



## Opening Responses for Advent

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

**Let there be light!**

On those living in the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

**Let there be light!**

The true light has come into the world to dispel the darkness.

**Let there be light!**

## Prayer of Approach

Let us pray:

The people groaned amid the gathering darkness, longing for the 'something' that would change everything, for the dawning of the new day after the long night of exile, for the boiling over of God's life from eternity into time.

The people thirsted and ached for streams of living water, for signs of new life springing up in the deserts of despair, for the change that would free them to be 'at home' with God, but without really knowing what that would mean.

The people preferred their own darkness and shadows to the fire on the earth God's truth brings raining down, but God promised to dwell with them as Emmanuel, Love inhabited humanly, made vulnerable and defenceless.

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

God of Advent,  
give us the courage to leave our darkness behind  
and the faith to draw near to you,  
stepping into the light of your truth, love and hope.  
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,  
the radical answer to Israel's longings,  
and the wellspring of everlasting life. **Amen**

## 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What difference has Jesus already made to your life and what might need to change to embrace him more fully?

## Canticle – Magnificat (Singing the Faith 793)

### Prayers of Renewal

God of light,  
you call us out of the darkness both  
of ignorance of your love  
and mistrust of your ways.  
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,  
you call us out of the darkness both  
of indifference towards the needs of others  
and the undervaluing of ourselves.  
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,  
you call us out of the darkness both  
of unjust ways of ordering the world  
and the blind pursuit of self-interest.  
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

God of light and hope,  
**make us ready to meet with you. Amen**

**Readings** Isaiah 7:10 – 16  
Matthew 1:18 – 25

### **Sermon**

The fourth Sunday of Advent has traditionally been that point on the journey towards Christmas at which we explore the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It's somewhat ironic, therefore, that the set Gospel passage for today hardly makes any mention of Mary at all! Indeed, for Matthew, whose Gospel will be our focus throughout this coming liturgical year, it's *Joseph's story* that's right at the centre in the early chapters. It's *his* genealogy that is outlined at the beginning, and *his* communication with God via dreams which kept the couple together in the event of Mary's pregnancy, and enabled them to escape from Herod's mass slaughter of all boys aged under two years. Finally, it was through *his* dream that Joseph and Mary left Egypt when things became safe enough, and settled down in Nazareth. Consequently, if we want to say anything much about Mary, we need to use Luke's Gospel, and bring the two into conversation. What is more, although Matthew's account *appears* straightforward enough on the surface, delve a little deeper, and we find controversial issues aplenty.

To begin with, we need to consider two key bits of background data, the first of which concerns what marriage looked like in First Century Jewish culture, which was quite different to what we are familiar with nowadays. We're used to picturing marriage as between two adults, and in the U.K., the average age at which people get married is over thirty-five. When a couple gets engaged, whilst it is a significant step on their journey, it does not represent a legally binding commitment,

and it's pretty common for people to live together before marrying – if they choose to get married at all. The situation confronting Joseph and Mary was drastically different. For starters, under Roman laws, the minimum age for marriage was twelve for girls, and fourteen for boys, though the latter could be legally betrothed from as young as ten. The typical age at which a Jewish girl was married, at that time, was twelve, normally following a year-long betrothal. We can't really substitute 'engaged' for 'betrothed', because the former doesn't fully capture the sense of the latter; betrothal was as binding as marriage – deeds were drawn up, and money was exchanged. After one year, the girl would leave her father's house to join her husband, and it is only at that stage that having a sexual relationship was appropriate. That was the point at which the couple were considered married.

It's quite reasonable, therefore, to assume Mary was around twelve years old when Gabriel visited her. Grasping this reality requires us to leave behind some of our standard assumptions about childhood, which is challenging and uncomfortable in a child-orientated culture like ours. However, all of this depends upon the claim that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived, rather than simply never having been pregnant before. This is a controversial issue, which brings us to our second key item of background data – the ways in which New Testament authors drew on the Old Testament within their writings, and whether they made good use of source materials, leading us to consider our reading from Isaiah.

Matthew and Luke both tell us that Mary and Joseph were betrothed but had not yet slept together. They use the Greek word *parthemos*, which means a young girl of marriageable age but yet to be married. In the culture of the period, this normally equated with being a virgin, and indeed, Luke has Mary spell her situation out to the angel (Luke 1:34) very clearly. Matthew arrives at the same point, via describing Jesus as fulfilling a prophecy we heard earlier from Isaiah 7:14. This is problematic, however, because we know Matthew had access to

both Hebrew and Greek translations of Isaiah, and appears to have gone with the latter, despite the fact that the Greek word *parthemos* is stronger than the Hebrew word *almah* that it translates, which just means 'young woman', and not necessarily a virgin.

Does this mean the virginal conception of Jesus has been built upon nothing more solid than a mistranslation of Isaiah? It's difficult to be sure what was in Matthew's mind because we are in a chicken-and-egg situation. Did he opt for the Greek version of Isaiah because he knew Mary was a virgin, or because he was so determined to depict Jesus as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy that he got a little carried away with himself? Whichever it was (and we'll never know for sure, although we could argue that Luke backs him up!), we might still be wondering what Isaiah's conversation with King Ahaz has to do with the birth of Jesus. After all, Isaiah's context was notably different to that found in either Matthew or Luke's birth narratives...

