

The Vine at Home
Fourth Sunday of Advent Time – Year C
19th December 2021

Opening Prayers

God of the manger, God of the shepherds, God of the angels – I come to you in worship you this day. I come before you, seeking the peace of an Advent God.

Today, I come to worship a God who came to a young woman in Nazareth, in unknowable ways, and who made the impossible possible and who made the uncomprehendable happen, a God who became a tiny baby boy, who contracted infinite power and strength into a fragile, feeble and dependent human life. I worship a Christmas God.

The Christmas God who came, you are also the God who comes - today, now, into my life, and the lives of those around me.

Like John the Baptist, I am looking for ways to prepare the way for you to come. I seek to know you more, and to do your will in the world.

I have failed, I have fallen short, but I know the peace, the acceptance, the forgiveness, the warmth of the Advent God.

This day, I look to your coming Lord,

Amen.¹

You may now wish to say The Lord's Prayer in a version most familiar or comfortable to you.

Hymn: 706 STF – Longing for light, we wait in darkness -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv-geQA5n4>

Readings: Luke 1:39-45 - Mary Visits Elizabeth

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40** where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42** and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. **43** And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? **44** For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Reflections on the reading

Christmas is coming – the birth of the revolution. The revolution that still goes on in every time and place, 2,000 years after the strange stories of a man from the Middle East. The revolution that was not about violent overthrows or changing governments, but the revolution of love preached and enacted by Jesus Christ of Nazareth. In these next few days, we celebrate that birth, and we keep the revolution alive.

¹ Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

So, this morning, we have three thoughts to share with you about this love-revolution, this radical message called Christmas...

Number one - The Unexpected Revolution.

At the beginning of JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which was quite recently turned into a series of blockbuster films, a whole host of dwarves arrive at Bilbo Baggins' house and simply invite themselves in, and begin partying. Our host (the eponymous hobbit) is too polite and good-mannered to turn them away and ends up providing food and drink aplenty until they are all settled in and begin making plans for the adventure they are about to set off on. This opening chapter is called 'The Unexpected Party'.

The Jesus Revolution, the party that started on that first Christmas and which has been going on ever since, was not what anybody expected. Look at the figure of John the Baptist – whose mother's story we hear a little bit from in today's readings but who (during Advent) we see described as a wild man, offensive, antagonistic, in direct opposition to both religious and political leaders. He is hardly the choice one might have expected as the herald of the Messiah, as the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus. And yet, this ranting hermit is given a vital, unexpected role in Jesus' revolutionary movement.

Number two - The Spirit-filled Revolution

Luke's gospel reading for today is Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the meeting of the pregnant women, the coming together of the mothers of two of the most significant figures of the New Testament: John the Baptist and Jesus himself. This is the moment when the baby John leaps in Elizabeth's womb – some sort of spiritual recognition of what is going on here perhaps? An early indication of John's role: to warn people that Jesus is coming, even his own mother? And Elizabeth's blessing for Mary is surely a significant moment for the young virgin as she grows into her new role, in the midst of a difficult context to bear a child.

The line you might like to reflect on today is that short sentence in the middle of the passage: 'And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit'. The encounter with Jesus, even the unborn Jesus, just beginning to take shape in Mary's womb, leads Elizabeth into an experience of the Holy Spirit.

So if we want to be a part of the unexpected revolution, we are also invited into the spirit-filled revolution. The movement that looks to go deeper than the surface level, that connects with people at the level of their very souls and builds a connection between the human and the divine. We are a spirit-people.

Number three - The Deconstruction Revolution.

In another story, later in the Gospels, Jesus talks in candid ways about the temple, saying that he will tear it down and rebuild it in three days. His listeners, assuming he is talking about the physical building of the temple in Jerusalem, are aghast and offended saying – it took forty-six years to build this temple, it cannot be rebuilt so soon.

Most commentaries point to the most likely interpretation – that Jesus was referring to his body as a temple which would be resurrected within three days of his death. However, this story seems also to point to a more fundamental truth at the heart of the Jesus movement: sometimes things have to be torn down.

For many religious people in Jerusalem at the time, it seems The Temple (with capital 'T's) had become more important than God. The temple was built as a very important and powerful way for the Israelites to access their God – it helped them to understand worship, to attain to something higher and more permanent than the nomadic gods of other tribes...but now it was getting in the way. Perhaps that is what Jesus was hinting at when he threatened to tear it down, and certainly what he was getting at when he (less subtly) turned over the tables of the money-changers. This revolution is going to involve some deconstruction of the systems and injustices that have been allowed to stand for too long.

This is the challenge we must face up to again today: what are the things we have built that have become obstructions to the revolution?

The early days of the Jesus-movement were radical, counter-cultural, unexpected, spirit-filled, liberated and anti-establishment. Are there places where we have lost some of that impulse? Are there parts of our churches, our church-politics, our institutions that have been introduced with the best of intentions but which now stand as obstacles to spreading the love and peace of Christ?²

[Pause. When you are ready, and if you feel able, say this prayer]

Revolutionary God, I am listening to your call again today, to be a part of your unexpected people, bringing transformation to a broken world.

Christmas God, come again by your Spirit so that, this year, I may know the miracle of *God with us*, Immanuel.

Amen.

Prayers of intercession

God of Advent, I come praying for,
A world desperate for a God-in-a-manager.
A world crying out for a Prince of Peace.
A world floundering around in search of angel music.

As I wait, as I seek to live open to your coming, and live with the hope of a Christmas God...I open my mind and my hands in prayer.

In the quiet, the stillness, of Advent, I offer prayers for the brokenness around me. In a moment of quiet, I hold up to you, holy Lord, those suffering from within my own families, and my friendship groups.

[Silence]

Advent God, let me be present to you.

In a moment of quiet, I hold up to you, holy Lord, those from this communities and the places I am from, those I meet in my daily life, my colleagues, fellow-commuters or shoppers, people on the street and in the Post Office. May I offer them Advent peace this week, and sense your proximity to those who need you.

² Reflection written by Tim Baker

[Silence]

Advent God, let me be present to you.

In a moment of quiet, I think beyond my immediate surroundings, to the pain of a broken globe: to conflict, disease, poverty, natural disaster, exploitation and oppression.

{Silence}

Advent God, let me be present to you.

I look to your coming Lord. I wait, hope and seek to build a better world. Guide me by your advent light. So I pray in the name of the light of the world, Jesus Christ.

Amen.³

Blessing

In the waiting and preparing,
In the final touches and frantic cooking and cleaning,
Amongst the parties and the presents,
Look out for the presence of the Holy One this week.
God is here, this advent.
May I come to know the divine, moving through, in and around you this Christmas season.
Amen.⁴

³ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

⁴ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

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