

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-11-30 06:00 GMT

Advent 2014 – The Plan: promise and the reality

The Old Testament is sprinkled with prophetic references to the one we know as Jesus Christ. They can come up in the oddest places, sometimes in the middle of something else

God reveals little snippets here and there of his Plan. A capital letter is appropriate here, as it is the only plan that covers from before the beginning of time to beyond the end of time.

From the New Testament letter-writers we see how it all come into place as Paul and others reflect on Jesus Christ and his work. The Plan is all about love, love for the world as an expression of the love between Father and Son. The Plan is by no means finished, but we can be assured that God has written us into it. Everything we need to qualify for that has already been achieved for us. All we have to do is to say yes.

Get a group together

The best way to study the Bible is to do it with a couple of other people. Is there someone you can meet with or invite round for an hour (it may be less than an hour) for three sessions where you look at what you've read and/or look at the Together Sessions material over a cup of tea or coffee and some biscuits or cake? Is there a third person you could invite in? Two's company, three's good company, four's excellent company, Day time, evening, whatever works for you!

The Together Session materials will follow shortly.

Why do it?

Meeting in small groups helps build us up in our Christian life. It gives us a chance to think and reflect, to learn and to challenge, to ask questions and try out answers in a place where we won't feel overwhelmed by large numbers. It is more effective than meeting in a large crowd, as the focus in a large group tends to be more blurred, and personalities can take over.

We have identified as a Church that we should grow in our faith beyond turning up to services on a Sunday. The format of Sunday services does not lend itself to inquiry, questioning, sharing; the flight path of a service is set and we cannot go back over things or ask questions without disrupting the flow. We need some time outside the church building where we explore and examine Christian faith and life alongside others in an airport lounge rather than in the cabin.

Prayer

Father God, I want you to challenge me this Advent to open up a little more of myself to you. You know my fears and anxieties and you do not want me to hold on to them but rather that I heap them onto you, for you carry my burdens in Jesus.

Bring to life the sense of expectation as I journey through the prophecy, the story and my journey as you reveal to me the truth of Gospel-message. Amen.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-11-30 06:02 GMT

Nov 30

Genesis 3:6-15

The woman stared at the fruit. It looked beautiful and tasty. She wanted the wisdom that it would give her, and she ate some of the fruit. Her husband was there with her, so she gave some to him, and he ate it too.

Right away they saw what they had done, and they realized they were naked. Then they sewed fig leaves together to make something to cover themselves.

Late in the afternoon a breeze began to blow, and the man and woman heard the LORD God walking in the garden. They were frightened and hid behind some trees. The LORD called out to the man and asked, "Where are you?" The man answered, "I was naked, and when I heard you walking through the garden, I was frightened and hid!" "How did you know you were naked?" God asked. "Did you eat any fruit from that tree in the middle of the garden?" "It was the woman you put here with me," the man said. "She gave me some of the fruit, and I ate it." The LORD God then asked the woman, "What have you done?" "The snake tricked me," she answered. "And I ate some of that fruit."

So the LORD God said to the snake: "Because of what you have done, you will be the only animal to suffer this curse-- For as long as you live, you will crawl on your stomach and eat dirt. You and this woman will hate each other; your descendants and hers will always be enemies. One of hers will strike you on the head, and you will strike him on the heel."

When God created humans he created beings with a mind of their own and the ability to make choices. We might wonder at the feebleness of Eve – why, has she not got everything she could ever need – a beautiful place that provided for her every need and a caring partner, and the joy of walking with God in the garden?

What the sneaky snake offered was wisdom. To know the difference between right and wrong sounds tempting, and Eve made her choice, but that knowledge brought with it shame and guilt.

Looking at Eve we might even feel a little annoyed that it was she who got us into the mess. Note, however, that God goes for the man first. The man tries to pass the blame over to the woman, and some women today might wonder if anything has changed. They are both punished, and with them all mankind.

Even, however, in this primeval story there is a glimpse of what God has planned. When God curses the snake (Satan) he says that a descendant of Eve will crush him. This was not an afterthought of God. Salvation is in the detail.

- **Why did God have that tree in the garden?**
- **Why did God allow the serpent to tempt Eve and thus destroy her and Adam's paradise?**

- **Does the serpent exist today?**
- **Would I have lasted any longer in the garden?**
- **Should God have created humans without free-will?**
- **Did God know that this would happen? If so, why did he bother to create Eden?**

Father God, you have created us with the joy and the burden of free will. Enable us to see how grieved you are when our choices go against your holiness. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-01 06:02 GMT

Dec 1

Genesis 12:1-7

The LORD said to Abram: Leave your country, your family, and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you. I will bless you and make your descendants into a great nation. You will become famous and be a blessing to others. I will bless anyone who blesses you, but I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you. Everyone on earth will be blessed because of you.

Abram was seventy-five years old when the LORD told him to leave the city of Haran. He obeyed and left with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all the possessions and slaves they had acquired while in Haran. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram went as far as the sacred tree of Moreh in a place called Shechem. The Canaanites were still living in the land at that time, but the LORD appeared to Abram and promised, "I will give this land to your family forever." Abram then built an altar there for the LORD.

What's God up to? Abram is not a young man, and yet God chooses him. The words God uses should not be underestimated. "I will bless you" is a golden ticket to success. When God blesses Abram he gives him wealth in many different forms, status, honour, patronage, support, protection. Everyone on earth will be blessed because of Abram, except, of course, if they choose to use their free-will not to be blessed.

The rich slave-owner gets up and goes to a foreign land as a stranger. He meets some pretty unpleasant people and he entertains angels (hit-angels – see Gen 18). God makes some big promises to him. His family, his offspring will become a great nation.

God even shows Abram a land that his family will inherit in perpetuity. God is planning a nation of people he will call his chosen.

- **What if Abram had told God he was too old, or had family responsibilities, or had flocks, servants and slaves to look after? What if Abram had just told God he wasn't going to go?**
- **How has God blessed me in my life? Can I point to wealth, status or any of the list above?**
- **Abram was 75. Who decides that you are too old (or too young, as some prophets protested)?**

Father God, I want the faith and trust that Abram displayed when he got up and went in answer to your call on him. I know that I will never be settled in anything unless I am settled in you first. Stir me up a little, Lord.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-02 06:02 GMT

Dec 2

Genesis 22:1-18

Some years later God decided to test Abraham, so he spoke to him. Abraham answered, "Here I am, LORD." The LORD said, "Go get Isaac, your only son, the one you dearly love! Take him to the land of Moriah, and I will show you a mountain where you must sacrifice him to me on the fires of an altar."

So Abraham got up early the next morning and chopped wood for the fire. He put a saddle on his donkey and left with Isaac and two servants for the place where God had told him to go. Three days later Abraham looked off in the distance and saw the place. He told his servants, "Stay here with the donkey, while my son and I go over there to worship. We will come back."

Abraham put the wood on Isaac's shoulder, but he carried the hot coals and the knife. As the two of them walked along, Isaac said, "Father, we have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" "My son," Abraham answered, "God will provide the lamb."

The two of them walked on, and when they reached the place that God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and placed the wood on it. Next, he tied up his son and put him on the wood. He then took the knife and got ready to kill his son.

But the LORD's angel shouted from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am!" he answered. "Don't hurt the boy or harm him in any way!" the angel said. "Now I know that you truly obey God, because you were willing to offer him your only son." Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in the bushes. So he took the ram and sacrificed it in place of his son. Abraham named that place "The LORD Will Provide." And even now people say, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

The LORD's angel called out from heaven a second time: You were willing to offer the LORD your only son, and so he makes you this solemn promise, "I will bless you and give you such a large family, that someday your descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky or the grains of sand along the beach. They will defeat their enemies and take over the cities where their enemies live. You have obeyed me, and so you and your descendants will be a blessing to all nations on earth."

God had already promised Abram that he had made him a father of nations. This was a done deal. God did not say to Abram that he would make him a father of nations, but that he **had** made him one. God had also promised that he would establish his covenant through Isaac.

And now God wants Abraham to offer him Isaac as a sacrifice.

We know God is testing Abraham, but Abraham did not know that.

