

SUNDAY 22 December 2024 - St Paul's Cooma 9.30am

Introduction

Hymn TIS 289. Christmas is coming

Chorus

**Christmas is coming
The Church is glad to sing
And let the Advent candles
Brightly burn in a ring**

**The first is for God's promise
To put the wrong things right
And bring to earth's darkness
The hope of love and light *Chorus***

**The second for the prophets
Who said that Christ would come
With good news for many
And angry words for some *Chorus***

**The third is for the Baptist
Who cried prepare the way
Be ready for Jesus
Both this and every day *Chorus***

**The fourth is for the Virgin
Who mothered God's own son
And sang how God's justice
Was meant for everyone *Chorus***

**At last we light the candle
Kept new for Christmas day
This shines bright for Jesus
New-born and here to stay**

**Christ is among us
The candles in the ring
Remind us that our Saviour
Will light up everything**

Greeting

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. **And also with you.**

Sentence of the day

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" Luke 1:41-42

Prayer of Preparation

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

Jesus said: 'This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

Prayer of the Day

Gracious God, you have visited your people and redeemed us in your Son: as we prepare to celebrate his birth, make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your word, and move us by your Spirit to bless your wonderful works. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose Day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever,

Amen

The Ministry of the Word

Micah 5.2-5a

² "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

³ Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. ⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends

of the earth. ⁵ And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

Psalm 80.1-7

¹ Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,

²**shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.**

³ Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

⁴ **How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?**

⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

⁶ **You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.**

⁷ **Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.**

Hebrews 10.5-10

⁵ Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶ with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.

⁷ Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, my God.’” ⁸ First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them” —though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹ Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

Luke 1:39-45

Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

This is the gospel of the Lord: **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ**

Sermon - Mary's Blessing

Question Time

Prayers

Let us pray for the world and the church.

Response: Gracious God, in your mercy. **Hear our prayer.**

The Lord's Prayer

Accept our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray,
Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

The Confession

God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy, welcoming sinners and inviting them to the Lord's table. Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith, confident in God's forgiveness.

Merciful God, our maker and our judge, we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and in what we have failed to do: we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves; we repent, and are sorry for all our sins. Father, forgive us. Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Almighty God, who has promised forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith: pardon you and set you free from all your sins, strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Greeting of Peace

We are the body of Christ. **His Spirit is with us.**

The peace of the Lord be always with you. **And also with you.**

Hymn TIS 302 - The angel Gabriel from heaven came

**The angel Gabriel from heaven came
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame
All hail said he thou lowly maiden Mary
Most highly favoured lady, Gloria**

For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be

**All generations laud and honour thee
Thy Son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold
Most highly favoured lady, Gloria**

**Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head
To me be as it pleaseth God she said
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name
Most highly favoured lady. Gloria
Of her Immanuel the Christ was born
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say
'Most highly favoured lady' Gloria**

The Thanksgiving

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts. **We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

Loving God, we thank you for this world of wonder and delight. You have given it to us to care for, so that all your creatures may enjoy its bounty.

Lord our God, **we give you thanks and praise.**

We thank you that when we turned away from you, you sent Jesus to live and work as one of us, and bring us back to you. He showed us how to love you and set us free to love and serve one another.

Lord our God, **we give you thanks and praise.**

We thank you that on the cross Jesus took away our sin, all that keeps us from each other and from you. He frees us from hate and fear, from all that destroys love and trust.

Lord our God, **we give you thanks and praise.**

And so with everyone who believes in you, with all the saints and angels, we rejoice and praise you, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.

And now we thank you for these gifts of bread and wine; may we who receive them, as Jesus said, share his body and his blood.

On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks. He broke the bread and gave it to his friends, and said, 'Take and eat. This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'

After supper he took the cup and gave you thanks. He shared the cup with them and said, 'This is my blood poured out so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in remembrance of me.'

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

You have gathered us together to feed on Christ and to remember all he has done for us. Fill us with your Spirit that we may follow Jesus in all we do and say, working for justice and bringing your peace to this world that you have made. Accept our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Blessing and honour and glory and power are yours for ever and ever. Amen

We who are many are one body, **for we all share in the one bread.**

The gifts of God for the people of God.

Come let us take this holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ in remembrance that he died for us, and feed on him in our hearts with thanksgiving.

