you. Even though I didn't know what to say, even when there was nothing I could do except be there, despite the fact you may need something from me that would cost, I stayed with you.

For as soon as I heard the sound of your anger, I listened.  
I didn't (immediately) get defensive and fight my corner, but sought common ground.  
I didn't hide or hedge or excuse, and I didn't ply you with platitudes either.  
I listened.

For as soon as I heard the sound of your questions, my curiosity was stirred. I joined in your searching, wrestled with the new ideas and possibilities and challenges your queries posed. I saw your perspective because I took time to see you.

What difference would we make to the world?

Let us worship God.

### **Prayer of approach and confession**

What do our souls magnify, O God, our light?

In this time of expectant waiting, may it be love.

Where hate and fear divide, show us how to embrace and cherish each other.

Where injustice sows the seeds of that hate and fear,

show us how to cede the centre of our own desires

and share Your carefully crafted creation equitably.

What do our lives magnify, O God, our light?

In this time of expectant waiting, may it be love.

Open the eyes and ears of our hearts to the joy that only comes in sharing.

Give us hands that hold others;

give us feet that walk with and beside, not over and away from;

may our lips sing a love song to the world.

When we get tired of waiting,

when we expect the worst in each other,

when we dim our lights so there's more for us, love us back to life.

Shine Your light on our path so we can find You and each other.

Magnify Your vision in our lives.

Amen.

### **Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession**

Mighty Mystery,

You have done great things for us.

Created us in our mother's wombs and breathed life into our frames,

held our hands when we learned to walk and then let us go, to explore Your big, wide, beautiful world.

You gave us friends, families, folk to love and walk with us;

You lifted us when we were low, filled our lives with so many good things.

Holy is Your name.

Sacred is the life You bless us with.

Thank You seems such an inadequate sentiment; yet, it is what we have.

May our thanks be real and lived out in the life we share with others.

May our thanks be uncontainable, poured out with abandon on the world You have loved into being.

Mighty Mystery, great things need to be done.

Our world is riven with violence.



The dividing lines drawn, not in the sand, but etched in a turbulent history that sweeps into today and shouts over any whispers of peace.

Our world is drowning in inequity;

established systems are structured to keep some people poor while a few flourish.

Our world is crumbling around us.

Climate change fuelled by greed, a stubborn denial of its power or a crippling apathy that says it's too late, continues to cause chaos.

Those who had least to do with it suffer the most,

but it will reach us all if we do not act now.

May we show strength in the face of such disastrous challenges,

scatter our pride and place Your vision in the imagination of their hearts.

Fill us with the good things only You can give: peace, love, forgiveness –

the sacred art of repentance, that turning round and walking in a new direction.

Your direction.

We pray now for ... [*name the concerns in the world and your local community*] ...

### **Closing words/Benediction**

Soon, but not yet ...

Always, and yet to be ...

Now, and then ...

Birth, life, another day.

Go in peace to wait, to watch, to wonder.

Go in peace to think, to do, to dream.

Go in peace to welcome the Christ child and walk with him into the world.

### **Musical suggestions**

*God Welcomes All* (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music version is now available; and the words-only book, digital resources including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

- GWA 90 – “We are a people of hope”
- GWA 91 – “Centuries of waiting before a Christmas Day” – an intergenerational song for Advent
- GWA 93 – “Take heart, dear sisters, fear not, dear brothers”
- GWA 94 – “My soul sings in gratitude” – a spoken paraphrase of the Magnificat
- GWA 97 – “The daylight dims as the sun sinks low”
- GWA 153 – “God, the maker of the heavens” – new words to a familiar tune
- GWA 226 – “God of all comfort, God of compassion”

I have unashamedly raided the best of the Advent hymns from CH4, as this is an opportunity to embrace pregnant expectation.

- CH4 51 – “God of hosts, you chose a vine” – this is an interesting choice, based on Psalm 80. It resonates with the feeding and growing imagery that weaves its way through the lectionary passages. There is also a beautiful contextualisation for Jesus’ birth.
- CH4 273 – “O Come, O come, Emmanuel”
- CH4 275 – “Come now, O Prince of peace”
- CH4 285 – “The angel Gabriel from heaven came”
- CH4 286 – “Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord”
- CH4 287 – “No wind at the window”
- CH4 290 – “The race that long in darkness pined”
- CH4 291 – “When out of poverty was born”

- CH4 359 – “He came down that we may have love” – if you are using Hebrews as one of your focus readings, this hymn echoes the words attributed to Jesus: “I have come to do your will.”
- A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4 throughout Advent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?

Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different “Spiritual Styles”?

- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?  
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?  
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?  
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

*God Welcomes All* can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and  
download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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