



Day 1- Hope in hopelessness- Luke 2:1-3

In this first week of Advent we are celebrating **hope**- and it's easy for us to see why. Jesus Christ, the Hope of the world, is born! He is the ultimate expression of the love of God- undeniable proof that we matter, that we're precious, that we're important enough for God to become flesh and move into our neighbourhood.

At Christmas we remember the fact that God so loved the world that He gave everything He had to bring life and freedom and salvation. We remember that God fully embraced our fallenness and fragility, our brokenness and messiness, all so that we could be rescued.

This is a message of incredible hope- in fact, it's the *only* genuine message of hope. Nothing else can reach so far and achieve so much. The message of Christmas is perfect, sufficient hope.

And yet it came at such a hopeless time. In fact, Dr Luke takes great care to emphasise the hopelessness of the situation. **'In those days,'** he writes.

Those days when God's people were once again living in captivity and bondage. **Those days** when the worship of God was openly mocked by the faith systems of imperial Rome. **Those days** when the fate of Abraham's children was decided by emperors and governors and kings who cared nothing for Yahweh or His people.

Those days had precious little hope. And it only seemed to be getting worse. The census ordered by Augustus served a number of purposes, none of which would have encouraged any hope in the Jewish people.

It meant more efficient taxes, which would pay for more efficient oppression. It was a demonstration of Caesar's power- a single command issued in Rome had repercussions that reached around the known world. And it was a reminder that no-one could ever hope to challenge imperial authority.

And yet it was **in those days** that hope entered the world. It was **in those days** that the definitive basis for all hope stepped in and began the revolution. It was **in those days** that God assured His people that He wasn't done, it wasn't over- in fact, it was only just beginning.

Many of us find ourselves living **in those days**. It's not imperial oppression or the dismantling of our faith community. But it's just as painful, just as devastating, just as crippling. For us, **those days** may be days of sickness, days of marriage trouble, days of concern about employment or finances, or so much more.

Those days can take a thousand different forms, but they all seem to exclude the possibility of hope. But we will find, as did the people of God two millennia ago, that He does some of His best work in the most hopeless situations.

And so we can have a sure and certain hope that it's not over for us- God is not finished in our situations or circumstances. He's not through in His work in us and for us. However oppressive **those days** may seem, our God is greater.

It's been said that it'll be OK in the end- if it's not OK, then it's not the end. **Those days** do not eliminate hope- just the opposite. They create the perfect conditions for miracles.

Day 2- Hope from ashes- *Matthew 1:1, 3, 5, 6*

One of the many things which distinguishes the Bible from legends, or even from historical biographies, is the fact that it never hesitates to present its heroes ‘warts and all.’ The greatest champions of the faith so often made such a mess of it all.

They doubted and denied, they betrayed and abused, they lied and cheated. The Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11 could just as accurately be called a Rogue’s Gallery.

And yet the Scriptural authors make no attempt to cover it up or sugarcoat the facts- on the contrary, they shine a light on it. They bring into sharp focus these feet of clay, these fragile heroes, as a celebration of God’s grace and His miraculous ability to bring beauty out of dust, to bring hope out of ashes.

The genealogy of Christ is no exception. Surely, we would assume, if an exception could be made anywhere it would be here. Surely this is where Matthew could skip over some of the details- not necessarily *lie*, just omit some of the more scandalous parts of the family tree.

Alexander the Great claimed the demi-god Hercules as one of his ancestors; Julius Caesar insisted that his family was descended from the goddess Venus. Ancient heroes and rulers emphasised the greatness and grandeur of their family tree. They shone a light on the divinity of their ancestors, the glory of their bloodline.

But Matthew puts his special emphasis not on the heroes, but on the scandals. He shines his spotlight on the parts of the tree we would probably seek to cover up.

Tamar is included in the family line of Christ. Tamar, the victim of family politics and the predatory sexual instincts of her father-in-law. This woman who was abused and betrayed and left to fend for herself in an unfriendly world, is highlighted and elevated to a place of beauty and emphasis as one of the links in the chain that brought the Saviour into the world.

Rahab and Ruth are both recorded. Rahab, a prostitute rescued from hopelessness and given a new life, a new start. Ruth, a foreigner and outsider brought into the community of God's people.

Uriah's wife Bathsheba is there. Another victim of a powerful man's most terrible shame- David's refusal to control his lust, and his willingness to betray and murder a faithful servant led to Bathsheba becoming little more than an object, a prize to be won at any cost. And yet, part of her legacy is to be recorded in this genealogical record of how hope came to save the world.

There are times and seasons when we find ourselves in ashes. Things are a mess that we have either made or inherited. And it can be so difficult to find hope, to believe that things will ever be better, things will ever improve, that light could ever dawn in this place of darkness.

But God brings hope out of ashes; He brings light out of darkness. Whether the mess is our fault or not, God can redeem it and bring hope out of it if we'll allow Him. Just ask Tamar or Bathsheba, Rahab or Ruth.

Day 3- Impossible hope- Luke 1:34-38

I'm a sucker for a happy ending. I know it's not always the most artistic way for a story to end; I know it's not always the most insightful or profound, the most elegant or high-brow, but I do love a happy ending.

I want to see the couple living happily ever after; I want to see the villains conquered and the heroes triumphant; I want it all to end **well**. But the best stories don't make it easy. The best stories make you work for it.

They bring you through the darkest valleys before they let you see the brightest lights. *The Pursuit of Happiness* tells the true story of Chris Gardner, a man struggling to raise his young son when their world seems to be fraying at the edges.

Alone in the world with no place to live, they spend their nights on trains or in public toilets or fighting for an uncertain place at a homeless shelter. Every time we think there's a glimmer of hope for the Gardners, they're struck with another devastating challenge.

But it's worth it. In the end, it's all worth it. There's **hope**-incredible, impossible hope. Things get better. And so it is for the people of God, because no word from Him will ever fail- even when it's impossible.

Even when there's no way this could ever get better, there's hope. Even when I could never get past this, there's hope. Even when they could never come home, there's hope. Even when that relationship could never be mended, there's hope- because no word from God will ever fail.

Mary was a teenaged girl, doubtless with her own dreams and plans for the future. And then Gabriel appears and tells her that she has a part to play in God's eternal salvation plan. This simple peasant girl from the middle of nowhere had a role to play in the redemption and renewal of all creation.

And it would mean loss; it would mean shame; it would mean whispers and rumours about the girl who became pregnant outside of marriage. And yet even from this darkness and trouble and pain, there was the impossible hope that God would use it for good, He would use it for the ultimate and perfect good.

He would use it to carry His good news of life and freedom to the very ends of the earth, ensuring that no-one need ever again have to endure an unhappy ending, but could be a part of the wonderful celebration God was preparing.

We may find ourselves in the sad part of the story, in the unhappy part of the story. We may find ourselves in the place when hope seems ridiculous, or even impossible. But nevertheless, no word of God will ever fail.

He has assured His people that He is always at work for our good, even when it seems there's no way. He has assured us that He specialises in bringing life out of death and light out of darkness.

And so we are never hopeless. Light will always dawn for the people of God; day will always break for the people of God. The One who assured Mary assures us today- His promises never fail, and so our hope can be rock solid and ironclad.

Day 4- Hope that cannot be overcome- John 1:1-5

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the enchanted realm of Narnia is ruled by the White Witch, a tyrant whose magic keeps the land trapped in a perpetual Winter.

When Lucy, a young girl from England, finds herself in a snow-covered Narnian forest, she meets a faun named Mr Tumnus. As he shares the stories of his world with this young Daughter of Eve, he speaks quietly of the White Witch-

“It is she that has got all Narnia under her thumb. It’s she that makes it always Winter. Always Winter and never Christmas; think of that!”

It’s fitting that Christmas falls at the coldest, darkest time of the year. Christmas Day is always within days of the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year.

Many of us will leave for work in the dark and return home in the dark. We see brief patches of light and life, but Creation itself seems to be sleeping- the leaves are fallen, the grass won’t grow, so many animals have vanished for the season.

We can very easily feel like Mr Tumnus- it’s always Winter and never Christmas. And we would not be the first to feel this way. God’s people had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. They had been exiles in Babylon for decades. By the time of Christ there hadn’t been a prophet for centuries, and the people of God were yet again suffering under the oppression of pagan foreigners.

Through it all they had been waiting for a Saviour, waiting for a Messiah, waiting for One who would set it all straight and make it all right. And it surely felt like it was always Winter without any hope for something better.