After Communion

Father of all we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. **Keep us in this hope that we have grasped: so we and all your people will be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name.**

Hymn TIS 291 - Earth has many a noble city

**Earth has many a noble city—Bethlehem alone excels:
from it came the Lord from heaven, came to rule his Israel.**

**Fairer than the sun at morning was the star that told his birth,
to the world its God announcing, seen in human form on earth.**

**Eastern sages at his cradle make their offerings rich and rare;
see them give in deep devotion gold and frankincense and myrrh:**

**sacred gifts of mystic meaning—frankincense God to disclose,
gold the King of kings proclaiming, myrrh his sepulchre foreshows.**

**Jesus, whom the gentiles worshipped at your glad epiphany,
now to you with God the Father and the Spirit glory be.**

Notices

Dismissal

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord: **In the name of Christ. Amen.**

Sermon

As we read the gospel this morning, you may have noticed that there was a lot of 'blessing' going on.

Mary, who was to become the mother of Jesus, had gone to visit her cousin Elizabeth to tell her the good news. Elizabeth, despite her old age was also pregnant, and the baby in her womb (who was to become known as John the Baptist) leapt with joy at the visit.

I am sure that every mother here clearly remembers the ways babies seem to do back flips while they are in the womb, so if Elizabeth was sure John leapt with joy, you can be sure there were some serious gymnastics going on.

In any case, Elizabeth exclaims in a loud voice: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" She calls Mary, and Jesus, the baby she will bear 'blessed.'

Later, she calls Mary 'blessed' again, when she says Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!

I find the word blessed a bit confusing. I fully understand that God blesses someone when he grants them special favour. God was certainly granting Mary special favour in choosing her to be the mother of Jesus, In fact, children are always God's blessing. Asking God to bless someone, to bring them prosperity or good fortune follows in this line, and is good because it recognises that God is sovereign.

The word 'blessed' also seems to be creeping into American internet vernacular as a way of avoiding boasting that you got something you really wanted - you thank God instead boasting about how clever, hard work or just plain lucky you are. In many ways the sentiment is right, but I often think the claim lacks a lot of sincerity.

What has really confused me about the word blessing is the way we say that we bless God. I was sure that blessing was a one way business - God blesses us rather than the other way around - but we even claim to bless God in our church services - for example, when we thank God for the offertory, we pray "Blessed be God forever." Obviously there is a sense in which we bless God, but if God is sovereign, why would we "Bless God" as I've mentioned we do in our services, and people do in the Bible on many occasions. How can we sing 'Bless the Lord, Oh my soul'?

To try to help me work this out, I dragged out my old Greek textbooks. After I blew all the dust off them (and finished coughing), I worked out that there are two main Greek words that are translated as 'bless'. One basically means 'happy', and I guess that is what you feel like when you are blessed by God. This is the word used when Elizabeth says to Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

The other word surprised me, it is the word used when Elizabeth said: Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!

The reason this surprised me is that it is the word we use for speeches in funerals - for eulogies. The word basically means Good Word, so when you use Bless in this sense, you eulogise someone, you say Good Words about them. In its original sense, you speak of the blessings that God has given that person.

It seems to me that it is similar when we bless God - we are not praying for good fortune for God, but we are speaking good words of God. In other words, we are worshipping God. The difference is, when we bless people in this way, we speak of the good things that God has done for these people, but when we bless God, we speak of the good things that God has done for his own sake, and for which we benefit.

I hope this makes this blessing business a bit clearer. When we bless people, we ask for, or we speak of the good things God does for those people, and when we bless God, we worship God by speaking of the good things God has done for his own sake.

This brings us back to Elizabeth blessing Mary. Remember she said: "Blessed is Mary among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! And then Blessed is Mary who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Mary was blessed among women because she was the very first to meet Jesus when he came to earth as a human. She was also blessed because she put her faith in God, that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her. Jesus, the child she would bear, was blessed because of all the good that he, as God the son, would do for us.

It is good to think of these blessings to Mary, and somehow see them as reason to magnify Mary well above our mere human status. There is certainly a lot we can learn from Mary's trust in God, but it is more important that we also have the blessings that Mary had. Jesus, after all, didn't just come to earth for Mary, but for each and every one of us, and for every human being that has, does or ever will step on this earth. We all get to meet Jesus as Mary did, although we meet him in this world through his Spirit, although, we will meet him in the age to come in exactly the way Mary did - face to face - provided we put our faith in him, as Mary did.

So, as we contemplate how Mary was blessed in her particular situation, let us use this to prompt us to remember how God has blessed each of us in our situations, how he came to this earth to bless us, to take away our sins by dying in our place, and is even now blessing those who put their trust in him, by preparing a place for each of us in heaven, where we may enjoy God's perfect blessings forever. Amen