

# **Truro Diocesan Mothers' Union**



## **Readings, Reflections and Prayers for Advent and Christmas**

## Advent 1 The Patriarchs: Genesis 17 v.1-7

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."*

*<sup>3</sup>Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup>I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.*

### Learning: Advent involves learning our place in the story of God's people

The story of Abraham is the beginning of the story of God's people. It is the beginning of the story of the calling of one man, and one woman, to follow God and become God's people. Isaac was born to Sarah and Abraham, and Jacob was born to Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob became the father of twelve sons who in turn became heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. The promise of God to be his people flowed from Abraham and Sarah, through Isaac and Rebecca, down to Jacob and his sons. This promise was not just a promise that God would bless them, it was also a promise that *through* them God would bless the whole world. They therefore bore a special blessing of spiritual significance for all people everywhere. This promise is carried through the story of God's people. It is the overarching story we follow through the Bible. It is part of our story too, as we become part of it through inheriting that promise as God's people through the invitation of Jesus Christ to belong to him. This story is part of the Christmas thread, and it is in understanding the bigger story that we better understand the significance of the nativity and our place within it. We need to learn this story.

But let us backtrack to Jacob. He was named 'Israel' by God. Israel means 'one who struggles.' Jacob did indeed struggle with God. He wanted God's family promise for himself. His older brother Esau would inherit the promise by dint of birthright. Jacob was desperate to receive the blessing for himself. Twice he cheated Esau out of it; once he lied to his father Isaac. He was willing to lie and cheat and scheme to obtain God's promise. He finally fled from Esau who was roused to anger at Jacob's actions. In exile Jacob discovered what it was like to be cheated against. His father-in-law lied to him, and married him to the wrong daughter. Jacob complained that he changed his wages 'ten times'. Jacob finally decided he'd had enough and would take his chances back at home again. On the way home he met an angel of the Lord who fought with him. Jacob was still adamantly pursuing God's blessing and wouldn't let go of the angel until he received it. The angel blessed him, but also put out Jacob's hip in the struggle. From then on Jacob walked with a limp, but also as the inheritor of God's blessing. He was given the name Israel - meaning one who had struggled with God.

Reflection: Jacob's scheming came from a desperation to receive God's blessing. Why do you think God left Jacob with a limp? How do *you* walk with God?

Action: Do you know God's story? It is good to see the 'big picture.' If you've never read the whole Bible, I recommend trying a children's version. It will tell the key stories and give a good understanding of the overarching story from Genesis to Revelation.

Prayer: God of Abraham and Sarah, and all the patriarchs of old, you are our Father too. Your love is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of David. During the coming weeks, as we prepare to celebrate his birth, make our hearts ready to welcome the coming of your son born in a stable in great humility and may we be always ready for his coming again in all his glory.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen

## Advent 2 The Prophets: Isaiah 9

v.2,3,6,7

*The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.*

<sup>3</sup>*You have enlarged the nation  
and increased their joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as people rejoice at the harvest,  
as warriors rejoice  
when dividing the plunder.*

<sup>6</sup>*For to us a child is born,*

*to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
<sup>7</sup>Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.*

*He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.*

### Yearning: the prophets yearned for God's voice to be heard

If the Patriarchs point to the Big Story of the Bible, then the prophets point to God's heartbeat pulsing through those stories. Although the Bible stories are a record of God's people, not all the Bible stories are necessarily commended by God. Some are rather painful accounts of the stories of God's people, included within the Bible as lamentation or warning. When we listen to the voices of the prophets we hear a little clearer God's side of the story. One of those stories concerned King David. Known as a 'man after God's own heart', yet, when David prepared materials to build God's temple, he was told, "*You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood*" (1 Chr 28.3). Here we hear God's pronouncement on David's actions and become aware that, famous warrior though David was, warfare and bloodshed were never intended as God's best for our world.