But John assures us that, even in the midst of the long, cold darkness, the Light shines and has not been overcome; it **will not** be overcome. And that Light is so bright and warm and strong that it's worth waiting for. It was worth slavery and exile; it was worth suffering and sickness.

And it's worth it in our long, cold Winter. Even where we find ourselves today and in these days, when our hope seems as barren as the trees around us, the Light still shines, and so it's worth holding on.

Later on in the story, the spell cast by the White Witch begins to break, and Christmas finally comes- year after year of unbroken Winter has finally come to an end because Aslan, the Christ-type, is on the move.

Our circumstances and situations cannot overcome the light of Christ. However challenging and difficult they may be, however painful and even unbearable they may feel, our Light shines in the darkness, and will not be overcome; He **cannot** be overcome.

He will not be overcome by loneliness or fear or anxiety; He cannot be overcome by loss or grief or unemployment. His light shines in the deepest darkness, and will never, ever be overcome. It may be Winter, but Christmas is coming.

Day 5- Hope for the hopeless- *Luke 2:8-12*

We often have a tendency to romanticise certain things. Nature is peaceful and serene and beautiful, until we have to spend a night in a tent in the middle of nowhere. Then every noise becomes a monster and every stone under our pillow becomes a boulder.

So it is with shepherds in the Bible. We can easily imagine these men to be the salt of the earth, humble farmers looking after their flocks, at one with nature and each other and the world around them. And yet Scripture gives us subtle hints that this perspective is not always shared by characters in the salvation story.

Even David is treated with nothing but scorn by his own family- his father seems to forget he even exists, because he's off looking after what his brother laughingly calls, ***'those few sheep.'***

The truth is, Jewish shepherds would have commanded very little respect from their community. Not good enough to follow a rabbi, their work with the flocks and herds meant that these high school dropouts were unable to maintain the strict ritual cleanliness laws demanded by the religious leaders.

By all estimation, these shepherds were amongst the last people God could be expected to visit with such incredible news. For Him to entrust ***those people*** with a revelation like this is unimaginable.

Men with no position or power or status; men with no way of being good enough or doing well enough; men quietly despised by their peers, and openly rejected by the religious establishment. Men with no qualifications, no spiritual status, no hope.

And yet, it is to these men that God sends a choir of angels to bring a message of universe-shaking, life-transforming, shepherd-saving hope. These are the very first people to learn that Messiah has been born, that light has dawned, that hope has come at last.

And it's a hope that includes them. It's a hope that has room for them, a hope that extends even to them. It's a hope that doesn't exclude, that doesn't set entry-requirements, that doesn't have a minimum standard for behaviour or education or finances or anything else we could imagine.

Jesus Christ comes and offers hope to every single person, regardless of who they are or what they've done or where they've been. And it's a hope that transforms those who receive it. The shepherds didn't just return to their work with the flocks as if nothing had happened.

No, they returned glorifying God and praising Him for what they had seen and heard, and they spread the word concerning what had been told to them. These shepherds became the first Gospel missionaries, telling anyone who would listen about the new hope that had been given to them and to the entire world.

The hope that Christ brings reaches even us. However unlikely it may be, however undeserved we may be, it reaches us. Right where we are, even if we're sitting on a hill watching sheep. The hope of the Gospel reaches us, and it transforms us. It makes us new creations with a new purpose, a new drive, a new fuel for living.

No-one needs to be written off from Gospel hope, because no-one needs to be written out of the Gospel story.

Day 6- hope for the mission- John 1:6-7

I joked during this last Summer's heatwave that, had I known Wales got this hot, I would never have come. I obviously wasn't serious. Not entirely.

But that constant, unbroken heat can often be oppressive, even for the most ardent sun-lover. Every day we look to the sky hoping for even the slightest sign of rain; we look to the dying grass and the hard, cracked ground, and we dream of showers, we dream of rain, we dream of a flood that will come and bring new healing, new life, new vitality. We hope for something, we hope for **anything**.

So it was for the people of God before John the Baptist burst on to the scene. Scripture records no prophets for around four centuries between the books of Malachi and Matthew. God seemed to have fallen silent.

For the community of faith, at times He must have seemed distant, remote, unconcerned, uninvolved. And then John arrives and begins preaching and teaching and baptising, and we're told here in v7 that he did so to prepare people for the work of Christ, **so that through him all might believe**.

John came and promised that rain was coming. He promised that the ground that was dry and cracking, the ground that was dead or dying would soon erupt into new life, new vibrancy, new hope. Because Jesus was coming.

And His Gospel, His Good News of life and freedom and salvation, it wasn't limited or contained; it wasn't for a select few; it wasn't for those who were good enough or who had worked hard enough.

It was for all people, everywhere and everywhen. Everyone could be a part of His story. Everyone could accept His hope.

We can look around us and see dry ground, cracked earth, cloudless skies. We see a world desperate for rain, desperate for a move of God that they don't understand, that they don't even realise they need. It's a world that desperately needs new life.

And it can seem hopeless. We can be tempted to despair, because how God could ever move in a generation like this? How could He ever reach people like that? How could He ever bring healing to this depth of brokenness, light to this impenetrable darkness?

But Jesus Christ came so that through Him all might be saved, all might find life, all might let go of systems of death and brokenness and fallenness, and enter into the fullness of life.

And so we can rest assured in the fact that there is hope for our mission as the people of God in the world. We are called and commanded to be the Body of Christ in the world, carrying on the work of Christ in the world.

And at times it seems too big, too much, too hard. At times we can despair that there's just no way. How could people like us do God's work when this ground is so painfully dry, so painfully hard?

But our hope is the assurance of God that all can believe, all can be a part of the story, all can take their seat at the table. Our labour is not in vain, our work is not worthless. It's already raining.

Day 7- the foolishness of hope- *Matthew 1:22-23*

The Shawshank Redemption tells the story of a number of men in a brutal New England prison. At its heart, it's a story about **hope**. An inmate named Red tells his friends that hope is a dangerous thing- it can drive you insane. It has no place in prison.

One prisoner, Andy, disagrees. **Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things**. He knows that when everything seems dark and we have every reason to despair, it's **then** that hope is most vital, most essential, most life-giving.

And there will be times when that hope seems foolish, when it seems crazy, when it even seems **dangerous**. Like Red, we can be tempted to bury our hope deep down because it just seems to be setting us up for inevitable failure, inevitable disappointment.

But God seems to bring His people to a place of crazy faith, foolish hope, so that they can be even more encouraged when He steps in and does the impossible.

He did it with Abraham- the New Testament writers can tell us in two separate places that he was **as good as dead**, and yet God promised to make him a father of nations. There were innumerable younger men who were capable of bearing strong children and becoming nation-builders, but God chose Abraham and assured him that this foolish hope would come to pass.

He did it with Moses. He led His people out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery with incredible signs and wonders, and then brought them right to the shore of the Red Sea. Water before them and Pharaoh behind, everything seemed lost. Surely He could have brought them by some other road?

And yet He parted the sea and led His people through with a wall of water to their left and their right, so that they would never forget that He is the God of foolish hope.

He did it with David. He took a simple shepherd boy, forgotten by his father and despised by his brothers, and had him anointed king of Israel, assuring him that he is the one who will lead his people to greatness, even if the path leads through one giant after another.

And He does it with Joseph. The angel assures this simple carpenter that his young fiancée will conceive and give birth to the Son of God, in keeping with promises made through Isaiah centuries before.

God assures Joseph that the impossible will happen, the unimaginable and unprecedented will happen, that which no human mind could grasp or human plan engineer, it will certainly happen because God has set His heart and mind upon it, and so however impossible and crazy and foolish the hope, it is ironclad and rock solid.

What was true for Abraham and Moses, what was true for David and Joseph, it remains true for us today. He is still the God of foolish hope, the God who is able to do ***immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine***, and so none of the situations and circumstances of our life are hopeless or helpless.

The advertising for The Shawshank Redemption said, ***'Fear can hold you prisoner; hope can set you free.'***

However foolish it may seem.



Week Two

Day 8- Peace in chaos- Luke 1:1-7

At times, Christmas can seem like the least peaceful time of the year. Anyone who has ever left their Christmas shopping to the last moment can testify to that- in the midst of panic-buying, aggressive shoppers and tired staff, there seems to be very little peace to be found.

