****Sunday 18th December

2022 Advent 4

The Rev’d Martin Knight

**Call to Worship**

As God’s people, we draw ever closer to Christmas:

we go on waiting – and not for presents under a tree,

we go on hoping – and not for more cards than last year,

we go on preparing – and not the ingredients

for Delia’s Apricot and Orange Turkey stuffing.

We wait and we hope and we prepare:

with bright angels, shocked shepherds and star-gazing kings,

with expectant Mary and her swollen ankles and hurting back,

with Joseph, who’s world is about to change.

We wait for a Child – God’s Christmas Gift.

**Advent Candle Lighting**

*(This can be used responsively or read by a leader.)*

Here is the fourth Advent candle.
**WE LIGHT A LIGHT AS WE GREET ONE ANOTHER IN GOD’S NAME.**
We light a light like the blaze of the Angel who came to Mary. **WE LIGHT A LIGHT TO SAY “YES” TO GOD’S OUTRAGEOUS CALL.**

**We light a light seeking peace in our hearts**

**as we receive God’s Great Christmas Gift!
THE FOURTH ADVENT CANDLE.**
Do not be afraid – have courage.

**All Age Introduction ‘God’s Christmas Gift’**

As a way into the theme, you might like to say something about what you really enjoy about the Christmas Season and why: – carols, boiled ham, lights and candles.

Lead into saying something about the things you don’t like about Christmas and why: pressure on parents, economic struggles, enforced happiness.

You could ask those present to shout out their responses – or to talk to each other.

As we gather as Church during Advent,

we get to the core of what Christmas is about.

Today we name and celebrate God’s greatest gift – Jesus Christ.

**Prayers of Approach & Confession**

Holy God, as we gather in worship, we bring all that we are;

all the complexity of our lives, all its challenges and joys.

We are here as family, ready to seek you again,

to bring you to the forefront of our minds

ready to sing in praise, to pray in expectation

to be empowered by your Word and your Spirit.

O God:
to you alone we lift our souls; in you alone we place our trust;
for you alone we wait all day long.

For you are the God of our salvation, abounding in mercy and steadfast love.

Help us remain alert and watchful for signs of the coming of your promised one—
the one who comes with power and glory, the one drawing near swelling our hope,

the one whom we praise, Jesus Christ.

And as we go on waiting, we pause…

…aware of all that we do and have done

that cause pain and guilt to wait, buried in the hearts of others.

We are aware of all that has caused us pain and hurt, which waits with us, locked inside.

Jesus Christ, Light of the World,

may we be aware of your light, shining in us,

cleansing and renewing and giving peace. (silence)

**Affirmation of Forgiveness**

We hear words that Jesus spoke to so many: ‘Be at Peace’.

May we be alert to God’s mercy and grace;

signs that the Spirit is already at work in us.

God believes in us,

and is prompting us to grow into the full wholeness God desires for us.

Thanks be to God!

We pray together that prayer that gave strength to Jesus and his disciples…

Our Father…

**Prayer of Illumination**

Using words from ‘We will take what you offer’, by John L. Bell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oInB7yubJKU>

*We will take what you offer*

*we will live by your word*

*we will love one another*

*and be led by you, Lord.*

**Readings**

*Romans 1: 1-7*  | *St Matthew 1: 18-25*

**Sermon Notes**

*‘A gift for everyone’ – a reflection the Romans passage*

I may be quite sad or overly sentimental, but I love Christmas adverts. I don’t love what they are trying to encourage us to do, and particularly not this year with the cost of living crisis, but I see gospel connections that I’m pretty sure the creators didn’t intend!

There have been some memorable ones in recent years that give us a way-in to our readings for today.

Let me say upfront, I do not work for any of these companies and am not advocating their practices. Other stores are available!

*(with relevant Copyright licenses in place, you may be able to show the advert*

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iN0lbTq4HnQ> )*

In 2016 the John Lewis advert begins on Christmas Eve, with a father desperately trying to put together a large garden trampoline, ready for the grand unveiling on Christmas morning. Much huffing and puffing and a few pinched fingers later, it’s complete, ready for the expected and excited child to enjoy.

After retreating inside, foxes who had been watching from the hedge discover the joy of bouncing higher and higher, quickly joined by a badger and rabbits. Not the expected recipients and not natural friends. The families Boxer dog is watching from indoors, with some significant jealously!

Come the morning, a young girl opens the door with excitement, running into the garden, quickly overtaken by the boxer, who has a fabulous time flinging himself up and down with gay abandon! ‘Gifts that everyone will love’ says the strapline.

None of us are stupid.

This is an advert designed to encourage us to spend our money in the said store.

But that line interests me – ‘the gift that everyone will love’, which sounds familiar.

Paul’s letter to the Romans says (I paraphrase…):

*“I have this amazing story to tell you,*

*It’s about Jesus Christ,*

*And it’s for all of you”*

When we gather in Church at Christmas, and hear again the story of Jesus birth, it truly is – for everyone.