Abraham loves Isaac and it pierces his heart to do as God bids. Do you think he carried out his duty with a spring in his aged step? Did the days spent journeying as God directed him to the mountain pass by lightly? What was going through his mind as he lit the coals with the fire he'd brought with him. "Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham knew. What's it like to bind the child you were told was the one with whom God had promised to establish an everlasting covenant (Gen 17:17-19) and to break that covenant by killing him?

God provides the lamb, and his angel tells Abraham that he will be blessed beyond his wildest expectations. Is it an exaggeration to say that Abraham's offspring will be more numerous than the billions upon billions of stars in the sky, or might it be just the ones that Abraham could see? How about the grains of sand on the beach (Clacton rather than Felixstowe)? Your level of faith provides the answer to this question.

- **Where is God calling you to go? Think beyond places.**
- **What is holding you back from following God implicitly?**
- **Could God have tested Abraham in a more humane way?**
- **If God knows everything why did he have to test Abraham?**
- **Should Abraham have argued with God? After all. He argued over Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16 onwards).**
- **If I am a child of Father Abraham, then in what way am I living as a blessing to the people of this earth?**
- **What are my wildest expectations of God? Or did I tame them long ago?**

Father God, Abraham bowed to your authority even though it went against all logic. Help us to see you as One who transcends human thoughts and ideals, whose purposes are beyond our understanding, yet following Whom takes us out of our earthbound nature into the heavenly. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-03 06:02 GMT

Dec 3

Numbers 21:4-9

The Israelites had to go around the territory of Edom, so when they left Mount Hor, they headed south toward the Red Sea. But along the way, the people became so impatient that they complained against God and said to Moses, "Did you bring us out of Egypt, just to let us die in the desert? There's no water out here, and we can't stand this awful food!"

Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes that bit and killed many of them. Some of the people went to Moses and admitted, "It was wrong of us to insult you and the LORD. Now please ask him to make these snakes go away."

Moses prayed, and the LORD answered, "Make a snake out of bronze and place it on top of a pole. Anyone who gets bitten can look at the snake and won't die." Moses obeyed the LORD. And all of those who looked at the bronze snake lived, even though they had been bitten by the poisonous snakes.

We skip over lots of history to reach the point where the children of Israel (that is, the descendants of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham) are out in the wilderness after having been rescued from Egypt. The Israelites did not like wandering around in the wild places and they complain. It's strange, however, that we do not read of any Israelites breaking away and heading off elsewhere. Surely if they walked in a straight line they'd end up somewhere near civilisation? Perhaps they liked to stay in the group but have a good moan. Surely not like us?!

Moses gets a list of ungrateful complaints aimed at him and at God. Who would be a leader of such ungrateful wretches? Their moaning was an insult to Moses even if he did not directly hear what they said.

God was not pleased with their moaning either and he punished them by sending snakes to bite them. Many died. It was out of fear that some of the remaining Israelites went to Moses and confessed their sin. They pleaded with Moses because they did not know how to plead with God.

A bronze snake up a pole?! What's that all about? It was a strange device that God commanded to be constructed. It was there for healing – just look at it and live. Jesus quotes the event when talking to Nicodemus, just before he tells him that God so loved the world... You know where to find that story. Read it.

- **Why were the Israelites wandering around in the wild places anyway?**
- **What do I complain about within my church? Do I deserve to be bitten for it?**
- **When is complaining a sin?**
- **Do we as a whole church ever fall into moaning?**
- **Have we delivered complaints to a leader?**

- **How is God involved when church members say disrespectful things about their church leaders or act in a way that is selfish or disrespectful?**
- **Have we as a church ever confessed together?**

Father God, the complainers were punished by death. Help me to see Jesus lifted up so that I may be drawn to him and receive life and forgiveness through him. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-04 06:02 GMT

Dec 4

Isaiah 9:2-21

Those who walked in the dark have seen a bright light. And it shines upon everyone who lives in the land of darkest shadows. Our LORD, you have made your nation stronger. Because of you, its people are glad and celebrate like workers at harvest time or like soldiers dividing up what they have taken. You have broken the power of those who abused and enslaved your people. You have rescued them just as you saved your people from Midian. The boots of marching warriors and the blood-stained uniforms have been fed to flames and eaten by fire.

A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler. His names will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace. His power will never end; peace will last forever. He will rule David's kingdom and make it grow strong. He will always rule with honesty and justice. The LORD All-Powerful will make certain that all of this is done.

The Lord had warned the people of Israel, and all of them knew it, including everyone in the capital city of Samaria. But they were proud and stubborn and said, "Houses of brick and sycamore have fallen to the ground, but we will build houses with stones and cedar." The LORD made their enemies attack them. He sent the Arameans from the east and the Philistines from the west, and they swallowed up Israel. But even this did not stop him from being angry, so he kept on punishing them.

The people of Israel still did not turn back to the LORD All-Powerful and worship him. In one day he cut off their head and tail, their leaves and branches. Their rulers and leaders were the head, and the lying prophets were the tail. They had led the nation down the wrong path, and the people were confused.

It's important that we put things into context. You may recognise some of the above as it forms part of the nine lessons and carols service. What you hear in that service is a sanitised version where everything is rosy-cosy. The people of Israel had an up and down relationship with God because of the way they frequently ignored his commands and went their own ways.

God punishes Israel in order to keep them right with him. There were times when God allowed other nations to run Israel down but he always kept a faithful few, a "remnant" that still followed God. The line of the house of Jacob became a thin thread at times, and God's covenant with Israel was often close to breaking point because of the behaviour of the Israelites.

In this context we hear the words "A child has been born to us". Handel's Messiah strikes up with "For unto us a child is born" and we are in Christmas mood. The promise is astounding – this man (he was only a child for a few years) will deserve the name Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. If this is not who he is then he does not

deserve the name. How many hymns that we sing talk about the power of Jesus or the power of his name? Think of three before you go any further.

Keep in mind the context in which the promise is made.

Yesterday – John 3:16 – you knew that, didn't you?

- **How can a God of love punish his people so severely?**
- **Why didn't God just give up on Israel and start again with another nation?**
- **How Wonderful is Jesus?**
- **How has Jesus become Prince of Peace? Where is the evidence?**
- **How powerful is Jesus in a land that argues about whether prayers should be said in schools and whether the monarch should invite all faiths to the next coronation?**
- **How powerful is Jesus in your life?**
- **Peace will last for ever – when is it going to start?**

Father God, until I understand why you punished the Israelites I cannot begin to understand why you should choose to spare me. Help me to know your holiness, your righteousness and your jealousy so that I may understand your mercy. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-05 06:02 GMT

Dec 5

Isaiah 11:1-14

Like a branch that sprouts from a stump, someone from David's family will some day be king. The Spirit of the LORD will be with him to give him understanding, wisdom, and insight. He will be powerful, and he will know and honour the LORD. His greatest joy will be to obey the LORD. This king won't judge by appearances or listen to rumours. The poor and the needy will be treated with fairness and with justice. His word will be law everywhere in the land, and criminals will be put to death. Honesty and fairness will be his royal robes.

Leopards will lie down with young goats, and wolves will rest with lambs. Calves and lions will eat together and be cared for by little children. Cows and bears will share the same pasture; their young will rest side by side. Lions and oxen will both eat straw. Little children will play near snake holes. They will stick their hands into dens of poisonous snakes and never be hurt. Nothing harmful will take place on the LORD's holy mountain.

Just as water fills the sea, the land will be filled with people who know and honour the LORD. The time is coming when one of David's descendants will be the signal for the people of all nations to come together. They will follow his advice, and his own nation will become famous. When that day comes, the Lord will again reach out his mighty arm and bring home his people who have survived in Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Ethiopia, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and the land along the coast. He will give a signal to the nations, and he will bring together the refugees from Judah and Israel, who have been scattered all over the earth. Israel will stop being jealous of Judah, and Judah will no longer be the enemy of Israel. Instead, they will get together and attack the Philistines in the west. Then they will defeat the Edomites, the Moabites, and the Ammonites in the east. They will rule those people and take from them whatever they want.

We have another prophecy given by God to Isaiah. Could this relate to Jesus? It works on many levels, but there are also parts that do not work so well. Clearly the second paragraph is a prophecy yet to be fulfilled?

