



## 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?

## 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** Micah 5:2 – 5a  
Luke 1:39 – 55

### **Sermon**

The writer of Luke's Gospel appears to have fancied themselves as something of a historian; within its early chapters, they went to great lengths to situate the events narrated in relation to key figures of the time. When John the Baptist is introduced, as the one preparing the way for the public ministry of Jesus, for example, no less than seven powerful men are named from both the religious and secular realms as his contemporaries. There is, therefore, a certain irony in the fact that the main characters in this section of his Gospel are two women who were insignificant in worldly terms. Elizabeth was the oldest of the pair. She was married to a priest called Zechariah and they lived in the hill country of Judea, but as Luke charmingly tells us, she was getting on in years and had been unable to have children (Luke 1:7). In a patriarchal society where the mechanics of fertility were partially understood at best, the 'blame' for failing to conceive was attributed to the woman, meaning that Elizabeth had suffered years of shame. Yet, despite the scepticism of Zechariah when told of God's plan by the Angel Gabriel, she was six months pregnant when visited by her younger cousin, Mary. It was quite typical for women to be betrothed around the age of twelve, and then married a year later. This means that Mary was very young when she too was greeted by Gabriel and told that she would be the mother of the Son of God.

Having just shown enormous courage by saying yes to God, Mary's next move was to immediately set out from Nazareth in Galilee, and head to her cousin's house. We don't know if she made this decision because her immediate family and fiancé Joseph had reacted badly to her news, or because Elizabeth was that key person she'd always looked up to for sound advice and a listening ear. Either way, having made her way there, Mary entered Elizabeth and Zechariah's house and called out a greeting. As soon as she heard this, we're told that the baby in the older woman's womb leapt for joy, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41). The text tells us that she responded to Mary with a 'loud voice' (1:42), with the Greek effectively meaning the equivalent of shouting through a megaphone. This was a joyous declaration of faith in God and the promises they had both received. Elizabeth recognised what wouldn't be obvious for some weeks yet: Mary was pregnant, and more than that, her child would be the Lord, God in human form (1:43), and her 'yes' would bring blessing. Then, in the first of several such occasions in the earlier chapters of Luke's Gospel, Mary burst into a song of justice, that subsequently became a staple of the Church's worship – the Magnificat (1:46 – 55).

It is a source of frustration to me that Mary has long been described in carols and within liturgies as 'meek and mild', thus reinforcing the patriarchal ideal of the passive woman, who simply does as ordered by her father, her husband, or the powerful men of the day. Reading the Magnificat blows that image of Mary clean out of the water. This song, which was likely based upon another powerful song of justice offered up centuries earlier by Hannah in thanksgiving for when she fell pregnant with Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1 – 10), is full of passion and courage. It speaks of a God who scatters the proud and brings down the powerful from their thrones, who fills the hungry with good things and lifts up the lowly. God is acknowledged as faithful to Israel down the generations and throughout all that's still to come, and as having performed mighty and liberating deeds for the people. In short, Mary

knows deep in her bones that God's promises are true, and this was indeed the basis, I believe, on which she said her courageous 'yes'. Especially for one so young, the Magnificat really packs a punch.

It also poses a profound challenge for us. We have to ask ourselves why it is, given that the Magnificat has long been a staple of worship and daily prayer, that the Church has so often colluded with the very powerful and proud people God brings low. One of the other results of false depictions of Mary as 'meek and mild' has been the watering down of the message of her song, as if God didn't really mean those words or they only carry weight in that specific context. If we instead took her powerful declaration of faith seriously, we would recognise that God is biased towards the outcast, the vulnerable, the poor and those pushed to the margins of society, and thus perhaps we would take seriously the implications of her firstborn son spending his time and eating with those very same groups. At the heart of this meeting between two women overlooked by the great and good of their day, and sadly in subsequent years too, is a glimpse right into the nature of the Kingdom of God and the difference it makes.

Our Micah reading also points us towards the ways God challenges expectations and conventions. We could quite reasonably translate its description of Bethlehem as being one of the 'little clans of Judah' as being amongst the 'least important' or 'most insignificant' (Micah 5:2), giving us another example of God deciding to work through the more unlikely of the available options. Moreover, the passage is full of allusions to King David, the shepherd boy from Bethlehem whose preferment ahead of seven older brothers turned expectations in his day on their heads (1 Samuel 16). Understanding the story of God's people reveals time and again that God does indeed lift up the lowly, and put down the mighty from their seat. Hence, as we head toward Christmastide once again, we are invited to consider our attitude to those pushed to the margins in our society. Both Mary and Elizabeth found themselves unexpectedly blessed by God despite their being

undervalued and overlooked by the powerful and strong. Yet, it was their courage and faithfulness which opened the way of salvation to all who will put their trust in God's goodness and mercy. This serves as a reminder not to write others off because they don't fit into those templates of goodness and greatness abroad in the wider world. As our Advent journey draws to its close for another year, may we open our eyes to God's promises and seek to see with God's eyes. Amen

## Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

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**