Even when all the planning and preparation is complete, many of us still can find very little peace. Between wrapping and cooking, family meals and family fights, peace seems to be a rare commodity.

We can, perhaps, find some comfort in the fact that this is perfectly in keeping with the very first Christmas. Finding peace in the midst of chaos may well be the oldest Christmas tradition we have.

Joseph and Mary had already spent months facing the problems and struggles that come from suspicious pregnancies in a small rural community. Now they have to travel all the way to Bethlehem to register for the Roman census- around an 80 mile journey, which would have taken at least four days.

Then they arrive in Joseph's ancestral hometown only to discover that the crowd has beaten them to it. Bethlehem is full to bursting with travellers, and the only place they can find to deliver the Child is literally fit only for animals.

There seems to have been little room for peace in their Christmas, just as there often seems to be little room for it in ours. Oftentimes peace cannot be **found**- it has to be **accepted**.

The young parents undoubtedly found the peace they desperately needed when they held their newborn son. Even amidst all the chaos of the pregnancy and the journey and the delivery, there can be no doubt that they felt the peace that can only come from God when they heard and saw and held their baby, their Saviour.

Peace cannot be bought at a store or ordered online. It cannot be giftwrapped or served on a plate. However hard we strive, however much we do, the peace that we most desperately and urgently need has only one source- Jesus Christ.

And the peace He offers is not something that can only be found on a mountaintop; it is not attained after years of silent meditation; it is not earned through self-punishment and self-denial.

The peace of God is a gift of His grace, freely given to all who will do as His earthly parents did- just be in His presence. Just hold Him, and allow Him to hold us.

The chaos may not cease. Before the Holy Family left Bethlehem, a tyrant had every male child in the area murdered in a futile attempt to kill the Messiah.

The chaos may continue; it may even increase. But it cannot diminish or spoil the peace that God gives. It cannot overcome or overwhelm the peace that comes from sitting at the feet of Jesus. The adult Christ would promise that He gives us unmatched peace [John 14:27]. As the old song says, ***I've got something that the world can't give, and the world can't take it away.***

Day 9- Sacrificed peace- *John 1:1-2*

At some point in life, I ceased waking up early on Christmas morning. At some point, my love for sleep outweighed my love for presents. Now that I have a wife and son, neither of whom share my priorities on Christmas morning, I'm back to waking up obscenely early.

But however we manage our time on Christmas morning, most of us have, at some stage tremendous peace that can be found as we lie dozing in bed. The challenges of yesterday have passed, the challenges of today haven't yet arrived. We can rest, we can recharge, we can find some measure of peace.

But on Christmas morning, even I can find the energy to get up and get going earlier than usual. The joy set before us far outweighs even the peace that can be found in bed. The love of my family, my love **for** my family, is more than enough to draw me away from that peace, that quiet, that rest.

From before Creation was created, God **was**. He enjoyed perfect, constant communion and fellowship and relationship within Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's what John references in the opening of His Gospel- the Greek could be read as, **He was face to face with God in the beginning.**

Endless and unimaginable eternities passed as the Trinity enjoyed each other in perfect love and perfect peace. And yet Christ chose to leave it. He chose to sacrifice it. He chose to surrender that peace as He entered a broken world, a fallen world, a world full of sharp edges and broken pieces.

He chose to leave the glories of Heaven and dress Himself in rags of flesh. He embraced a life in which He would know hunger and tiredness, in which He would experience loss and mourning, in which He would be denied and betrayed, beaten and abused. He chose to enter into a life He knew would end in the brutality of the cross, and then He chose to descend into Hell itself.

And right at the climax of His suffering, He endured the inconceivable- the breaking of the unity the Trinity had enjoyed since before eternity. **Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani...My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** [Mark 15:34]

Christ willingly gave up the peace that only exists in Heaven; He willingly gave up the peace of perfect unity and community in the Holy Trinity; He willingly entered into the mess and chaos and brokenness of this old world.

And He did it out of love. There was nothing that could have forced Him to do it; there was nothing that could have placed Him under obligation to do it. It was motivated by His immeasurably vast love for us, and the desire to bring us into the same peace the Trinity had been enjoying from all eternity.

Peter tells us that, through Christ, **we may participate in the divine nature** [2 Peter 1:4]. That means we are invited by God Himself to join Him in His peace, to experience that peace for ourselves. Christ, in a divine exchange, sacrificed His peace for a time, so that we can experience it forever.

Day 10- Peace interrupted- Matthew 1:18

Casting Crowns have song named *Dream for You*. The second verse imagines God speaking to Mary-

***Hey Mary, I've heard you've been dreaming,
Making plans for your big wedding day,
You and Joseph are gonna be
The picture perfect family,
Maybe a couple of kids down the road,
But I've been thinking...***

Before they were each visited by angelic messengers, neither Mary nor Joseph could ever have imagined what God had in store for them. They could never have dreamed of the part they would play in salvation history, the contribution they would make to God's redemption story.

Up until now, their dreams must have been very similar to those of their peers and neighbours- an honest living, a loving family, as long and peaceful a life as they could manage together. And then they receive this commission from God to be parents of Messiah, mother and father to the One who would change everything.

Their hopes and dreams for the life ahead of them changed dramatically. Many of us would have resisted or resented a call that required us to make so many sacrifices, to implement such dramatic changes to our life. Within the next few years, Mary and Joseph relocated their entire lives to Bethlehem, then fled to Egypt as refugees, only finally to return home to Nazareth.

Their quiet, peaceful life had been rudely and dramatically interrupted. And yet we are given no clue in Scripture as to any resentment or bitterness on their parts. In fact, almost every time Joseph is mentioned in the book of Matthew, it is in the context of swift and unhesitating obedience.

The interruption of their peace was light and momentary when weighed against the privilege being a part of God's story. Their part wasn't always easy. In fact, not long after the birth Mary is promised that, **a sword will pierce your own soul** [Luke 2:35].

Their role in salvation history brought challenges and trials, it brought pain and tears. But there is no hint that they ever regretted their choice. In fact, Mary was such a part of the story that she was even at the foot of the cross watching her Child die [John 19:26-27].

Following Christ along the way will often mean allowing our peace to be interrupted. It will often mean our plans being disrupted, our agenda being rewritten and even overruled. But Mary and Joseph are a part of that **great cloud of witnesses** assuring us that it's always, always worth it.

They would promise us that any sacrifice on our part is far outweighed by the infinite richness of following Jesus. They would encourage us that any peace we allow to be interrupted is repaid ten thousand times over and more besides.

So don't resist God's interruptions. Welcome them, embrace them, and allow Him to take you further than you've ever imagined possible.

Day 11- In need of peace- Luke 2:6-7

If you have access to the Internet, I would encourage you to take a moment today to look up a painting named *The Nativity* by Gary Melchers. It is a beautiful and profound representation of the Holy Family, seemingly hours after the birth of Christ.

They're in what appears to be a cold and barren cellar, Mary lying propped up against some cart wheels as she sleeps, presumably to keep the cold and damp from sinking into her bones.

Joseph sits awake, to my mind looking utterly terrified. Here is a man very aware of just how out of his depths he finds himself. Any new father may feel that way, but Joseph seems painfully aware that this helpless newborn is the Son of the Living God, made flesh in a way that no-one could ever have imagined.

A waterbowl and jar lie beside Mary, draped in a few rags. The delivery clearly happened right on the floor, in the most inauspicious way a king could possibly arrive.

It seems an utterly hopeless scene, except for one thing. In all of Joseph's exhaustion and concern, in all of his wonderings about what the future holds for him and his young family, in all the chaos they've just faced and may well face in the future, his eyes are resolutely fixed upon the one source of light in the entire painting- the manger holding the newborn Saviour.

A terrified father sitting beside a drained mother can find his peace, he can draw his strength, he can be renewed in his hope by the One who lies wrapped in cloths, sleeping in a manger. Jesus is literally the bright spot in the scene.

Many of us can so easily feel like Joseph- out of our depths, barely keeping our head above water; living in what the old Chinese proverb calls ‘interesting times’; facing chaos today and uncertainty tomorrow.

Peace seems elusive, it even seems impossible. And yet for the people of God, Christ is present. He is always intimately, sufficiently present. And like Joseph in the painting, His light is enough to bring peace. His light is enough to strengthen and sustain. His light is enough to grant us **peace**.