Recall that our Old Testament reading takes us back to a period of great anxiety for Israel and Judah, which were two separate nations at that point – the former in the north and the latter in the south. The dominant power in the region, the Assyrians, were threatening their neighbours and Israel had formed a rebellious alliance with Aram in response. When Judah refused to join them, Israel and Aram turned on their neighbours, and King Ahaz of Judah was terrified. God sent Isaiah to reassure him that all would be well and gave him a promise that a woman conceiving and having a son would be a sign for them. We don't know who the woman and child were, but we do know that the prophecy was fulfilled in that context. Could it apply again to the birth of Jesus?

Some argue that Matthew was misusing Isaiah 7, ripping it out of its original context, and applying it in a completely different scenario. It is a way of approaching the Bible that we were strongly discouraged from practicing when training to be local preachers; to quote one of

my tutors from later, at theological college – a text without a context is a pretext! Moreover, there are several instances where the writers of the New Testament draw on the Old Testament with the intention of bringing the original context of their citation into the new situation, because they felt it 'shone light' onto the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew has done the opposite here, and whether we are happy with this depends upon whether we think a prophecy may be fulfilled more than once. To use an admittedly imperfect image, can they be a bit like bouncing bombs awaiting their final explosion, with the coming of Jesus being like their moment of impact with the 'dam' of God's desire to bring about salvation from sin, evil and death? I'll leave it for you to make your minds up on that one...

Now, I hope this gives you something of a flavour as to why Matthew 1:18 – 25 is one of the most argued about passages within the New Testament! When it comes to the subject of the virginal conception, I suspect that Paula Gooder is probably right – those convinced the claim is true won't find enough within the counterarguments to make them change their minds, but sceptics won't be swayed by the meat offered by Matthew and Luke's accounts, either. For my part, I think the underlying point is that God's up to something radically new and that God's life 'boils over' into our world, in the form of a defenceless love. While I wouldn't be willing to go to the stake over it, for me, it's the symbolism and underlying theology that is most important. Also, grappling with the complexity of this text hopefully 'brings home' the important point that when people assert that 'the Bible clearly states x or y', they often haven't read it properly! So, given all of this, what *are* we to make of today's Gospel passage? Wherever we stand on what to make of the virginal conception, in their different ways, Mary and Joseph come across here as quite remarkable people.

On Mary's part, while she might well have been as young as twelve, everything we know about the context of the time suggests that she is unlikely to have been much older than fourteen. Hence – as Paula

Gooder argues – the important thing to grasp is just how big an ‘ask’ God was making of Mary. Even if the child in her womb was that of Joseph, getting pregnant during the betrothal period would have still destroyed her reputation, and put her in significant physical danger, as anyone getting pregnant outside of marriage could be stoned to death under the law of Moses. Mary risked rejection from family and surrendered the security of home and community in order to remain faithful to God. As such, she undoubtedly showed some remarkable courage, which puts depictions of her as ‘meek and mild’ to shame.

For his part, Joseph’s change of mind after encountering that angel in a dream was huge. We’re told that he was a righteous man, which in this context meant he was obedient to the Law of Moses. Another source of debate among scholars is whether the text should say ‘*but* he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace’, or ‘*and* he wasn’t willing’ to do so. Under the Law, he was quite entitled – and perhaps even mandated – to divorce her (which was necessary to break their betrothal). He could have done so very publicly, and maximised her humiliation. However, he wasn’t willing to drag her through the mud. Either way, he was aiming to divorce her, and it was the intervention from the angel that made him change his mind. It takes real courage to change our minds, and Joseph would have faced both anger from family and slights on his masculinity for choosing to stick with Mary. He too, therefore, showed remarkable courage.

Now, we have thought a lot about textual questions here. Yet, at the core of this reading isn’t ‘intellectual analysis’, but a question for our hearts and imaginations – when the chips are down, would we show that same remarkable courage as Mary and Joseph? Would we lay everything on the line for God, or are we too wrapped up in pursuing security for ourselves – whether material, or otherwise? As we enjoy the final days before Christmas, dare we imagine what difference it would make to the world around us if we were willing to say ‘yes’ to God, even when that gets really costly?

The point of Christmas isn’t that Jesus was a cute baby, or that this is a time for a cheery ‘get together’ with family members in the midst of winter, but that God’s defenceless love ‘boiled over’ into our world in human form, meaning that God quite literally risked everything to transform our world from within. Friends, dare we respond, as Mary and Joseph did, with our own risk-taking love? Amen

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of Advent hope,  
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world,  
as the bringer of liberation, hope, and the light of love,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who’ve lost loved ones during this past year,  
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,  
and all who have been made homeless during this period.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,  
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures build up.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are dreading the Christmas period,  
especially those who’ll reluctantly spend this season alone.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who see you as untrustworthy and implausible  
that they might discover anew your love and care.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are scared to say ‘yes’ to your calling,

that they will be inspired by the remarkable courage of Mary.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Final Prayer**

God of overflowing love,  
whose body language cannot help but speak grace,  
whose life and light boils over into our broken world,  
not rending the heavens, but filling out that world from within;  
we thank you that you identify so completely with us  
that in Jesus Christ, you became one of us.

We thank you that we don't have to persuade you to care,  
or flatter or manipulate you into being interested in us.  
For you know our longings and desires and contradictions,  
and you change everything through your defenceless love.

Help us to take the time we need this Advent  
to be surprised and frightened and astonished  
by the wonder of the Word made flesh –  
God from God, and Light from Light. **Amen**

### **Blessing**

Journey onward in the light of faith, and shine brightly.  
Step forward in the strength of faith, and be bold.  
And as you go, remember that you do so  
with the blessing of God the Father,  
the peace of Jesus the Son  
and the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**