The third paragraph tells of a coming together. The sense in which things join up before something momentous happens is repeated a fair number of times in the Bible. If this passage is talking about Israel then we have certainly seen the re-creation of Israel in recent times and have seen dispersed Jews coming back to form a state that has demonstrated military and political power against its enemies. You may be interested to know that the Philistines of old inhabited the strip from Gaza through to Joppa, modern-day Haifa and Edom, Moab and Ammon are now in Jordan. Some way to go yet, then.

Is God still favouring the Jews in our time? They are still his chosen people and they have survived through some terrible events over the last two thousand years – oppression, persecution, alienation, dispossession, pogroms and holocaust. A scattered remnant has

returned to the geographical location that God gave to the descendants of Abraham, but people have been settled there for two millennia. What happens now?

- **Is God behind the power of modern Israel?**
- **Can Israel be a great and powerful nation under God?**
- **How should Christians view Jews today?**
- **Is it our duty to preach the Gospel to Israel?**
- **Can Israel continue to be strong if it does not recognise Jesus as their Messiah?**
- **What can we do to hasten the time (which will surely come) when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, just as water fills the sea?**
- **When will the lion and the lamb lie down together?**

Father God, you call us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. It feels like an insurmountable problem, but it's precisely because of that that we need to pray. Father, bring peace to Jerusalem. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-06 06:02 GMT

Dec 6

Isaiah 40:1-8

Our God has said: "Encourage my people! Give them comfort. Speak kindly to Jerusalem and announce: Your slavery is past; your punishment is over. I, the LORD, made you pay double for your sins."

Someone is shouting: "Clear a path in the desert! Make a straight road for the LORD our God. Fill in the valleys; flatten every hill and mountain. Level the rough and rugged ground. Then the glory of the LORD will appear for all to see. The LORD has promised this!"

The tide has turned for Israel. They have been through rough times and God has extracted a high price for their wrongdoing. This is the nation God has every intention of using for his glory. He will do that - it will happen, and Israel will be there. If Israel wants to come through the hedge backwards to the event then that is how they will come, and that is exactly how they did come.

God is not letting go of Israel. Through thick, thin, long, short, good and bad Israel will be celebrated as the people into which God's Son was planted. That's why they were chosen.

That is their only purpose. A new Jerusalem is coming.

A herald cries out. John the Baptist is recognised by Mark in the opening sentences of his gospel as the one about whom this prophecy is written. John did not have a JCB to perform the mighty earthworks that are described. The description, though poetic, is nevertheless strong and forms a powerful image of the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ.

John challenged people to make a pathway to God in the deserts of their own lives, to make it straight and level. The glory of the Lord was glimpsed just for a moment at the baptism of Jesus, but this was just the start.

- **Now that Jesus has been glorified, does God still favour Israel?**
- **Where is the new Jerusalem?**
- **What needs straightening and levelling out in your life?**
- **Where can we see the glory of the Lord?**
- **Do you long to see the glory of the Lord?**

Father God, your love to us in Jesus is constant, yet you will take us through times of pruning, of correction, of revelation as your light picks out the dark things in our lives. We pray for encouragement and an understanding that each of us is chosen, too, and that you will make us what you want us to be as we give ourselves to you. Lord, show us your glory. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-07 06:02 GMT

Dec 7

Isaiah 53:3-7

He was hated and rejected; his life was filled with sorrow and terrible suffering. No one wanted to look at him. We despised him and said, "He is a nobody!" He suffered and endured great pain for us, but we thought his suffering was punishment from God. He was wounded and crushed because of our sins; by taking our punishment, he made us completely well.

All of us were like sheep that had wandered off. We had each gone our own way, but the LORD gave him the punishment we deserved. He was painfully abused, but he did not complain. He was silent like a lamb being led to the butcher, as quiet as a sheep having its wool cut off. He was condemned to death without a fair trial. Who could have imagined what would happen to him?

In Isaiah we also read of one who is familiar with suffering. Could this really be the same person who would reveal God's glory as John the Baptist proclaimed? This prophecy is oddly written in the past tense, which actually makes it more real for us who view it from after the event. We know that Jesus suffered hatred and rejection at the hands of the Jews, and that even Father God could not look upon the Son on the cross – My God, have **you** rejected me, too?. He may have asked why, but he knew why. Utter desolation.

Strangely Jesus' suffering was not unconnected with God's punishment. He suffered for us, for our children and their children and for generations as yet unborn. God is righteous and there is a penalty for sin – eternal separation from God. The price was on our heads just as it was on Adam's. Jesus on the cross took the punishment for us. God showed his love for us by taking the penalty for our sins upon himself in his Son. This was not an accounting trick to balance the books. This involved coming into the world he created and accepting the punishment with real pain and sorrow, abuse, hatred and rejection that had only one outcome – death.

The prophet talks about our sins crushing Jesus. We are a future people who come two thousand years after the event that was prophesied. Does this "sin" thing apply to us as well? Did I have a hand in the crucifixion of my Lord? Did I join in with the crowd to shout "Crucify him?" I wasn't in Jerusalem on that particular day – surely that exonerates me? Not at all! Jesus Christ died for the sins of all mankind, from Adam and Eve through to the people of his time, and on to everyone who would ever live. He died for me and you.

- **Could God still suffer today?**
- **How do I become free from sin?**
- **"I do not deserve forgiveness" – this is a true statement and no theologian would disagree with that. How can this be considered by some as condemnation but as release by others? Which side are you on?**
- **How should we respond to the way that our national life seems to be increasingly rejecting Christ?**
- **How have you rejected or denied Christ in your life?**

Father God, I want to know my Lord Jesus as Servant and Saviour, to know him in his suffering that I might see the sort of person I was and how in him I may be transformed. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-08 06:02 GMT

Dec 8

Is 53:8-12

His life was taken away because of the sinful things my people had done. He wasn't dishonest or violent, but he was buried in a tomb of cruel and rich people. The LORD decided his servant would suffer as a sacrifice to take away the sin and guilt of others.

Now the servant will live to see his own descendants. He did everything the LORD had planned. By suffering, the servant will learn the true meaning of obeying the LORD. Although he is innocent, he will take the punishment for the sins of others, so that many of them will no longer be guilty. The LORD will reward him with honour and power for sacrificing his life. Others thought he was a sinner, but he suffered for our sins and asked God to forgive us.

Today I stand forgiven for the sinful person that I was. Jesus did not forgive my sins because of his coming to earth. My sins were not forgiven as Jesus went about preaching and healing. My sins still had mastery over me as Jesus hung on the cross. Only at the moment he breathed his last and died was the sin that was destined to be the blight of my life fatally wounded.

Much as we might like to think of ourselves as kind, decent, caring, helpful people, and we probably are, this is not what Christianity is about. If we let our own natural goodness masquerade as worthiness before God then we'll never know the redeeming love and forgiveness we have in Christ that takes us far beyond any human endeavour. However good we may consider ourselves we are simply not worthy to stand before God. It's not about what we do – it's about what we are. Sin is in our make-up – it resides in us and condemns us eternally. There is only one way for it to be removed, and that is through the blood of Jesus.

In Christ Jesus and in him alone can I stand before Father God.

- **What did Christ do for me?**
- **How do I know?**
- **Am I forgiven? Have I brought everything that needs forgiving to God?**
- **What about the sins I do not know about?**
- **What is the difference that Christ has made to my life?**
- **Is it polite to boast about what Jesus has done for me?**
- **What will be said of me when I stand at the gate of Heaven?**
- **How confident are you that heaven is your destination?**

Father God, you came in Jesus knowing that he would suffer a terrible and bloody death. Through Jesus' obedience I am now set free and washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.. How you must love me. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-09 06:02 GMT

Dec 9

Isaiah 61:1-6

The Spirit of the LORD God has taken control of me! The LORD has chosen and sent me to tell the oppressed the good news, to heal the broken-hearted, and to announce freedom for prisoners and captives.

This is the year when the LORD God will show kindness to us and punish our enemies.

The LORD has sent me to comfort those who mourn, especially in Jerusalem. He sent me to give them flowers in place of their sorrow, olive oil in place of tears, and joyous praise in place of broken hearts. They will be called "Trees of Justice," planted by the LORD to honour his name. Then they will rebuild cities that have been in ruins for many generations. They will hire foreigners to take care of their sheep and their vineyards. But they themselves will be priests and servants of the LORD our God. The treasures of the nations will belong to them, and they will be famous.