And so we can launch out again into a chaotic world, into a restless world, into a world that seems designed and built to keep us in perpetual chaos. And in the midst of it all, we can be assured that **we will make it**.

Like the disciples had to learn decades later, Christ will never sink, however rough the storm, and if we are in His boat we will not sink either. We may not be able to laugh at the storm, as the old song says we should- the disciples weren’t laughing, and they **literally** had Jesus in the boat. But we can have an ironclad certainty that this storm will pass, and it will never, ever bring us under.

When we are most in need of peace, our best course of action is to follow the advice of Joseph in Melchers’ painting- **fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith**- the One who gives peace when we need it most, right in the heart of the storm.

Day 12- Peace on earth- Luke 2:13-14

December 1914 is one of the most famous Christmas Days in history. Known as ‘The Christmas Truce,’ soldiers all along the trenches crossed over No Man’s Land to exchange prisoners, food and even small gifts. There were joint burial services, carol singing, and even the famous football game.

One German officer recorded, ***so after all the Christmas festival, the festival of love, caused the hated enemies to be friends for a short time.*** But unfortunately it truly was only for a short time. Within days the truce was just a memory, and the increasingly bitter conflict had begun again. Indeed, the following year such truces were much more rare, and by 1916 they were all but non-existent.

It has been estimated that since 1939 there have been only 26 days of continuous, unbroken peace across this planet, and some scholars have called that figure overly optimistic. Up until the 20th Century, there was widespread acceptance of the idea that humankind was morally evolving, that very soon war would be obsolete and we would truly know peace on earth.

In horrifying contrast, the last century was undoubtedly the bloodiest in human history, with two global wars and innumerable localised conflicts.

In all of this, the angelic promise of ***peace*** seems laughable; it seems insane; it seems impossible. Until we realise that the peace of which they assure us is something far deeper and far higher than simply the absence of conflict between nations. It is even greater and more significant than good relations with those around us on a personal level.

The peace the angels promised with the birth of Christ is peace between God and His people. It is the re-creation, the re-making, the re-forging of a relationship that was broken by the Fall of our first parents. It is the enabling, by grace, to live in union with God, no longer alienated from Him, no longer running and hiding from Him as did Adam and Eve.

It is the knowledge that ***there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*** [Romans 8:1]; the certainty that in His amazing love, lavished upon us, ***we should be called children of God*** [1 John 3:1]; the absolute assurance that nothing we could ever face, nothing we could ever do, nowhere we could ever go ***will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*** [Romans 8:39].

This peace is not merely the absence of conflict. It is not a treaty signed between nations or a football match played between trenches. It is peace with God, the healing of a wound that stretches back to the Garden of Eden, the restoration of that which was once so terribly broken.

And so this peace is available in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, even in the middle of a warzone. It cannot be stolen from us and we cannot be excluded from it, because it has been perfectly won for us by Christ.

Day 13- Future peace- Luke 2:13-14

I once told Nathan about computer games when I was growing up. Some of us may remember the Stone Age when computer games came, not on discs or as digital downloads, but on cassette tapes. If you wanted to play a game, you had to be prepared for the long-haul, because loading could take as long as 15 minutes!

Today, we're used to instant gratification. Our food, our entertainment, even our commutes- we expect everything to happen **right now**. I can't be the only one who marks the point in a neighbouring queue where I would have been if I had only joined it, instead of the one I chose.

But the angelic chorus encourages God's people to take the long view. It reminds us that what we see and experience, what we suffer and endure, **it will not always be this way**. Things will not always be broken. They will not always be spoiled. We will not always have to live in a place of broken pieces and sharp edges.

And we will not always live in a world where peace is rare, where it is brief, where it is hard won.

The angels remind us that there is coming a day when God's peace will flood all of Creation, when all that is will be saturated with perfect, cosmic peace. It will be peace with each other, peace with the created order, and most wonderful of all, peace with God.

Because these are the three ways in which the Fall of our first parents stole peace. They were no longer at peace with each other- their immediate reaction after eating the forbidden fruit was shame at each other's appearance. Their peace as husband and wife was lost.

Their peace with creation was spoiled- the ground itself was cursed because of their sin; the animal kingdom would henceforth be a savage place of tooth and claw. Paul can say that creation itself is **groaning** [Romans 8:22] because it has lost its peace.

But most tragically of all, the Fall robbed Adam and Eve of peace with God. When they heard His voice, keen to enjoy relationship with them, their instinctive response was to run and hide.

The angels assured the shepherds that the Saviour had come and He was the **Prince of Peace** [Isaiah 9:6], and there was coming a Day when the peace that He won, the peace that He achieved through His victory at the cross, would drive out and drive away everything that would diminish and destroy.

And so it's worth holding on. It's worth running our race with perseverance, because the peace that Christ will soon usher in is worth it all. The peace that His people enjoy now, the peace that is available to all people, everywhere and everywhen, it is only a foretaste. Greater, deeper, eternal peace is on its way.

As CS Lewis wrote at the conclusion of the adventures in Narnia,

Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no-one on earth has ever read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Day 14- Ambassadors of peace- Luke 2:15-20

We live in an age of **spoilers**. In case you're not sure what that means, it's when someone finishes a book or watches a movie or completes a TV series before anyone else has had the opportunity, then reveals a huge plot point or even the entire conclusion, absolutely ruining the experience for others who haven't seen the film or read the book or watched the show.

Theologically speaking, people who do this are **the worst**.

There are even individuals who do it deliberately. Some years ago, a highly-anticipated novel was released, and a number of individuals read its 600 pages overnight, simply so that they could drape a huge banner from a bridge overlooking a busy motorway in the attempt to spoil its conclusion.

But not all spoilers are wrong. Not all spoilers are an evil. In fact, some spoilers are to be embraced. They are to be encouraged. Some truths are so powerful, so wonderful, so revolutionary and world-changing and life-saving that they have to be shared, they have to be spread as widely and quickly as possible.

These are truths far more powerful, far more wonderful than how a movie ends or a novel concludes. These are truths so eternally significant that the entire world needs to see and hear and experience them for themselves.

So it was with the message of peace that the shepherds carried. When they met the Christ-child, we're told that **they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child**. As they left, they did so, **glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen**.

Spoiler alert- everything has changed! A new day has dawned, a new hope has arisen, a new peace is now possible! The revolution has begun in a manger in Bethlehem. The entire world has changed overnight, and nothing will ever be the same again.

This was a message far too important for the shepherds to keep to themselves. They felt compelled to share it with all who would listen, with all whom they encountered. These simple herdsmen were the first ambassadors of the Gospel- Messiah had come, the Kingdom of God had drawn near, Heaven had stepped down and touched Earth and had brought peace.

We are inheritors of that message and that mission. Our world is desperate for peace. Kings and emperors, generals and premiers, they have all promised some variation of **peace in our time**. But this broken world has made liars of them all.

But God's people are ambassadors of a peace that passes understanding; a peace that transcends borders and boundaries; a peace that isn't won at the end of a rifle, but is achieved through who Christ is and what He has done.

This is a message we cannot afford to keep to ourselves. So, by God's grace and with God's help, may each of us and all of us follow in the footsteps of these very first missionaries, and spread the word concerning what we have seen and heard and experienced for ourselves.

Day 15- Joy in disappointment- Matthew 1:18

Children are often wonderful teachers, especially when they're receiving gifts. Most adults have learned how to express thanks and appreciation for even the most disappointing of gifts.

Socks! How did you know?

What an unusual jumper, thanks so much!

My goodness, what an interesting flavour this cake has, thanks for baking it yourself!

Children, on the other hand, have often not learned this etiquette, and so are sometimes brutally frank in their assessment of such presents. If they are unhappy or uninterested, they seem to show very little hesitation in expressing their true feelings.

And yet, how often do the most unexpected things lead to the most joy? How often do the most unusual, seemingly uninteresting things, bring the most pure and unbridled joy to the heart? There's a reason clichés become clichés- because more often than not, they're accurate. And there's a reason for the cliché of the child playing with the box more than the toys contained therein.

Joseph could not have been expecting much joy. Matthew presents this earth-shattering, reality changing news in stark terms- ***Before they came together, [Mary] was found to be pregnant.***

There's no sense of drama, no hint of the heartache, the disappointment, the anger Joseph must have felt at the news of this seeming betrayal. Joy must have been far from his mind and far from his heart.