In the reading today from Isaiah, the people 'walking in darkness' are those who lived in the area of Galilee, populated by a mixture of God's people and those from other nations. The Jews in Judea looked down upon the Jews in Galilee, considering themselves purer and more righteous before God. (Perhaps a little like those who consider themselves 'proper Cornish' and not emmets!) The prophet Isaiah revealed a different story: that on those living in Galilee a great light has dawned - that to *them* a son is born. This would have been a difficult proclamation for the people of Judea to receive. But it revealed God's heartbeat that *all* of his people are equally valued by God. We need to yearn, as the prophets did, to hear God's voice speaking out clearly and audibly in our world today, that all people, everywhere, will know that they are equally loved and valued by God.

Reflection: Whose are the prophetic voices today? How is God speaking into our world?

Action: Have you ever heard God speaking to you? It is good to 'hear' his voice. He speaks in many different ways. Ask God to speak to you and practise listening - it takes time to 'tune in.' But he will respond, though we may need to learn to hear.

Prayer: God our Father, you spoke to the prophets of old of a Saviour who would bring peace. You helped them to spread the joyful message of his coming kingdom. Their words have brought hope to countless generations and still have the power to challenge and inspire us today. During this Advent season, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth may we spend time in your presence, meditating on your word. Teach us to make space to listen to your voice, to understand and respond so that we, through our words and actions, are confidently ready to share with those around us the good news of your unending love for each one of us. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen

## Advent 3: John the Baptist Mark 1 v.1-8

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, <sup>2</sup> as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way"—*

<sup>3</sup> *"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'"*

<sup>4</sup> *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."*

### Turning: John the Baptist is the turning point between the Old and New Testaments

In this Big Story of the Bible we come to a turning point with the arrival of John the Baptist. John was very much an Old Testament figure. He wore the clothing of a prophet to indicate he was a prophet. He lived in the wilderness to indicate a life set apart for God. He spoke out against injustice and greed and lack of compassion, just like the prophets of old. He fulfilled Old Testament prophecy as in the passage from Isaiah quoted within the St. Mark reading. But John the Baptist was the turning point from the Old Testament and towards the New. John pointed to a new, different future. He preached a forgiveness through the repentance of sins. He pointed towards the one who would come from God in great power. He spoke of a new baptism - not in water but by the Holy Spirit. These all came to pass when John the Baptist eventually understood Jesus to be the fulfilment of the promises, and pointed him out to those around him.

John was the proclaimer to a new way of understanding and engaging with God. Until John, God's people dwelt in God's holy land. It was holy because it had been given to them by God and blessed by God. God's people were holy because they had been called by God and were chosen by him. They knew God's presence through the tabernacle in the wilderness and, later, the temple in Jerusalem, when they filled with the glorious presence of God. They witnessed God's Spirit taking hold of individuals to empower them for great tasks - as leaders, prophets, highly skilled craftsmen and women. Now John the Baptist announced a new filling of God's Spirit - not just for the few but for everyone. With a Spirit-filled baptism not of buildings or the land, but of human beings: frail bodies filled with a supernatural empowerment. The ensuing story of the New Testament charts this new revelation of understanding God's promise to Sarah and Abraham to be a blessing to the whole world. The promise which was passed down to Isaac, then Jacob, then to his son, Judah, and on down - eventually - to his descendent Jesus Christ. The promise to be a blessing to the whole world is fulfilled in Jesus but outworked, crucially, through His body the Church: us. It is our turn to play our part in this continuing story of God's blessing to his world.

Reflection: What does it feel like to be part of God's continuing story of blessing to our world?

Action: Ask God how he is calling you to be part of his blessing. In prayer ask for his empowering Holy Spirit to enable you to become faithful to that call.

Prayer: God our Father, you gave to Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age a son called John. He grew up strong in Spirit, prepared the people for the coming of the Lord and baptized them in the Jordan to wash away their sins. Help us to be ready to welcome Jesus into our hearts and may we, through the power of the Spirit, grow ever stronger in faith, ready and willing to answer your call. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen

## Advent 4: Mary Luke 1 v. 26-38

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

<sup>34</sup> *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

<sup>35</sup> *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 the Son of God.* <sup>36</sup> *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.* <sup>37</sup> *For no word*  
*from God will ever fail."*

<sup>38</sup> *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

### Discerning: Mary discerned God's call to be the right way

It is not so long ago that an unmarried mother was shunned by her community. My mother picked up her first maternity allowance at the Post Office a few (short) months after marrying my father. By the time she had walked back to their lodgings the postmistress had already contacted the landlady, who was waiting on the doorstep to evict them. The Virgin Mary accepted God's call to be the mother of the Christ child in a society in which the family's honour was reflected by the chaste conduct of young women. Once Mary's pregnancy was evident, her acceptance of God's call brought shame upon her, her family and her betrothed. Fortunately, this story had a happy ending. Joseph was convinced through the visit of an angel that Mary was indeed honourable. My parents' story also has a happy ending: they continue to enjoying the blessing of a long and happy marriage.