Whoa! Spirit-control! So many Christians want to be the one in control. You'll never get taken for the ride of your life if you clamp your hands on to the steering wheel and feet to the brake pedal.

These words were picked up by Jesus in the synagogue at the start of his ministry. He startled, shocked and outraged his neighbours and townspeople by saying that these words were fulfilled in him. How very dare he! We don't want your sort here again, thank you. You can go and take yourself and your riff-raff with you.

That's the problem when we set up Church as a comfortable haven, a shrine of otherness that takes us out of the world, a place where we can hide away and relax from what is happening outside. That is not the church. It is not the model Christ established. He may have said "come to me all who are heavy-laden and I will give you rest", but that was said to those who did not know the peace that is found in daily living in Christ. Jesus told us to go out into the world and preach the gospel.

In claiming the prophecy for him Jesus had declared that he had a mission. Nowhere do you see in those words a sentence that starts with "I". The subject is the Lord. The Lord has done this, the Lord will do this, etc. Jesus has come with power and authority but as a servant of the Godhead.

Is it time for our churches to take up where Jesus left off? Should we not be active command (God's) and control (Holy Spirit's) centres for mission and service (Like Jesus) to our neighbourhoods, and individually be models of the kingdom where the oppressed are given good news, where people are set free and restored. Are we ready to be co-fulfillers of this prophecy?

- **How outrageous is your Christian life?**
- **How daring am I in what I say and do?**
- **Are the oppressed hearing the Good News?**

- **What am I doing to heal the broken-hearted?**
- **Have the prisoners and captives of Satan heard from me about the freedom that is in Jesus Christ?**
- **What part does the Holy Spirit play in my life?**
- **Could these words be my own church's manifesto? What would we need to do to make it so?**

Father God, Jesus announced to his people the promise of a new world order that he would bring about. I want to be part of that. Help me out of the comfortable life I have set up and take me on manoeuvres with you. Amen

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-10 06:02 GMT

Dec 10

Daniel 7:1-14

Daniel wrote: In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylonia, I had some dreams and visions while I was asleep one night, and I wrote them down. The four winds were stirring up the mighty sea, when suddenly four powerful beasts came out of the sea. Each beast was different. The first was like a lion with the wings of an eagle.

...

The fourth beast was stronger and more terrifying than the others. Its huge teeth were made of iron, and what it didn't grind with its teeth, it smashed with its feet. It was different from the others, and it had horns on its head-- ten of them.

Just as I was thinking about these horns, a smaller horn appeared, and three of the other horns were pulled up by the roots to make room for it. This horn had the eyes of a human and a mouth that spoke with great pride. Thrones were set up while I was watching, and the Eternal God took his place. His clothing and his hair were white as snow. His throne was a blazing fire with fiery wheels, and flames were dashing out from all around him. Countless thousands were standing there to serve him.

The time of judgment began, and the books were opened. I watched closely to see what would happen to this smaller horn because of the arrogant things it was saying. Then before my very eyes, the fourth beast was killed and its body destroyed by fire. The other three beasts had their authority taken from them, but they were allowed to live a while longer.

As I continued to watch the vision that night, I saw what looked like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven, and he was presented to the Eternal God. He was crowned king and given power and glory, so that all people of every nation and race would serve him. He will rule forever, and his kingdom is eternal, never to be destroyed.

Daniel had been eating cheese for supper again. The visions given to him were not unlike those that came to Ezekiel and John in Revelation: frightening, vivid, visceral, colourful pictures with strange creatures and rolling vistas. These were, of course, not cheese-induced, but a revelation of what is to come. Apocalyptic is a good description.

We may not know exactly what these visions mean. God does not always make things perfectly clear, and it may not be wise to latch on to any particular interpretation. The beast and its ten horns may have a significance. Ten nations? Ten particular people? We don't know. Be wary of people attaching meaning that they want to attach. Saying, for instance, that they represent the evil EEC is now out of date as there are more than ten nations in it.

We have a description of God, and that is of a mighty One sitting on a fiery throne – white hair (does that mean that God is an old man? I don't think so) and robes, and multitudes serving him. Wow!

And then, after the beast is destroyed (not much point in spending time figuring him out, then), comes the one like a son of man, i.e. one in human form, on the clouds of heaven, to be presented before the Eternal God. This is our Lord Jesus. The one who was servant, who lived as a human and still retains human form ("Touch me, Thomas") is crowned king of an everlasting kingdom.

As you can see, Daniel's vision (c. 550 BC?) is a prophecy that takes us to the end of time, to the fulfilment of God's plan. Where do you think the people standing round the throne will have come from? John asks that question. Read Rev 7.13-end.

- **Like Joel prophesied do I see visions or (Senior Citizens) dream dreams?**
- **Do we share with the church what God may have revealed to us?**
- **Where as a church are we heading, or are we lulled?**
- **Will my name be found in the books?**

***Father God, you have it all planned, down to the last person. I want to be in that number.
Amen***

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-11 06:02 GMT

Dec 11

Micah 5:1-5

Jerusalem, enemy troops have surrounded you; they have struck Israel's ruler in the face with a stick. Bethlehem Ephrath, you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah. But the LORD will choose one of your people to rule the nation-- someone whose family goes back to ancient times. The LORD will abandon Israel only until this ruler is born, and the rest of his family returns to Israel.

Like a shepherd taking care of his sheep, this ruler will lead and care for his people by the power and glorious name of the LORD his God. His people will live securely, and the whole earth will know his true greatness, because he will bring peace.

The prophet Micah tells us that something amazing will happen in Bethlehem. O little town! You are going to be famous for ever! I am reminded of the saying "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" that Jesus used.

The Word came to us in humility. From the heights of heaven to the lowest place on earth the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. I'm not sure that I can comprehend this amazing act of love and obedience. He did not appear as a grown man, beamed down like Captain Kirk, but he actually insinuated himself in an egg in a womb. Helpless, dependant, born, bawling, childhood and thence to manhood. That's a dangerous path!

He came into a family that had its roots in the line of Judah and traces back to King David. God had prepared his family from Abraham. He had graced his people for the one purpose of placing his Son into it.

I include two pictures from Bethlehem – both are tinged with irony. For the first please pray that we are given the opportunity to share the true meaning of the Incarnation and for the second that the angels' prophecy over the fields of Bethlehem of peace to men on earth will be realised in our time.

Yesterday's answers

The coming of the Son of Man will be like lightning that can be seen from east to west. Where there is a corpse, there will always be buzzards. Right after those days of suffering, "The sun will become dark, and the moon will no longer shine. The stars will fall, and the powers in the sky will be shaken." Then a sign will appear in the sky. And there will be the Son of Man. All nations on earth will weep when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. At the sound of a loud trumpet, he will send his angels to bring his chosen ones together from all over the earth.

Matthew 24:27-31

The high priest stood up and asked Jesus, "Why don't you say something in your own defence? Don't you hear the charges they are making against you?" But Jesus did not

answer. So the high priest said, "With the living God looking on, you must tell the truth. Tell us, are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" "That is what you say!" Jesus answered. "But I tell all of you, 'Soon you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right side of God All-Powerful and coming on the clouds of heaven.' " The high priest then tore his robe and said, "This man claims to be God! We don't need any more witnesses! You have heard what he said. What do you think?" They answered, "He is guilty and deserves to die!" Matthew 26:62-66

- Was the Incarnation a pretty affair?
- Did the angels know what would happen to Bethlehem in the 20th century?
- When did Jesus know who he was?
- What did Mary know?
- What should Christians be doing regarding the wall that runs through Bethlehem?

Father God, I cannot think of a more dangerous way for the Word to come to earth than as a seed planted in a woman. I cannot even comprehend what it is like to give up the divine privileges to become like us, live like us and to die for us. Yet that is what your Son did. There was never a more dangerous mission than this. And what did he gain for it? Everlasting glory? An eternal throne? Yes, but the reason he did it was so that I could stand before that throne in heaven. I will be in that number. Amen.