The fact of the matter is, when we look at the first Christmas without the veneer of Christmas cards and Nativity scenes, it's a mess. And yet God redeemed it. From that mess He brought life, He brought light, He brought hope- He brought joy.

Other than brief snippets of Jesus' youth, the Gospels give us no information about the decades between His birth and the beginning of His ministry. But Luke tells us that **Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.** [Luke 2:52]. Surely these were years of joy for Him and His family?

It's always dangerous to speculate when Scripture is silent, but a former pastor of mine used to say that these years were for Joseph and Mary- to enjoy their Child, to teach Him the family business, to share in the joy that He brought to their home. (It begs the question, perhaps- did they ever say to their other children, **Why can't you be more like your Brother?!**)

Many of us have messy lives. Many of us will have a messy Christmas. But we can know, as Joseph surely discovered, that God can weave that mess into a tapestry of surpassing beauty. He can redeem that mess and use it to bring unspeakable joy.

Our mess is not the end. God can take it and use it to bring us to a place that seems impossible, a place that seems unreachable - a place of genuine, soul-deep joy.

Day 16- Joy in who God is- *Matthew 1:23*

When we first moved to Wales, we had to repeat the single most challenging building project of my entire life- Nathan's bed. This monstrosity had left me exhausted, sore and frustrated when we first built it, and now we had to do it all over again.

And in spite of offers of help from our new Church family, I was adamant that we could do it ourselves.

I was painfully, dangerously, **wrong**.

Human beings are built for community; we are built to be **together**. We are built for relationship with each other, as a shadow of the fact that we are built for relationship with God.

And yet, when our First Parents fell in the Garden of Eden, that perfect relationship with God was broken, almost irrevocably. Almost. Because Jesus Christ is Immanuel- He is **God With Us**. He is God living in our flesh and walking in our shoes; He is God facing a world full of broken pieces and sharp edges; He is God moving into our neighbourhood and making His dwelling amongst us

God in Christ is literally moving Heaven and Earth in order to restore that perfect, intimate relationship. His heart has never been **distance**, but always **intimacy**. It has never been **separation**, but always **union**. And we can see this reaching its perfect fulfilment and completion in Revelation 21:3-

God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.

And it is all the result of what we call **the Incarnation**- God becoming flesh at Bethlehem; God becoming Immanuel. Through this miracle of grace, the human family can once again know the joy of being in relationship with God; the joy of being His and knowing He is ours; the joy of having God *with us*, wherever we are and whatever we face.

This is something prophets and priests and kings dreamed of and prophesied about for millennia. It's something our spiritual ancestors in the First Testament longed for and pointed towards, and it's something that is perfectly fulfilled in Christ.

And so when we face the troubles and storms of life, **and we will**, we can know that Christ is Immanuel- He is with us. When we face difficult decisions and difficult people, He is with us. Joys are all the sweeter because He is Immanuel; sorrow can be endured because He is Immanuel. Loneliness is eased because He is with us; burdens can be borne because He is with us.

It is not about our good behaviour or our most strenuous efforts- it is simply because of who He is. God became Immanuel in His amazing grace and His extravagant love; He remains with His people and for His people for exactly the same reason.

And so even when we don't deserve it, even when we haven't earned it, He remains Immanuel, He remains with us, He remains the most basic and foundational reality of the people of God.

And that is reason for joy.

Day 17- Joy in what God has done- *Matthew 1:21*

By this point in Advent, expectations are reaching an explosive point in many of our homes. Excitement is building as certain members of our household watch their calendars with feverish intensity. We just can't wait for Christmas to finally arrive! The waiting seems to have gone on for an eternity- we've had to exert superhuman patience as one day crawls into another.

The people of God in Scripture could relate. As year merged into decade merged into century, Messiah **still** hadn't arrived. This Hero who would change everything, who would set everything straight and make everything right, this Figure prophesied and expected right from moments after the Fall in Eden, He still hadn't come. He still hadn't arrived.

Expectations were varied for Messiah. Some expected a warlord in the mould of David- a conqueror who would drive out the Romans and restore Israel to her place of glory. Others imagined a priest-king or a custodian of the Law- someone who would perfectly fulfil all of the legal requirements of righteousness. Others envisaged some mysterious figure emerging out of nowhere, or a herald of the end of all things.

In truth, when Messiah came He was unlike anything most people expected, but was everything that everyone needed. He didn't come to do anything as trivial as secure a military conquest; He didn't come with fire and brimstone; He didn't take the throne in Jerusalem and usher in a new day of religious reform.

Instead He came to accomplish that which was most desperately and urgently needed. He came to do the work that no-one else

could do, but that everyone, everywhere painfully needed. He came to win the only victory that mattered, to defeat the only Enemy that counts.

Jesus came to save His people from their sins.

Note, He didn't just come to save us **in** our sins; He didn't save us to go **back** to our sins or to go **on** in our sins. No, He came to do a work so complete, so perfect, so once-and-for-all that all those who trust in Him and walk with Him along the way could be saved, once and for all, **from** their sins.

That we could be saved from the power and dominion of sin right here and right now, no longer living as the **slaves** Christ warns us of in John 8:34, but can instead be truly, fully free.

The name 'Jesus' is from the same Hebrew root as 'Joshua,' which can help us understand just how complete is the victory He has won for us. Like Joshua, Christ came to lead His people into the inheritance promised to us so long ago; He came to triumph **fully** over enemies far too big and far too strong for us to handle; He came to tear down walls and drive out that which would destroy us; and He asks us to choose for ourselves, even this very day, whom we will serve.

Christ brings us the joy of victory, the joy of freedom, the joy of being once and for all saved from our sins.

Day 18- Joy in His mindfulness- Luke 1:46-49

There is a common occurrence in our home. The quiet peace will be shattered by a sudden scream of indescribable agony. Sarah or myself will jump up and rush to wherever our son is, convinced by his screams that he's being torn apart by wolves.

When we finally reach him, in a panicked rush we'll ask, what's wrong? What happened? 'I tripped going up the stairs...I nipped my finger in the door...I fell over my own feet.' It could be any number of explanations, but the cries of agony have convinced us that a trip to the hospital is inevitable- surely anything causing this amount of pain is an emergency!

When we probe deeper and ask if everything's ok, instantly the situation changes. 'Yeah, I'm fine!' Then play resumes as normal. The pain, if it was ever present at all, has suddenly vanished.

The only medical care that is really necessary is an expression of concern. The only attention and assistance that is needed is an awareness of the situation- an acknowledgement that something bad has happened, but we know, we care, we're interested and involved.

Mary's song, known as the **Magnificat**, is an acknowledgement that things in the world are not right. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer; corruption is rife and abuse is rampant. Things have been broken, things have been twisted, things have just not been the way they ought to have been.

But the Magnificat is nevertheless an expression of praise, a song of worship, because God **has been mindful**. God is aware, God is

involved, God is present in the pain of His people, He is active in the suffering of His own.

We can hear echoes of Exodus 3:7-8-

The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down...

God was mindful of the Roman occupation. He was mindful of the contempt in which His people were held. He was mindful of the fact that His temple had been despoiled and His Law mocked. He was mindful that things were **broken**.

But more than this, He was aware that the Romans were the least of the problems facing His Creation. The universe itself was twisted and spoiled, it was damaged and off-course. Sin and death, never a part of His design, were a cancer that ruined and poisoned everything.

But God was mindful. And in His mindfulness, He acted. In His mindfulness, He moved. In His mindfulness He stepped in to bring life, to bring freedom, to bring joy. To paraphrase CS Lewis, the Divine Playwright wrote Himself into His play to change the story, to bring about a happier ending than anything we could ever have imagined.

As He was mindful of the suffering of His people in Egypt and under Rome, as He was mindful of the suffering of all Creation under the poison of sin, so He is mindful of our suffering; He is mindful of **your** suffering. And in His mindfulness, He **has** acted and **will** act and is acting **right now**. And He will bring joy.

Day 19- Joy for all the people- Luke 2:10-12

Christmas is, for so many of us, a time of incredible happiness. It's a time for family, a time for gifts, a time for food; it's a season of light in the midst of darkness, a time of celebration in the midst of the cold. Many of us, perhaps even most of us, have innumerable reasons for happiness in the Christmas season.

But this happiness is not universal. For many of us our thoughts will be dominated this Christmas, not by those seated around the table, but by the empty chairs. There will be those whose trees are not surrounded by presents; there will be those who struggle to keep the house warm through the long, dark nights. Others will struggle with their mental health around this special season, or with the mental health of those they love.

