

The Vine at Home

20th December - Fourth Sunday in Advent – Year B

Call to worship

Advent God, come amongst us. God of hope, shine your light upon us, flickering, like a candle flame, Advent God, we put our hope in you.

Advent God, we put our hope in you. Amen.¹

Hymn: 176 STF – Like a candle flame

Opening Prayers

Most High God, who left your throne to come down to us, to be one of us...

You look us in the eye and understand us.

You have compassion on us and you heal us, and you love us to bits. *[Pause]*

You know our failings...

but your forgiving love will not let us go. *[Pause]*

Come once again to us...

Give us the heart of a humble servant.

Lift up the lowly, scatter the proud empires of this world, and bring down the arrogant structures of power.

Your Son, Jesus, has been conceived. Let it be. Amen.²

Let us now say the Lord's Prayer

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 - God's Covenant with David

7 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, **2** the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." **3** Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: **5** Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? **6** I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. **7** Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders^[a] of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" **8** Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; **9** and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. **10** And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, **11** from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you

¹ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Phil Craine

rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me;^[a] your throne shall be established forever.³

Romans 16:25-27 Final Doxology

25 Now to God^[b] who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages **26** but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— **27** to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom^[c] be the glory forever! Amen.⁴

Luke 1:26-38 - The Birth of Jesus Foretold

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, **27** to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[a] **29** But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. **30** The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. **32** He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. **33** He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." **34** Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^[b] **35** The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[c] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. **36** And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God." **38** Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.⁵

NB – references to the Romans reading in the reflection below rely on a translation that goes for "strengthen" (NRSV, NLT, ESV, CEV) over "establish" (NIV, KJV)

Reflections on the readings

In the early 1980s and 90s, as well as classics like *Casualty* and Noel's house party, prime time TV would bring you the joys of the World's strongest man competition where many of us would be routing for Geoff Capes to bring the title to Britain. The tests were brutal and could give many of us a hernia just watching them, they were real tests of strength for the world's strongest. Nowadays, we can test the strength of nearly everything with scientific experiments putting the stress on any material you choose.

And yet the one thing that we can't test, is the inner strength that we all draw on day by day, and that in itself is one of the most deceptive things. Sometimes the people we see as

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strongest bear some incredible burdens and are near breaking and sometimes those who look as though they should be at breaking point actually show an inner resolve that would put Geoff Capes to shame.

The readings before us speak of someone whose “strength” would reach way beyond his generation, someone who was called to give of her strength and the strength that we receive when the incarnate Christ walks alongside us. Political strength, physical strength and personal strength.

As we look first at the political strength of a king we see a character who at times has not actually been that strong. David has had his moments of real weaknesses but his faithfulness to God has battled through and at this point in the story he is well and truly settled in at home and, after sorting out his own comfort, he then turns his mind to the ark of the covenant. In his plans to build the Lord something as wonderful as his own house he finds that the Lord has other ideas, looking way into the future when any temple that may have been built will get destroyed numerous times. For God has plans for a home that will be both as temporary and as permanent as the tent that has sufficed so far.

It would be easy, in a Christmas sermon of incarnation, to speak of that home within us and the world right here in 2020, and at this time in particular, to focus on the need for that Christ incarnate in the darkness that we currently see. Instead though, today we are going to look at that moment, part way between the promise to David and right now, when the prophesy found fulfilment at the birth of the king that would occupy the throne for all eternity.

In fulfilling Nathan’s prophesy, the Gospel reminds us of the line of Jesus reaching back to the kingdom of David, a reminder of the strength of Christ in our lives. For the people of Israel the messiah was to be their saviour from all the tyranny of the world, with a deep expectation he was to come from the line of David. It is against the powers that the world may throw at us today that the strength of the messiah reigns.

If we are thinking of David’s political strength then we may think big – nations seek to build the biggest and best to prove their power and yet we live in an age where we miniaturise everything, and some tiny things can pack quite a punch. All the power of David’s realm rested on a baby, the smallest of humans in the person of Jesus, and not only did this baby contain the strength that Nathan prophesied, he contains the full power of God. Around a thousand years earlier the prophet Nathan spoke over David a promise that would stretch beyond his imagination and way past us into eternity. And yet that was all held in this one moment, the political strength of a king and the immeasurable strength of God in the hands of a baby.

And for a baby, that strength had to come from somewhere. This child holds the might of a kingdom, the power of a God and yet in that moment he is powerless and needs the strength of another, and so enters a mother who would pour all of her physical strength into the heart of God. As the angel descended (with angels carrying their own images of strength) and lit up Mary’s life another message was given. The message of motherhood.

Every mother has to draw on depths of inner strength both in pregnancy and through the life of the child. At this snapshot in our story, Mary could not have known the amount that she would be called to give and nor the inner strength she would have needed some years later

kneeling at the foot of a cross. In the moment before us, the angel utters words that would illicit joy and anxiety, wonder and fear and motherhood begins.