Picture courtesy of christmasstartswithchrist.com



Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-12 06:02 GMT

Dec 12

Malachi 3:1-4

I, the LORD All-Powerful, will send my messenger to prepare the way for me. Then suddenly the Lord you are looking for will appear in his temple. The messenger you desire is coming with my promise, and he is on his way. On the day the Lord comes, he will be like a furnace that purifies silver or like strong soap in a washbasin. No one will be able to stand up to him.

The LORD will purify the descendants of Levi, as though they were gold or silver. Then they will bring the proper offerings to the LORD, and the offerings of the people of Judah and Jerusalem will please him, just as they did in the past.

John the Baptist was sent to the people of Israel to prepare the people through baptism for forgiveness of sins. I love the fact that people flocked to see him and seek a change in their lives. There must have been a jam of people crowding in, just like those Middle Eastern religious events you can see today in the news when a funeral, a procession or some celebration looks like a complete mess as people shove in from all sides and any sense of Church of England order and dignity goes out of the window. There is fervour in what these people are doing.

John told people to watch out for another. This person was so great that John declared he wasn't even fit to tie up his shoelaces. John is one of the greatest prophets – Jesus said so – and even this great man John considered himself unworthy to tie up his cousin's shoelaces.

"He will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire!" This man will bring cleansing of a sort that John's baptising could not touch. This man will cleanse and purify us.

- **Is sin something that belongs to an old-fashioned era?**
- **When was the last fervent act of worship you attended?**
- **When did you last feel the need to respond to the message of the Gospel but feared responding in a public way as it might be unseemly or embarrassing?**
- **Have you been baptised in the way John describes?**

Father God, You sent your Son Jesus as a refining fire, a furnace that would burn up sin and impurity in me, as cleansing soap that would clean me thoroughly. I want to bring to you my adoration and worship. Touch me with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-13 06:02 GMT

Dec 13

Matthew 1:18-25

This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David's family. But before they were married, she learned that she was going to have a baby by God's Holy Spirit. Joseph was a good man and did not want to embarrass Mary in front of everyone. So he decided to quietly call off the wedding.

While Joseph was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, the baby that Mary will have is from the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and marry her. Then after her baby is born, name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

We turn to the New Testament. Matthew places Joseph as a descendant of King David. We know this story so well.

A virgin birth was prophesied. Mary and Joseph were the ones who would have to cope with the difficulty of believing this conception to be of the Holy Spirit, and still to act in a way that would not bring shame to Mary. Jesus, was born to Mary the virgin. She did not remain a virgin, as she and Joseph went on to produce children that were theirs. Joseph knew his position as the earthly adoptive father of Jesus. Mary was his "natural" mother, though there was little natural about the conception – she'd done what mothers do, and that is to bring the conceived baby to birth.

How seriously do we believe that Jesus was born to a virgin mother? It's nonsense as far as common sense and science are concerned. Does it matter that Mary had had no relations with Joseph? If we falter on this then we have to ask if we really understand who Jesus was, because if he was not born of a virgin mother then he would have been the result of two human parents coming together. Not much room for God in that. So, if Jesus is the Word made flesh, no two human parents could make this happen.

Some branches of Christianity make a great deal of Mary being the mother of God. Logically speaking you could say that. If Jesus is God-with-us, as the prophet said, then Mary could possibly be viewed as the mother of God. Mary was the mother of human Jesus, and Jesus was both human and divine, but to talk of Mary being mother of God is to place her where she should not be. We know that God the Father has no mother, and God the Son relates eternally only to the Father, and no parenthood is specified for the Holy Spirit.

- **Why did God choose Mary?**
- **Why did God not wait until Mary was married, in order to save her shame at being pregnant out of marriage?**
- **Is the virgin birth important to our faith?**
- **How important is Mary? Does "God-with-us" roll off your tongue or thrill you?**
- **How often do you say the name Jesus in a day?**
-

***Father God, you sent us Jesus, your Son, the Word in human form. His name is God saves.
Help me to understand how you have saved me in Jesus, in which name I pray. Amen.***

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-14 06:02 GMT

Dec 14

Matthew 1:18-25

So the Lord's promise came true, just as the prophet had said, "A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel," which means "God is with us." After Joseph woke up, he and Mary were soon married, just as the Lord's angel had told him to do. But they did not sleep together before her baby was born. Then Joseph named him Jesus.

Matthew shows us that what happened had been prophesied long ago. Over many years people must have studied that prophecy and wondered what it meant. Perhaps the Jewish faith is still wondering...

This child would be God-with-us. There is absolutely no physical law that can frame or scientific approach that can comprehend the mystery and magnitude of "Immanuel". No sage, no professor, no teacher or doctor, no commentator or philosopher can fathom the mystery of God Incarnate. No political party, no national power, no king or prince, ruler, emperor or warlord can rule or reign over the Son, whose kingdom is limitless and eternal.

Matthew tells us that Joseph marries Mary in the nick of time, but he stays clear of sleeping with her until the baby was born, as to do otherwise was simply unthinkable.

There's a lot of unfounded speculation about the ages of Mary and Joseph. There is no reason to suppose that Mary was ridiculously young or Joseph advanced in years. There is a carol that starts "Now Joseph, being an old man...", but there are plenty of carols that make unfounded claims ("King Jesus hath a garden full of flowers gay"? And what was in those ships all three?/Our Saviour Christ, and his lady?)

Here's a carol worth pondering:

1. Of the Father's heart begotten,
Ere the world began to be,
Called the Alpha and Omega,
Both the source and end is He
Of all things that are,
that ever have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore!

2. O that birth forever blessed!
When the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
Bore the Saviour of our race;

And the Babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face,
Evermore and evermore!

3. O ye heights of Heaven, adore Him;
Angel hosts, his praises sing;
Powers, dominions, bow before Him,
And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Every voice in concert ring,
Evermore and evermore!

- **Does "God-with-us" roll off your tongue or thrill you?**
- **Was Jesus born out of wedlock?**
- **Where does Joseph stand in this whole affair?**

***Father God, help me to honour Mary as mother of Jesus, to understand not only the servant role she undertook but also her and Joseph's work in nurturing Immanuel to adulthood.
Amen***

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-15 06:02 GMT

Dec 15

Romans 1:1-3

From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.

God chose me to be an apostle, and he appointed me to preach the good news that he promised long ago by what his prophets said in the holy Scriptures. This good news is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ!

As a human, he was from the family of David. But the Holy Spirit proved that Jesus is the powerful Son of God, because he was raised from death.

The apostle Paul opens his letter to the church in Rome with a statement about Jesus. He describes himself as a servant, and explains that he was chosen by God to preach the good news.

It's very easy to read powerful words and to let them roll past without ever tackling them. We use and repeat lots of liturgical words in services, and they can so easily flow over. Paul says, "This good news is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ!" Take time to ponder the depth of meaning of those words, repeating them over (not in a ritualistic or methodical way but thoughtfully and before God) and asking God to bring the meaning closer to you.

God's promises can take a long time to come to fruition - the time line of prophecy stretched quite some distance into the past. The Pharisee Saul would be well-versed in the holy Scriptures, i.e. the Old Testament. He knew it well, and knew prophecies that related to the promised Messiah. However, he didn't know them all, and so his expectation of Messiah was nothing like the One who turned up. There were aspects to this person that Saul was not expecting, and as far as he was concerned the people who were claiming Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah were crazy and a dangerous threat to the faith of Israel.

Saul knew that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David, but the idea that the Messiah would bring all men to God through suffering would have gone over his head. "Saul, why do you persecute me?" was the start of his revised understanding.

After his encounter with Christ Saul realised he needed to do a lot of re-reading and re-thinking. He'd made a Christ in his image. Our Christ is bigger than that.

- **Can you think of any prophecies that Saul would not have seen as relating to the Messiah?**
- **How many of God's promises are you keeping on your back-burner?**
- **What is your image of Christ? Does it do him justice?**

Father God, we celebrate Christmas and look for the baby Jesus. Take me to a place of spiritual maturity where you reveal the depth of your love for me in sending your Son to earth. Amen,

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-16 06:02 GMT

Dec 16

Jeremiah 23:5-8

Someday I will appoint an honest king from the family of David, a king who will be wise and rule with justice. As long as he is king, Israel will have peace, and Judah will be safe.