There are many, many reasons why people may not know the happiness that is expected around Christmas. But it is so important for us to realise that **happiness** and **joy** are not the same thing.

Happiness depends upon **happenings**. When life is good, when our circumstances are favourable, when our situations are positive, we'll know happiness. We're happy because we're not facing struggles or trials, we're happy because the road is smooth and the seas are calm.

But when storms come, when the path is hard, when we're facing the giants of life, it is only natural for us to lose that sense of happiness.

If we're lonely this Christmas, we don't need to feel strange that we're not euphoric with happiness. If we're grieving the loss of one we love; if we're facing challenges in our finances or our health; if

we're not sure what the new year will bring, or we're regretting the decisions we've made throughout the past year, then it's only natural that this happiness is absent.

And that's ok. Because joy is something far greater and richer than our happiness. Joy comes from a spring far deeper than situations and circumstances. True joy is rooted in something outside of ourselves and beyond the challenges and trials of life.

And the joy that can only come through our life in God and His life in us, the joy that is freely offered because of all Christ has done and given, this joy is available to us all. The angel didn't proclaim a message of happiness. He didn't promise an easier life. He didn't assure these shepherds of an end to Roman oppression or a newfound respect from their neighbours. The angel didn't promise that they'd be **happy**.

He promised **joy**, and he assured them that it was for all people, everywhere and everywhen. He assured them that this deeply rooted and foundational joy was being poured out lavishly from the heart of God, and that it was all because of the Baby born in Bethlehem.

It had nothing to do with happiness or happenings. It wasn't because things were getting easier or because the shepherds had developed a more positive outlook on life. It was because of who God is, because of what God had done.

Our joy can be as solid as a rock this Christmas, regardless of where we find ourselves and what we're facing. Not because of situations or circumstances, but because Christ is born in Bethlehem, and He brings His people **joy**.

Day 20- Joy because we are highly favoured- Luke 1:26-30

Many of us will have grown up in Sunday School singing,

*I'm special because God has loved me,
for He gave the best thing that He had to save me...
Help me feel Your love right now,
To know deep in my heart,
That I'm your special friend.*

For a long time that song bothered me. Because the fact of the matter is, God's love is so cosmically and eternally universal that it reaches every single son of Adam and daughter of Eve. There has never been anyone in all of salvation history, in their lowest and vilest moments, who has been unloved by God.

His relentless, incessant, ironclad love reaches queens and paupers, tyrants and monsters. In short, there is nothing special about being loved by God. In one sense, it is the most ordinary and commonplace thing imaginable- we are one tree in an immeasurably vast forest that is adored by God.

And yet...perhaps God is able to love us as if we were special. Perhaps His love is so perfect, perhaps His grace is so amazing, perhaps His kindness is so awesome that He is able to look upon each and every one of us and call us His special friend.

My first pastor used to say, I don't know if God has favourites, but He seems especially fond of me.

God is such a perfect Father that He doesn't pick and choose whom He loves, nor to whom He **shows** His love. Jesus assures us

that God's goodness to us does not depend upon our righteousness-

He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. [Matthew 5:45]

God is good all the time, and He is good to all. So good, in fact, that every single one of us should feel like we are His favourite. So good that all of us should feel like Gabriel's greeting was addressed to us- we are highly favoured! We must be especially precious to God, because just look at how good He is to us!

Look at how He blesses us with health and strength and daily bread. Look at how He provides us with so many people who love us, in our family, our community, our Church. Look at how He fills our cups to overflowing with one blessing after another. Most especially of all, above and beyond everything else, look at the price He paid for us.

He stepped down into a fallen and fragile world, wrapping Himself in fallen and fragile flesh. He suffered all of the trials and troubles that this old world could throw at Him, and He even took upon Himself our guilt, our twistedness, our ***out-of-stepness***, and paid the price for it all.

We are highly favoured. God doesn't play favourites, but in His wisdom and kindness, He is able to treat every one of us as though we were His special friend. And this is surely cause for constant and indescribable joy.

Day 21- Joy in Justice- Luke 1:51-55

Confession time. There is a petty streak in me of which I'm not proud. When I notice a particularly aggressive driver on the road, weaving in and out of lanes, driving so close to the car in front that it seems as if they want to climb into the backseat, I keep an eye out for them at the next traffic jam we encounter.

And my heart leaps when I notice that all of their aggression, all of their dangerous driving, all of their selfishness has earned them precisely **nothing**. It's petty, but it's also immensely satisfying.

Because there is something deep within us that rails against injustice. There is something embedded in the human heart that resents unfairness, that cries out against it, that resists it and seeks to rectify it. Whether it's something as petty as aggressive driving, or something much deeper, much more serious, much more **real**.

We know in our bones that this injustice is unnatural. It's not the way the world is meant to be, not the way life is meant to work. We instinctively know that it goes against the grain of the universe, it is out of step with the way Creation is intended to function.

And so all over the world people mobilise to combat injustice, in all of its shapes and forms. Whether it's poverty or illiteracy, whether it's human trafficking or addiction, whether it's physical abuse or substance abuse, people all over the world organise to end it, to prevent it, to make it right.

In the UK alone, there are over 168,000 registered charities, because whether we know God or not, whether we're a part of His Church or not, we know that injustice is unnatural, and it has to be opposed.

Mary's **Magnificat** reminds us that God's coming Kingdom is one of perfect, universal justice. Those who set themselves up above and beyond others will be brought low, and those who have been oppressed and trampled upon will be lifted high.

Those who have filled their lives with riches at the expense of others will find their storehouses empty, whilst those who have been scraping by will find their cups overflowing.

The wounded will be healed, the lonely will be set in families, the hungry will be fed, and perfect, cosmic, eternal justice will finally be done.

That Day is coming, but the Incarnation means that the first rays of dawn can already be seen. The Kingdom will come in all of its brilliance at the end of the age, but its seeds are already bearing fruit in the world today. They can be seen anywhere God's people follow the command of the Lord through Micah-

Act justly...love mercy...walk humbly with your God. [Micah 6:8]

These seeds can be seen when we put into practise the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and, ***drive a spoke into the wheel [of injustice] itself.***

And we can know a soul-deep joy at the fact that there is coming a day of perfect, universal justice for all.

Day 22- Love with us- *Matthew 1:21*

When our dog joined the family, I was adamant that she was going to be an outdoor dog, because dogs are outdoor animals. And so she stayed in the house for the first little while until she was able to move outside.

And then, somehow, week after week, month after month, she managed to creep her way back into the house. But she had very strict rules- she was allowed into the hall, and no further. And then somehow she was allowed into the living room, but not up the stairs. And then somehow she was allowed upstairs but not into the bedrooms. Until now she has free reign, but isn't allowed onto the furniture. Stay posted for further updates.

But the thing about our Cleo is that she just loves being around people. She gets so excited any time a visitor comes to the house, because surely the only reason anyone comes is to be her new friend! When you leave the room, she'll follow, because she can't imagine a minute passing without her being with you.

It's a wonderful thing to be loved so much that another person can't imagine living without you. It's humbling enough when it's a dog, but for another human being to decide that they enjoy being with you so much, your company bring them so much pleasure, you make their soul smile so wide that they just want to be around you, they just want to be near you, that's incredible. It's humbling.

How much more staggering is it that God Himself enjoys us so much that He wants to be with us? That He is willing to move Heaven and Earth to be near us? That He is willing to leave the Throne of Heaven, gladly laying aside the robes of majesty and

honour and glory all so that He could become Immanuel- **God With Us.**

He doesn't need us to complete Him. He is perfectly fulfilled without us- from before time began, God existed in the loving community of the Holy Trinity. He doesn't need us to satisfy Him. But He loves us so much that He invites us into His already perfect fellowship. He draws us into that Trinitarian dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He pulls out a seat at the table and invites us to sit down.

It is an incredible thought that God wants to be with us. When there was nothing loveable in us, nothing lovely about us, nevertheless He set His heart and mind upon us. He drew near to us so that we could draw near to Him.

That's the way it was always intended to be. Before the Fall in the Garden of Eden, the Lord God would come down and walk with Adam and Eve and talk with them. He would share Himself with them and allow them to share themselves with Him. Even though His knowledge was perfect and His power complete, He still allowed these limited beings to enjoy relationship with Him.