It is not easy to hear God's voice above the 'voices' of the society in which we live. There are times when we may feel we hear God's voice and yet it seems to sit contrary to the values we live by. How do we discern whether what we think we hear is of God or not of God? This is a question which Christians have been grappling with since the earliest days. The apostle John wrote: '*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,*' (1 Jn 4.1). Discernment is very important. I believe that the closer we draw to God the better we can distinguish what is of God and what is not. A closeness with God is found in prayer, in reading his Word, and in fellowship with others. We need all three: the Spirit witnesses to us in prayer; when we dwell in His Word our thinking aligns better with God's heart; fellowship allows others to speak into our lives and challenge or encourage our thinking.

Reflection: Have you ever felt drawn to stand up for something which might sit at odds with the prevailing culture?

Action: Discernment is crucial. Set aside a time of Bible reading & prayer this week. Share your thoughts from this time with a friend, or write them down into a journal. Allow God's word to speak to you.

Prayer: God our Father, we thank you that you chose Mary, a young woman from Galilee, without wealth or status. Mary had the faith and courage to say Yes to the shame and shock of becoming the mother of your Son and let loose the unstoppable power of love which overturned the world's values. We thank you that everyone is precious to you and that your love reaches out to all. As you love us, may we always show love and acceptance of others. We pray for courage to be a people who, like Mary, say 'yes' to you this Christmas time and in the years ahead. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen

## Christmas: John 1 v.1-14

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

*<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.*

*<sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

*<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

### Burning: Jesus - the Light of the World burning in the darkness

Although we recognise the birth of Jesus as the time of his coming into our world, Jesus was in the world long before his birth. He is part of the Godhead or Trinity. In the opening words of Genesis, God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, he is the Spirit hovering over the waters of the formless and empty darkness, he is the spoken Word: "*Let there be light, and there was light.*" The significance about Jesus' birth, is that this is the moment in which he becomes part of his creation. Jesus the Word stood outside of his creation, sustaining it, encouraging and enlightening it, but now at his birth, he becomes part of that which he has made. He is '*incarnated*', made flesh. He becomes one with his creation. Out of a burning passion for his creation, for his people, God has taken on their form and shape to make himself like us. He identifies completely with us. He even places his light within us that we may burn with the same passion as he does. Our hearts are set on fire with love for him.

Jesus is the light burning in the darkness. He is the Word at the beginning of time. He keeps the flame of the weakest faith burning: '*a smouldering wick he will not snuff out*' (Matt 12.20). He set the disciples' hearts on fire as they burned within on the road to Emmaus. His light we acknowledge at Christmas as the '*true light which gives light to everyone.*' Whoever follows him '*will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*' (John 8.12). He told his disciples, '*You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others*' (Matt 5.14). At our baptism we received that light into our lives, to shine before others, symbolised by a lit candle.

Reflection: What does it mean to know that Christ's light burns within you?

Action: Light a candle. Find somewhere quiet to sit before the flame. Enjoy Christ's presence. God bless you - and a very Happy Christmas!

Prayer: God our Father, you came to our world in Christ, bringing life and light for all. We thank you for that light that illuminates our lives today and which, as a lamp for our feet, leads us step by step on our journey through life. May that light shine now in our hearts and may the flame of faith burn brightly within us so that we in turn may bring light to others and, in so doing, bring glory to you. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who has come into the world. Amen

### A Christmas blessing:

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph and Mary, and the peace of the Christ-child be God's gifts to us and people everywhere this Christmas time and may the blessing of the Christ Child be upon us always. Amen