The name of this king will be "The LORD Gives Justice." A time will come when you will again worship me. But you will no longer call me the Living God who rescued Israel from Egypt. Instead, you will call me the Living God who rescued you from the land in the north and from all the other countries where I had forced you to go. And you will once again live in your own land.

God foretells through Jeremiah that there will appear one day someone of David's line who will be a wise, just and righteous king. We can with hindsight say that this is a prophecy about Jesus but we have to be careful not to cherry-pick.

Some of the prophecies contain bits. There's a tendency when we look at them to ignore the bits that don't quite fit in with the way we want to see things – for instance, if Jesus is king how is it that Israel has not had peace and safety? These are the hard bits, and we would be wise not to try either to pretend they aren't there or to interpret them with too generous a pinch of salt lest we kill off the perhaps as yet unrevealed meaning with it.

So let's pick out what we can. It is true that if Jesus is king then there is nothing that can survive in opposition to his kingship. We must apply the dimension of time to this, as we know from our own experience that Father God has so often delayed righteous judgement on us as He waits for us to come to Him in penitence, and has not treated us as we deserve for our sins against Him.

However, Israel is not at peace – "security", the term Israel uses as a reason for all it does in the Holy Land, is not synonymous with peace. Peace is a relationship of trust between two parties.

God is promising something quite astonishing in the last part of this extract. No longer will you (Israel and Judah) call me by the old name you have used, the one that describes me as the rescuer from Egypt. I will be known as the one who brought you back from the countries into which you were scattered.

Here's a verse from a seasonal (but not Christmas-seasonal) hymn:

**God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.**

- **Why is there no justice at the moment?**
- **Can our nation claim to be just and righteous before God?**
- **What is my role in promoting righteousness and justice? Is it nothing to do with me?**

- **Why did God scatter the Jews?**
- **What should be our attitude to this nation of Israel that God does not appear to be abandoning?**
- **Were the angels hasty in proclaiming peace on earth?**
- **How near is the time that shall surely be?**

Father God, we look forward to the time when war shall be no more and peace shall cover the earth. Enable us in this world today to be messengers and heralds of the Prince of Peace and The Lord our Righteousness. Amen,

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-17 06:02 GMT

Dec 17

Luke 1:26-33

One month later God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David.

The angel greeted Mary and said, "You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you."

Mary was confused by the angel's words and wondered what they meant. Then the angel told Mary, "Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end."

Mary had no idea about what was about to happen. Joseph, neither. Here were two people engaged to be married and the biggest intervention in history was about to take place. While this may have been prophesied it would have been no preparation for Mary. However, rather than being scared out of her wits, she was "confused" until the angel explained it all to her.

Note that Joseph is from David's family. It is so important to realise that the nation of Israel was created by God as the seedbed for the Word.

The angel tells Mary that she is blessed. It is by no act of hers that she is blessed: it was not because of her purity, her graciousness or anything else. No doubt she was a typical young girl living in a tightly-knit society being the sort of person she was expected to be. Her blessedness was from God – God had blessed her. The fullness of grace was God's grace, not Mary's.

Why Mary? Why not? The Word could not come as the child of an earthly noble family as this would only get in the way of people recognising Jesus as a servant to his people (though he was more often addressed as master or teacher). His birth had to be ordinary.

- **From where would Jesus the man trace his DNA?**
- **Do angels visit these days?**
- **What if Mary didn't believe the angel? Would God have chosen another?**
- **Has Israel any purpose now that the Son of God has come?**
- **What would make God pleased with me?**

Father God, you selected little girl Mary with blessing and favour. She was true to you and responded to her calling. I want to be true to the calling you have made on me. Help me to make this a reality. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-18 06:02 GMT

Dec 18

Luke 1:34-38

Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen? I am not married!" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. Nothing is impossible for God!" Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." And the angel left her.

Mary asks the obvious question. It's wonderful how the angel doesn't explain this first and take Mary on the journey in chronological order. To God and to the angel this is no more than a technical detail. To Mary it is quite important!

And, by the way, your child will be called the Holy Son of God. Another detail the angel may not have proffered.

So the Holy Spirit will place the Word into Mary, and this will be the tiny seed of conception. It is amazing that the Word places himself into a state of unknowing humanity within one who was created through him. Pause to think about that. The birth would be very ordinary after this!

The seed would grow and develop just like we did from shapelessness to recognisable human form. For nine months this precious cargo was carried until a helpless baby popped out (yes, a man is writing this). God in man was entrusted to his mother and to Joseph for human care, feeding, cleaning, nurturing, teaching. Jesus was no different from us. How could he be?

- **Do I follow God in trust, or is one foot firmly on the ground?**
- **Do I trust that nothing is impossible for God, except when it involves me?**
- **Was giving birth to Jesus' a serene and peaceful experience for Mary?**
- **When and where was the Word made flesh?**

Father God, you selected little girl Mary with blessing and favour. She gave herself to you as a servant and accepted the call on her life without question. I want to be true to the calling you have made on me. Help me to make this a reality. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk
when:2014-12-19 06:02 GMT

Dec 19

Matthew 2:1-2

When Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem in Judea, Herod was king. During this time some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem and said, "Where is the child born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

The three (why do we think three?) astrologers/magi/wise men/kings are a mysterious bunch. Why did Matthew include them in the story of the Nativity? Was he writing a story to fit the prophecy? It's certainly a rich tale - it continues into the slaughter of the children (prophesied in Jeremiah).

God chooses to reveal something unusual to star-gazers, a star that they appear not to have seen before, or that was placed or displayed differently to them. They clearly had access to information about one called the King of the Jews, because that's who they were seeking.

Now, how does God reveal stuff to us? We have amongst our congregation a man with a 12 inch telescope (lens size, not length) that can reveal nebulae from far away in space and time. Perhaps one day he will see signs in the sky through it. We have a number of intercessors who pray regularly. Might God speak words of truth to them? Does God speak to our musicians, our workers with their various expertises and skills, or our children or retired folk?

The star-gazers became star-chasers and Son worshippers.

- **What was the last star you chased?**
- **Do you survey the world through the eyes of your particular skills and look out for signs?**
- **How much does your awareness of God at work in heaven and on earth seep into your daily life?**

Father God, open my eyes to the world around me. I do not want to look for signs just to build up my faith but in order to see what you are doing and planning. Commit me to seeking and studying the revealed truth of the Bible so that I may become more aware of your work and your promises in Christ. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-20 06:02 GMT

Dec 20

Matthew 2:3-12

When King Herod heard about this, he was worried, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?" They told him, "He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet wrote, 'Bethlehem in the land of Judea, you are very important among the towns of Judea. From your town will come a leader, who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel.' "

Herod secretly called in the wise men and asked them when they had first seen the star. He told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too." The wise men listened to what the king said and then left.

And the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were thrilled and excited to see the star. When the men went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down and worshiped him. They took out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and gave them to him. Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went back home by another road.

We should not be surprised that Herod is anxious to retain his power base. He thought he was king of the Jews! The religious people knew their scriptures and connected up this visit with the town of Bethlehem. There was clearly some consternation, though why everyone in Jerusalem should be worried is a matter of confusion to me.

The wise men are given their orders and off they go, following the star. Surely a star doesn't move like that? The laws of parallax and the vast distance away that a star would have to be from us lest it burns us up and the movement of the earth together make the story a nonsense. Whatever the nonsense, the wise men found the stable.

Did I just say stable? The house where they found Jesus was not likely to be the stable where he was born. The reason for the stable birth was that there was no room due to the census. The census was over and people had gone back. Mary was not in a state to be travelling, though that was to be tested shortly. Our nativity scenes may be fun for children but we should grow up and see it for what it was.

The gifts they'd packed were expensive – they were gifts for a king.

- **Have I ever pretended to worship or just felt unworthy to worship?**
- **Does my relationship with God start from my power base, or his?**
- **What can I give him, poor as I am? Will "give my heart" do?**
- **What does the Lord require of you? See Micah 6:8**

•When did I last survey the heavens and ask “what is man, that You, God, should care for him?” (Psalm 8)

Father God, you showed the way to wise men by an intervention in their studies. Bring me to the Word Incarnate into that which defines me - my life, my work, my expertise, whatever it may be. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-21 06:02 GMT

Dec 21

Matthew 3:1-6

Years later, John the Baptist started preaching in the desert of Judea. He said, "Turn back to God! The kingdom of heaven will soon be here." John was the one the prophet Isaiah was talking about, when he said, "In the desert someone is shouting, 'Get the road ready for the Lord! Make a straight path for him.' "

John wore clothes made of camel's hair. He had a leather strap around his waist and ate grasshoppers and wild honey. From Jerusalem and all Judea and from the Jordan River Valley crowds of people went to John. They told how sorry they were for their sins, and he baptized them in the river.