And the entirety of salvation history has been about restoring that lost relationship. Recreating that lost intimacy. Renewing that broken fellowship. God doesn't need us, but He wants us so desperately that He always takes the initiative, He always makes the first move, He always speaks the first word.

He loves us so greatly, so staggeringly, so impossibly, that He became Immanuel, God With Us, so that we could be with Him.

Day 23- Loves leads to action- Matthew 1:24

Some of us may remember the 90s hit *Teardrop* by the group Massive Attack. The opening lines went,

***Love, love is a verb,
Love is a doing word.***

Massive Attack would, no doubt, have been amazed to discover what gifted theologians they were. Because this is a perfect way to describe Biblical love. It's not an abstract concept, it's not a feeling, it's not something that comes and goes with our mood.

No, Scriptural love as sure and strong as gravity. Love in the Bible is the first and last word in every conversation. Love is the driving force behind every good thing in salvation history, and it is always active, always moving, always doing. It is a **verb**.

Every time Joseph appears in the Gospel of Matthew, he perfectly demonstrates this truth. He makes three major decisions in Matthew. The first is here in chapter one, where he obeys the commands of God and takes Mary as his wife.

The next two are in the following chapter- he takes his young family to Egypt to escape Herod's purge, and then later he returns to Israel and settles in Nazareth. Both of these follow the same pattern as chapter one- the Lord speaks to Joseph in a dream, and Joseph got up and obeyed.

His love for God wasn't something vague or abstract. It wasn't a concept or an idea- it was rock solid, and it was active. The truth is, it couldn't be anything else- for him, or for us.

Genuine love for God will always result in action. It will always result in obedience. Like Joseph, our love for God and love for neighbour will always compel us to get up and act, to get up and work, to get up and move.

The action doesn't save us; the obedience doesn't earn more of God's favour, more of His blessing. The loving service is always a response to what God has already done, what He has already given.

And so what action is love inspiring us to take today? In what ways is our love for God and love for neighbour compelling us to work, to move, to give?

If our love doesn't express itself in action, if it doesn't inspire our words and our deeds, we have to ask ourselves how genuine it is. God's people are called to love Him with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. This love will never be contained to Valentine's cards.

It will always be expressed through our hands and our feet, our time and our money, our work and our family. It will always express itself in who we are and what we do. It will flow from us into the world around us, as we follow Joseph's example and get up and put our love into action.

This action may be costly. **Doing** love is always harder than **feeling** love. But it's always worth it. Joseph's love led to his being a vital link in the chain of salvation history, the same chain of which we are all a part. So may we, like him, get up and allow our love to express itself in those countless little ways that will together change the world.

Day 24- Love trusts- Luke 1:38

One of the most terrifying things about being a parent must surely be a child's rock-solid trust that you know exactly what you're doing and why you're doing it **all the time**.

A child naturally and instinctively believes that their parent knows what's best. The parent knows when they need to wear a coat, or just how much should be on the plate. The parent knows what time is bed time and when it's too early to be eating ice cream, or too late. The parent knows the answers to all the most difficult questions about life- those incessant 'Why? Why? Why?' questions that come at the most awkward times.

The child simply trusts that the parent knows best. How terrified they would be if they knew that, as often as not, the parent is making it up as they go. Or at least, I hope I'm not the only one.

Love trusts. One who is loved trusts that their beloved knows what they're doing and why they're doing it. One who is loved trusts that their beloved would never do anything to harm them. One who is loved knows deep in their bones that their beloved is always working, always moving, always striving for the good of the one they love, the one who loves them. Love trusts.

We see it here with Mary. This teenaged girl, confronted suddenly and without warning by one of Heaven's messengers, a being of such glory that time and time again, their greeting has to be, **'Do not be afraid!'**

Gabriel then tells the girl that she is to play a role in salvation history that no-one had ever played before or would play again. He tells her that she is to face scandal and suspicion from her

neighbours; he tells her that she is to face the uncertainty of a fiancé who may or may not accept her.

He tells her that the Child she will carry is the One to whom her entire people have been looking for centuries, the Saviour they've anticipated for longer than anyone can remember. Her Child will be the fulfilment of hopes and dreams that have been nurtured for generations.

And more than that, He won't just be her son, but the Son of God Himself- the Most High will come down and dwell in her neighbourhood.

This is staggering. It's incredible. And yet, Mary's response was unhesitating- it was full of the trust that can only come from love- ***I am the Lord's servant...May your word to me be fulfilled.***

Are we prepared to trust that our Beloved knows what's best? He knows what He's doing and why He's doing it; our days were written in His book before any of them came to be; He is always working all things together for our good, because He is our Good Shepherd, and He knows our name.

Even when we face realities that stagger us, that confuse us, that threaten to terrify us, we can trust our Beloved. He is the good, good Father, and He does all things well.

Day 25- Love draws- *Matthew 2:1-2*

I'm about to shock you, so strap yourself in. The magi who visited Christ, the wise men who travelled from the East following the star, do not belong in the Nativity scene. I'm sorry, and I hope you'll forgive me, but Matthew implies that as much as two years had passed between the birth of Christ and their visit.

The family, presumably finding work for Joseph in his ancestral home, had remained in Bethlehem long enough to settle down. By the time the magi find them they're no longer in a stable, but are in a home (Matthew 2:11), and when Herod launches his brutal reprisals against the infants of the area, he targets those two years old or younger, in keeping with what the magi had told him (2:16).

The Church calendar celebrates ***Epiphany***, or the visit of the magi, in early January, and it marks the official end of the Christmas season. But, regardless of the timing of their visit, the magi are an essential part of God's salvation story, as they represent the fact that Christ came into the world to save the ***entire*** world.

These three wise men symbolise that the Gospel is not exclusive- it's not for a select few; it's not for those who have earned it or deserved it; it's not for those who would be expected to receive it. Prevailing thought said that, when Messiah came, He would come as the saviour of the Jewish people. Their long suffering under the Gentiles would end, and they would finally be elevated to their rightful place above all other peoples.

But the magi show us that from the very beginning of the life of Christ on earth, His message was for all people, everywhere and everywhen. His love is so extravagant that it cannot be limited or

contained; Paul tells us it is so high and wide, so long and deep as to be immeasurable (Eph 3:18), and it cannot possibly be exclusive.

The love of God always draws, it always invites, it always embraces. That means it draws and invites and embraces **us**. It makes room for us at the table, it leads us into the place at the feast prepared for us since before the beginning of time. Love takes us by the hand and leads us to where we belong- whomever we've been, whatever we've done, however we've failed or fallen, love draws us into the heart of God.

And if that love welcomes **us**, if it embraces **us**, if it brings **us** home, how could we think to exclude anyone else? How could we think to deny anyone else the same welcome we've received? How could we think that we have the right to shut the door in someone's face, when that same door has been flung wide open to allow us entry?

The magi remind us that the story of salvation has always had a place for us. They remind us that no-one is too far gone- not us, and not those whom we would be tempted to shut out and write off.

God's love has always been too great to be contained within a tiny community of exclusive believers. It has always been a universal, cosmic force, as real and all-pervading as gravity. No-one is beyond its reach; no-one has done too much or gone too far or fallen too low.

There is always room in the story of salvation, because there is always room in the heart of God- for people like me, and you, and all of us together.

Day 26- Love gives us our identity- Luke 1:26-28

Identity is one of the deepest needs in the human heart. There is something within us that cries out for a healthy awareness of who we truly are, what we truly are, why we're here, what we're for. The old cliché of someone having a midlife crisis while they try to 'discover themselves' is grounded in reality, because so often we can go through an entire life without ever having a rock-solid identity.

And so we can tend to listen to the stories the world tells us about who we truly are. Our identity is in our **family background**, for better or for worse. If we come from a 'good' family, then one path is laid out before us. If we come from a 'bad' family, we'll find ourselves on a very different road.

Or our identity is in our **relationships**. We are fulfilled and satisfied only when we have a partner or a spouse, or when we're at the centre of a lively social circle. If we're single or lonely, then we're somehow not truly, fully human. We're missing something. We're doing something wrong.

Or our identity is in **what we do**, what we produce, what we contribute. As long as we're useful to society or to our family or even to our Church, then we matter and we're important. If we can't contribute, then we're worthless.

Or our identity is in **what we have**- our bank balance defines our value, the quality of our car determines the quality of who we are. The more we have the more important we are, and if we happen to have very little, then we must not matter quite as much.