Even though this child was to be God incarnate, no baby can survive pregnancy without its mother. All that the child needs for life - blood, nutrients and oxygen, the mother pours her strength into the child, giving selflessly for the sake of the one she carries. So this young woman, having not planned for this moment, not yet had those conversations with the one she loves, finds herself giving of herself so that God may live in her and through her. At this moment, God's strength comes from Mary's strength, incarnation possible only through the reserves of a young woman.

We rightly applaud Mary as the mother of the most important child to ever be born, and of course in some corners, she is venerated significantly in her role as the "mother of God". Yet Mary is also just another mother, one woman in a long line of the most extraordinary people who give of themselves to give life. And just like every other mother, she has the right to be proud of who her child would become, and of her role in creating a life that would save so many and change the world. We can sometimes wonder how much of what the angel said actually went in, with such monumental news, did she actually hear the part about him sitting on the throne of David and the Kingdom without end, did she really fathom who he would become? The reality was that the political strength of a kingdom required the physical strength of a young woman.

If we wanted to critique that last point then we could argue that God's strength did not come from Mary's own personal reserves, but from the Holy Spirit as promised by the Angel. Yet the reading from Romans reminds us that this is available for all of us – our third point is that the personal strength that God gives us for each day is there for all to receive and not just a one off outpouring on Mary as she received the presence of God.

Through his incarnate presence, Jesus brings the power of God into our lives. Walking with us, we know his strength in the day to day, and so many can testify to the fact that they would not get by without the Spirit lifting them each and every day. The image of a massive surge of power comes to mind, something that is so often destructive to the things that fall in its path compared with the slow steady release of power through a battery. In Christ we find that power surge, destructive to all that is within us that is damaging to us – sin for example and our former ways of life, and then we also find the slow and constant release of power through the Holy Spirit that gives us the strength to face our new life.

Romans is one of Paul's more pastoral letters (as opposed to his "telling off" letters) but does still challenge the readers, building them up in their faith. Right at the end, he chooses his closing words to offer them the strength through Christ for this life of faith that he calls them to. He has just done the final greetings, which is usually a good place to stop, but then he returns to a warning about divisions and stumbling blocks, before guiding them back to Christ, "the one who is able to strengthen you".

Sometimes we find ourselves more in need of this strength than at other times.

This is going to be a tough Christmas for many, whether it is the challenge of making the best with so little because of furlough and layoffs, whether it is the inability to be with ones we love so dearly, or the ongoing mental health challenges that come with the current situation, this will be tough and we will draw on the personal strength that comes from Christ

so much more. Christ is incarnate in the darkest places, walking with us and taking our hand when we need him most, and still ever present in the times when we don't notice him, just as the baby relies on that constant flow from the mother, so we rely on Christ each and every day for strength.

As we enter the final approach to what will be a tough Christmas, we are reminded that we are celebrating the birth of a King with all the political strength of a nation upon his shoulders. We remember that we could not celebrate this incarnate presence without the physical strength of a young woman poured out into the Christ child she bore. And we remember that by this birth, God incarnate in the world, we are given the personal strength that enables us to live each day. So, may we go in the strength of the Lord. Amen.⁶

Prayers of intercession

Lord of Refuge and Shelter

We pray for those who have found themselves homeless or fleeing from their homes. We pray that you would protect those people and look after them. We pray that we would have compassion towards those who find themselves without a home. *[Pause]*

Lord you are Unfailing and Endless

We pray that you would be with those who find the thought of the future worrying and fearful. We pray that you would comfort them and help them find joy in the day-to-day. We pray for school children and university students who have been impacted by Covid's uncertainties. Help them to find peace in you. *[Pause]*

Holy and Mighty Lord

We pray this Christmas-time, that people would come to know you and the goodness and joy that you bring. We pray that like the shepherds were in awe of Baby Jesus, that we too, would be in awe of your kingdom and your holiness. *[Pause]*

Lord, you are Eternal and Wise

We pray for our government, navigating the troubles of this year with Covid, and any other issues that we are facing. We pray that you would give them discernment and wisdom. We thank you that ultimately you reign, and yours is the kingdom, now and forever. *[Pause]*

Amen.⁷

Hymn: 202 STF – Hark! The herald

Blessing

Enter into this Christmas with a fierce hope in your hearts – this world, this neighbourhood, this church, and each of us, can become a better, more hopeful, more peaceful, more loving place, by the grace of the Christmas God.

Go in peace, and build the kingdom. Amen.⁸

⁶ Reflection written by Phil Jackson

⁷ Prayers of intercession written by Alice Young

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⁸ Additional prayers by Tim Baker