John is the last Old Testament prophet. His task was to bring people back to God and to tie the bonds of families. It was prophesied over him before his birth that he would lead many people in Israel to turn back to the Lord their God. He would go ahead of the Lord with the same power and spirit that Elijah had. And because of John, parents would be more thoughtful of their children. And people who now disobey God will begin to think as they ought to (according to Luke's account).

We may spend a little too much time on seeing a wild man with a crazy diet, but let's look deeper. This man drew crowds of people from all around to a murky river in the middle of the wilderness. His preaching was stark and precise. Confess your sins, turn back to God. And they did, in droves. As a sign of their repentance they were baptised by John (and his disciples) in the Jordan, coming out of the water a gleaming muddy colour.

The passage above might give the impression that saying sorry for sins is what you do, but the meaning is more about acknowledging the sorry state in which we find ourselves when sin is at home in use. John preached repentance, and so do we, for the forgiveness of sins. To repent is not to dress up in sackcloth and wail or to apologise, though each of these would be consistent with our wretchedness before God. Repentance is a deliberate act of turning away from the sins and, of course, from that which we allowed to bring us to the point of sinning.

- **What are the sins that beset you? Can you really be free from them?**
- **Does God punish us for our sins?**
- **Are you bound by any sins that you feel are unforgivable? What should you do?**
- **What would John say to our nation today?**
- **What is the Church saying to our nation today?**
- **What would you be saying as you stood at the Fynn River just by the railway tunnel to the crowds who were turning up?**

Father God, help me understand the state of abandonment I place myself in whenever I sin against you. My walk of repentance to your throne room is what you desire of me, yet I stay away through stubborn pride. Convict me with your Holy Spirit and show the place you have prepared for me in your throne-room as an adopted child of yours. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-22 06:02 GMT

Dec 22

Matthew 3:7-11

Many Pharisees and Sadducees also came to be baptized. But John said to them: You bunch of snakes! Who warned you to run from the coming judgment? Do something to show that you have really given up your sins.

And don't start telling yourselves that you belong to Abraham's family. I tell you that God can turn these stones into children for Abraham. An axe is ready to cut the trees down at their roots. Any tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into a fire.

Why did the religious people turn up? Were they checking John out in case he might be preaching heresy, were they going along out of curiosity? It seems that they might have only gone through the motions. They might not have been expecting the excoriating riposte that John gave them. Repentance is not a ritual. If the heart is not in it then it is as dust before God. Membership of a church carries no guarantees. Electoral rolls carry no votes in heaven. We all know that being on the sidesman, flower, lesson reading, administration or any other rota in church does not upgrade our ticket to heaven of itself. Wheat and tares grow together until the harvest comes.

You snakes – you slithery, crawling poisonous reptiles. What strong words to use of the powerful, learned, privileged and respectable religious teachers and leaders

They thought they had special privileges before God simply by being sons of Abraham. The history of the Old Testament is littered with God sifting out or destroying the useless and the bad from among his people, and pruning the good to make it better. Never sit smug in a pew.

- **With what attitude do you enter church for a Sunday service?**
- **How would you fare in a church where your membership was reviewed regularly and depended on your showing fruit consistent with repentance?**
- **What if your church disappeared overnight? Who would notice?**
- **What prevents you from being cut down at the roots?**

Father God, pull my cushion when I sit so comfortably in my faith that I do not reveal to others a life that has been saved by and walks with the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-23 06:02 GMT

Dec 23

Matthew 3:11-12

I baptize you with water so that you will give up your sins. But someone more powerful is going to come, and I am not good enough even to carry his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His threshing fork is in his hand, and he is ready to separate the wheat from the husks. He will store the wheat in a barn and burn the husks in a fire that never goes out.

John is heralding Surely we wouldn't fall like she did? Trouble is, we know too much.

• **Did John know that it was Jesus' sandals that John felt unworthy to carry?**

•

Father God,

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-24 06:02 GMT

Dec 24

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus left Galilee and went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But John kept objecting and said, "I ought to be baptized by you. Why have you come to me?" Jesus answered, "For now this is how it should be, because we must do all that God wants us to do." Then John agreed.

So Jesus was baptized. And as soon as he came out of the water, the sky opened, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down on him like a dove. Then a voice from heaven said, "This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him."

This is the first appearance of Jesus the man in this gospel. Two gospels are just only starting at this point. (We rely on Matthew and Luke for a variety of birth stories. Mark and John say nothing.) We'd left him living anonymously in Nazareth with his parents, having gone there to escape the deadly plans of Herod. Many years have passed, and during that time the boy Jesus, whose name means 'God who saves', will have reflected deeply on the sense that he was in every aspect a human being, but that he was also someone special who had a relationship with God like no other prophet, priest or king before him.

When he goes to meet John Jesus knows what he has to do. Ignoring the polite awe of John Jesus refuses to swap places and persuades him to do the same for him as he'd done for the people. This would not be a baptism of repentance but a baptism to signify the start of a ministry.

Jesus rises from the water and the world hears God's voice proclaiming.

- **When did Jesus know who he was?**
- **How do you look at the human Jesus? Was he beautiful? Did he wear white robes? Was his hair golden?**
- **Did his parents ever need to correct him?**
- **Why did Jesus get baptised?**
- **How dear was Jesus to God?**
- **Which is the most important event for mankind – Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter?**

Father God, you sent your dear Son to earth and he came in obedience and total humility and took on my humanity. Help me to see Jesus as the Word Incarnate, fully human and fully divine. Amen

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-25 06:02 GMT

Dec 25

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the time was right, God sent his Son, and a woman gave birth to him. His Son obeyed the Law, so he could set us free from the Law, and we could become God's children. Now that we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. And his Spirit tells us that God is our Father. You are no longer slaves. You are God's children, and you will be given what he has promised.

This is our last reading as we slip into Christmas. I challenge you to follow the chain of logic Paul sets out above:

God sent his Son – His Son obeyed the Law – He set us free from the Law – We may become God's children - ...

There was an appointed time Surely we wouldn't fall like she did? Trouble is, we know too much.



<http://youtu.be/MOByXwK-g94>

Happy Christmas

- **What does it mean to be an adopted child of God?**
- **What will you be celebrating over the next week?**
- **What part will Christ play in your household this Christmas?**

Say this prayer over Christmas lunch:

Father God, thank you for sending Jesus, your Son, to us so that we may through his life and death on the cross be forgiven all our sin, and through his resurrection live eternally in him. Glory to God in the highest. Amen.

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-11-30 08:02 GMT

Together Sessions

It is important when studying the bible that we are able to share thoughts and listen to other people's ideas about the passages we read. We each have experiences and insights that may not be common to everyone else.

The following is a format for meeting together. There will be some published meetings to which you are invited, but you may wish to think about the people who may not be able to get to those meetings and offer to do this with a couple of friends over a cup of tea and a piece of cake at your place or somewhere (there are some fine tea shops in the neighbourhood). It shouldn't take more than an hour and that will include the chat.

While we look forwards in our series of personal readings from the Old Testament when we meet together we will look with the Apostle Paul and the Gospel-writer John at Jesus Christ from after the event. Two readings will be very familiar to regular carol-service attenders.

You'll need some pens and small pieces of paper and your Bible.

Do not read ahead but print out this sheet and take it along to the meeting. Do not forget to bring your daily readings, too.