There are so many hooks on which we can hang our identity, and so many of them are potentially disastrous. But Gabriel tells Mary the root and foundation of all healthy identity.

He tells her that her identity is not as a teenaged peasant. It's not as a fiancée or a neighbour; it's not as a member of a subjugated race in a conquered nation; it's not in what she has or what she's done or who she knows.

No, Mary's deepest and most significant identity is that she is **highly favoured**- that she is known and loved by God. Regardless of where she is and what she faces, regardless of all that lies ahead and all that may have gone before, this is who she is.

And regardless of anything else, above and beyond anything else, before and after anything else, this is who we are. We are highly favoured- in a different way from Mary, perhaps, but in a way just as strong, just as meaningful, just as transformational.

We are **loved**. And that is infinitely more important than any of the stories the world tells us about our identity. That identity cannot be touched by circumstances and situations; it goes before our family life and it reaches beyond our relationships; it transcends our possessions and is far deeper than our contributions.

So when all those other hooks fall apart and crumble away, when we can't do enough or give enough or work hard enough, when everything about us implies that we just don't matter, we are still highly favoured. We are still precious, still valuable, still **loved**.

Day 27- Love is a gift- John 1:9-13

For better or worse, Christmas is a time associated with gifts. For months before 25th December children all over the world are eagerly watching adverts and exploring toy shops and making long and detailed lists as to exactly what they hope to receive for Christmas.

Every year since 1986, the US bank PNC has calculated ‘the Christmas Price Index.’ They take the items from *The Twelve Days of Christmas* and work out just how much it would cost to buy the gifts mentioned in the song. Now, if you remember, that means that each of the 12 days they have to buy a partridge in a pear tree, and every day from the second they have to buy two turtle doves, and every day from the third they have to buy three French hens, and so on.

In this way they estimate what they call ‘the true cost of Christmas.’ As of 2017, any romantics wishing to spoil their true love would have to pay £123,386.30. A bargain by any definition!

As challenging as gift-giving can often be, as financially devastating as it is to so many families who give beyond their means, the heart of a gift is that it is freely given. Gifts are not earned or deserved. If they were, they wouldn’t be **gifts**, but **wages**- something to which we are entitled.

A genuine gift comes without obligation, it comes without strings attached, it comes to those who don’t necessarily deserve it. A genuine gift says more about the one who gives than the one who receives- a true gift is a tangible way of saying, **‘I love you...I saw this and thought of you...I thought this would make you**

smile...when you see this or use this or eat this, I want you to think of me and remember how precious you are to me.'

The love of God is a gift, freely given. It could never be earned or deserved. It could never be the result of anything we have done- in fact, it is always **in spite** of what we've done, who we've been, how we've failed and fallen.

God in Christ **gave us** the right to become children of God. It wasn't payment for our services rendered. It wasn't the wages for a life lived well, a life lived right. It wasn't because we had been good enough or worked hard enough. It was a gift, freely given, the cost paid entirely by the Giver.

As has often been said, nothing on our part could add to that love, and nothing could detract from it. Our good behaviour doesn't enhance God's love for us, nor does our bad behaviour diminish it. If that were the case, it wouldn't be a gift; it wouldn't be grace. It would put us into a commercial relationship with God- His love is payment for how good we are, and it is withdrawn when we fail.

No, God's love is a gift, and it is freely and lavishly given to every son of Adam and daughter of Eve, in spite of how little we could ever hope to be worthy of it. The lives of God's people are to be lived in response to the gift we have received. All that we are, all that we have, all that we do, it's to flow from the fact that we are so dearly and desperately loved. It is to be built upon and grounded in the solid foundation of God's gracious love for us.

We can never earn His love, but we can allow it to define and shape who we are and how we live in the world.

Day 28- Love for the unlovely- Matthew 2:16-18

We all know people who are easy to love. Their lives overflow with grace, with kindness, with compassion. They bring a blessing wherever they go. Their presence in our lives enhances who we are. Their friendship, their love, their companionship seems to smooth the sharp edges of life in a broken world.

It's so easy to love these people, because they are so lovely, so loveable. Whether they are family or friends, whether they're a spouse or sibling, whether they're a neighbour or a part of our Church family, we all know these people whom it so easy to love.

We also know people who are not so easy to love. Difficult people, hard people, cold people; those folks who go through life with a constant scowl, a constant resentment, a constant bitterness which is so quick to take form in a sharp word or a harsh deed.

Herod was not easy to love. Considered a brutal tyrant by his peers, this massacre of the infants was very much in character. Obsessed with maintaining his power, Herod had a bodyguard of 2,000 men. He was even willing to murder members of his own family, including his wife, in order to secure his reign. Killing peasant children he had never met would have raised few moral qualms.

Herod was unlovely; by any reasonable measurement he was **unloveable**. And yet...and yet, it was for Herod that Christ came. It was for Herod, and for all the Herods of the world, that Christ lived and died, that He rose again and ascended into Heaven, that He will one day return to set all things straight and make all things right.

Had Herod been the only one in need of salvation, Christ still would have taken up flesh and moved into our neighbourhood. God still would have moved Heaven and Earth, He still would have made a public spectacle out of everything that ruins and spoils and corrupts, He still would have carried His cross all the way up to Calvary, and He still would have descended all the way down to death. Even for Herod.

Because God loves the unlovely. He loves the **unloveable**. He loves those who seem to have gone out of their way to escape His love, to render themselves outside of His love, to make themselves immune to His love.

That means there's hope for the the Herods in our life. There's hope for those who have ran from God as far and as fast as they can. There's hope for those who have lived such unlovely lives, who have done such unloveable things. If Jesus was willing to live and die for Herod, then His love can surely reach those people who are on our hearts.

It even means there's hope for us. We may not be Herod, but we have all been guilty of unloveliness. Through word or thought, feeling or deed, we are all unloveable. There is nothing in us that could earn or deserve God's immense love for us. Like the lost son in Luke 15, we have taken all the goodness of God in our lives and at times we have squandered it, until we're face-down in the gutter with the pigs.

And yet we remain utterly, desperately loved by God. He moved Heaven and Earth **for us**, because absolutely nothing in all Creation could diminish His eternal and immeasurable love for us, however Herod-like we may be.

Day 29- The Wait- Genesis 3:15

This is the very first promise in Scripture that a Saviour is coming; that things will not always be broken, sin will not have the last word, death will not have the final say. This is the very first assurance that God has not given up, He has not walked away.

This promise, given moments after Creation broke, assures us that brokenness is temporary. The long night of weeping, of pain, of loss, of separation from God and from each other, it is not a forever thing. Because there is coming a day when the one who has helped break everything will himself be broken. The Enemy of our soul will receive a crushing blow from which there will be no recovery.

And the waiting is hard. That's partly what this season of Advent is about- learning to wait, and to wait well. Learning to anticipate with eagerness the dawning of That Day, when the Kingdom of God comes in all of its fullness, and everything that has been so dark will be illuminated with a light of unimaginable brilliance.

All of God's people find themselves in that waiting place, and for some of us it's harder than others. For some of us, the broken edges of a fallen world seem sharper than usual, and they can cut deep.

But it will not always be this way- some day soon, the sun will rise for the very last time, and we will shed our very last tear. Some day soon death will claim its very last victim, and everything that is crooked will be set straight, and everything that is broken will be mended. The wait may be long, but it is worth it. As any child on Christmas Eve can tell us, the morning makes the wait worthwhile.

Day 30- The Prize- Revelation 22:20-21

In many ways, Christmas morning is just the beginning. Unwrapping the presents is wonderful, but when they're open the fun can begin! As they sat under the tree perfectly wrapped for weeks, or as they were waiting when we come down the stairs on Christmas morning, they were exciting and beautiful and tantalising. But they can only be fully enjoyed and fully experienced when they're open.

Our eternal life does not begin the moment we enter Heaven- it begins the second we say **Yes** to Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven is not just some place we go when we close our eyes for the last time in this world; it is a living, breathing reality wherever God's people find themselves, right here and right now.

And yet...there is coming a day when it will arrive in all of its fullness. CS Lewis says that every truly good and beautiful thing we can experience in this world is nothing more than,

The scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

When Christ returns in His final Advent, His final Coming, He will make all things new and His people will finally experience that unvisited country for the very first time.

We can know the fullness of life right now in the same way that we can enjoy a present as it sits under the tree- because we know that it is a foretaste of something even greater that is just around the corner.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

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