Pattern for meeting:

1. Meet together for refreshments and a bit of chat first. If people don't know each other well then encourage them to say a bit about themselves, where they live, family, work, hobbies, etc.
2. Look back over some of the personal readings and ask if anyone found anything useful, or difficult to understand, or challenging. The leader is not expected to know the answers as you will be looking for answers together. Please feel free to refer any questions back to someone else who can help.
3. Read the Bible passage. You can ask someone to read it out or read it out yourself.
4. Read the commentary
5. Ask people to bring up any of the questions they have attempted this week to see whether we have come to similar conclusions. Below are some more questions you might like to think about. Don't worry if any of them are just too difficult.
6. Do read the text again quite slowly, so people can feel a sense of bathing in the words.
7. For a time of prayer ask if anyone has anything they would like the group to pray about. It can be personal, family, work, or something not related to you. A simple way to encourage people to pray is to write down on a post-it or a card a few words that describe what the prayer request is and to place it in the middle of the group for someone to pick up. Two or three prayers may be plenty the first time round.

Take time to talk around church life, our worship and prayer, the things that we relate well and less well to. Talk about how we see the world, especially the things that concern us – war, famine, injustice, evil, ... Make a note on a card if something is said that perhaps could be prayed about.

Ask people if they would like to pick a card – the prayer can be as simple as reading out the words on the card, as our agreement has already been established ,and when two or three are gathered together in Jesus; name, ...!

Allow time and let people feel that there is no rush or pressure. Ask people to continue these prayers through the week, making it a special concern.

Start the prayers by saying this:

Father God, thank you for this time we've had together. We want to learn to read and share your message in the Bible and to grow together. We thank you for Jesus and all he is to us. Let's pause for a few moments to think about your presence with us now.

[pause]

We now want to bring you some prayers. Forgive our nervousness or lack of confidence. You just want us to meet with you.

[time for prayers]

Together Session 1

Colossians 1:15-18

Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen. He is the first-born Son, superior to all creation. Everything was created by him, everything in heaven and on earth, everything seen and unseen, including all forces and powers, and all rulers and authorities. All things were created by God's Son, and everything was made for him. God's Son was before all else, and by him everything is held together. He is the head of his body, which is the church. He is the very beginning, the first to be raised from death, so that he would be above all others.

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

New International Version (NIV)

Paul may be quoting a hymn or a creed – the words are quite poetic or could have even been sung as a hymn or psalm. This passage is talking about Jesus before he became Jesus and was known as the Son or the Word of God. Remember the opening line of the last lesson in the carol service – in the beginning was... [can you complete it between yourselves?]

There was no Jesus at the beginning – Jesus was the man born on earth. We are talking about God the Son or The Word of God.

It seems that everything was created by him (or in him, depending on the translation). The whole created order includes the heavenly and the earthly, the spiritual and the bodily (corporeal). We read that God created the world. God is not specifically the Father. When God spoke the world into being, we should be careful not to think of an old man with a beard, for that is an image that does not help us or honour God.

Christ is the head of the Church. THE CHURCH WAS MADE FOR HIM, NOT FOR US. By God's grace my keyboard turned itself on to Caps Lock for that. I still have in mind the person who told me she would never go back to church since they changed the Lord's Prayer from the version she was familiar with.

- **Which translation do you prefer? Can you say why?**
- **Paul says that Christ is the image of the invisible God. How can we see Jesus, as he is not visible today?!**
- **Who created the world?**
- **Who created the serpent in the Garden of Eden?**
- **Paul says we are created for him. How does that affect who and what I am and how I live my life?**

- **The Word holds everything together. Think of the children's song "He's got the whole world in his hands". How does this influence the way we view the 10 o'clock news or read the newspaper? Are there conflicts with what we believe and what we actually see?**
- **Paul says that Jesus Christ is the head of the church. How many layers of hierarchy do we then need in the Church?**
- **The Church was made for Christ and not us. In what areas of my church life do I seek to get my own way?**
- **How does Christ view the church you attend? Our worship, our love, our commitment, our outreach, our family life together, our obedience, our growth, our maturity, our discipleship, our service, our evangelising?**
- **Which one of the above would Jesus want us to get right first?**

Prayer time..

Final prayer

Father God, thank you that you showed yourself in the man Jesus, who is now the Lord Jesus Christ and sits in glory with you. Give us an understanding of who you are through Jesus and his story and through your Holy Spirit alive in us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-12-01 06:01 GMT

Together Session 2

The three sessions are to be taken when you find the time. We present them now so that you have them ready.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

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

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

NIV

This reading is so familiar that it runs the risk of being enjoyed just for the sound of it. The words are read out as the final reading in the carol service. The nine lessons and carols service as we know it dates from 1918 so it is not actually a church tradition in the way that, say, Mothering Sunday, is.

We cannot deny that the words are beautifully poetic. The images of light and darkness go well with an aura of candlelight. Life is light, light shines and captures the darkest places. The light is true and we all get some. But what on earth does this all mean!?

I do not want to leave a carol service with a "warm glow" (mulled wine notwithstanding). I do not want to walk out of the service feeling I've had my fix of seasonal cheer (ditto). I do not want to come away again still befuddled by what has actually been going on (ditto again).

I want to leave knowing that I understand this story a little more clearly than I did last year when I stood up to hear it, that God has revealed by his Holy Spirit some truth that had been hidden until this time round.

I want to go out strengthened in my faith, deeper in my relationship with Jesus Christ my Lord and brother, with God my Father, and more alive in God's Holy Spirit. Truth to tell, I want that for every service I ever attend.

The beginning happened once. The Incarnation happened once. Jesus died just once and for all. We love as humans to repeat the seasonal patterns – 4 seasons, birthdays, the Church year (a human invention and sometimes perhaps a bit of a contrivance), and because this reading will come around again next year there is a danger that we will not actually engage with it except on the superficial level.

The words above are truly amazing. Read them, ask God to reveal their meaning to you.

- **Who was the Word? By what other name is the Word known to us?**
- **What is meant by “nothing was made that was made”?**
- **This life is the light of mankind. Why, when this is a central point of the reading, do we turn the lights down and have candle-light instead?**
- **What is the Gospel writer referring to when he talks about darkness?**
- **(Group activity) List some popular Christmas Carols. Which ones grapple with and reflect the truth of the Gospel message most closely? Which ones are simply a retelling of the Nativity story? Which ones have little to do with either of these?**

Prayer time..

Final prayer

Father God, your evangelist John has written deep truths for us. We pray that by your Holy Spirit you will shine light onto these words so that they may illuminate our understanding and set a fire in our hearts that we may blaze with your light in this world. Amen.

Together 3

John 1:10-14

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

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.

NIV

He was in the world. No other faith comes anywhere near this astounding truth. It may seem a comfort to think that if people did not recognise Christ when he was on earth then how on earth can we when he is not here? It is not, however. Remember how Jesus' disciples responded when he asked about what men thought about him? Remember how Peter responded to the next question? "You are the Christ".

This was an astonishing statement. Kings and priests had been waiting for centuries for the arrival of the Christ, the Messiah. Wise and learned teachers, students of the law and zealous religious types had all been longing for this man to come. They had lined up a Messiah who was going to liberate the oppressed and bring salvation to Israel. I would expect that this was what everyone was waiting for.

But the Messiah had arrived and the people were blind. They did not recognise him. It was not because they were stupid but because they were looking for something else and their eyes were not open to the truth. It wasn't Peter figuring it out for himself that Jesus was the Christ. By himself he'd never have twigged it. The Holy Spirit had laid the truth on his heart – he revealed it to Peter. It's a good job Peter shared that with Jesus.

Perhaps we haven't quite twigged who Jesus is. No amount of study, thinking or doing will make it clearer. Rely on God's Holy Spirit to reveal the truth to us, and at a rate we can cope with.

Knowing that Jesus is the Messiah is not going to make us children of God. It is they who both receive him and believe in his name that are adopted into God's family.

- **How can I recognise Jesus Christ?**
- **How can I receive Jesus Christ?**
- **What does it mean to believe in his name?**
- **What is the legal position of the children of God? Are we adopted into full family rights?**
- **What did the Word give up in order to become flesh?**
- **Was Jesus truly God? And truly man? At the same time?**
- **Did Jesus know what Peter was about to say?**

Prayer time..

Final Prayer

Father God, these words from John's Gospel reveal a truth that is amazing. We pray that the truth becomes realised in as your Holy Spirit opens the book and shines light on the words so that they become living truth. Inspire us to continue to read the Bible and to meet together. We pray in the powerful Name, the eternal Name of Jesus Christ. Amen

Scripture taken from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.