It’s not like the big shops advertising their wares – because their gifts aren’t for everyone, because not everyone can afford presents at Christmas.

The gift of Jesus birth, is for everyone! It’s for Jews and Gentiles, expected and unexpected visitors, for rich or poor, for young and middle-aged and old, for those who can enjoy turkey and all the trimmings and those who use a food bank. This story, of Jesus Birth – is a gift for all.

Perhaps even Foxes, hedgehogs and a boxer dog.

*‘The greatest gift I can give is me’ – a reflection on the Gospel*

A less well remembered advert from Sainsbury’s, which shot in stop-frame animation, shows a father overwhelmed by the pressures of Christmas – getting up in the morning, delayed commuting, busyness and chaos in the toy factory where he works. All he wants to do is find the greatest gift he can give his family, but right now he doesn’t have time to breathe.

‘Streets are chaotic, shops idiotic, there’s a queue for the queue

I’m trying to find the greatest gift I can give my family.’

As he contemplates how he can do all that’s expected, possibly by cloning himself, he realises; ‘the greatest gift I can give my family – is me.’

*(with relevant Copyright licenses in place, you may be able to show the advert*

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq5SGSCZe4E> )*

The pressures of daily life – let alone during the Christmas period – can be intense.

So much can overwhelm and dominate our thoughts and activities.

The advert is not wrong, the greatest gift we can give to each other – is ourselves

our time, our love, our support in tough times, our celebration in good times.

But we know, it’s easier said than done.

 There is also something else in that ad.

In Matthew, we read this… *“Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Immanuel”*

‘The greatest gift I can give is me’ sounds very familiar. Immanuel: *God with us*

Perhaps it is as if God is saying to us: ‘The greatest gift I can give you, is me’

God coming to us as a child, in a manger; ‘Immanuel’

God living among us and showing us all a new way of living, through Jesus;

a way of hope, compassion, mercy and peace,

which we so desperately need.

And just as we give presents as well as receiving them –

we can give that gift to other people;

we can give our time and our love,

we can encourage them

we can spend time in their shoes and fight for justice.

God’s greatest gift to us is a child in a manger.

The greatest gift we can give, as church and as individuals, is God’s love in us.

*‘what can I give him, poor as I am, what can I give him, give my heart’*

Thanks be to God!

**An Affirmation of Faith**

We believe that God has come to us as a little child,

proclaiming strength in perceived weakness,

drawing close as one of us: ‘Immanuel’

filling our hearts with joy to be shared with one another.
We believe that God has birthed righteousness and justice into the world,

making the cause of the oppressed the highest priority,

declaring an everlasting reign of peace,

defeating the power of pain and suffering.

We believe that God calls us to participate in this reality of love,

transforming us as disciples to go out into the world,

sending us forth to announce his kingdom of peace and comfort,
challenging us to see everyone as nothing less than beloved children.

This we believe. This we preach. This we seek to embody in word and deed*.*

**Prayers for Others**

God of eternity,

in the last minute rush of Christmas shopping

we pause to consider what money cannot buy.

(open prayers for those struggling in the economic crisis)

In the excitement of wrapping the presents

we pause to listen to the story that lies beneath the paper.

(open prayers for relevant local concerns)

In the busyness of cooking and entertaining

we pause to remember those who have no place to go.

(open prayers for the lonely)

In the choosing of trees and putting up decorations

we pause to pray for those who find Christmas a difficult time.

(open prayers for those facing broken relationships)

In the singing of carols and costumes of nativity plays

we pause to think of what lies behind our customs and traditions.

(open prayers for schools and community groups)

In the letters to Santa and hanging up of stockings

we give thanks for your gift of yourself in the birth of a baby.

(open prayers of thanks the Nativity)

We thank you that two thousand years after the story of Jesus,

God is still with us

Here in (town/city)

God is still with us

Here in (church name)

God is still with us

In our own hearts,

God is still with us – and it is an amazing gift beyond all gifts. AMEN

**Offertory Prayer**

Holy One,

in this Advent Season we wait in hope and we give in hope.

Hope for your coming Kingdom;

hope because of your presence with us now;

hope because light is banishing the dark.

Receive these gifts and use them, we pray,

for your work of healing and hope in the world. Amen

**An Advent Communion**

*Adapting Liturgy from the Iona Community*

*Invitation*

God’s Banquet is coming.

The time we await, when all will gather from North, East, West and South.
A banquet where the rich and powerful will sit with the weak and poverty-stricken.

A table where young and old will learn from each other.

A time when all will sit together in peace, “and the wolf will lie down with the lamb”.

Here at this table we find a foretaste of God’s banquet.

This is indeed God’s table, not the churches, and so all who seek to follow Jesus Christ are welcome to eat and drink from it.
Come and taste the grace eternal,

Come and see that god is good.

*The Story Remembered*

As we prepare to celebrate his birth, we remember the life that this baby will live.
We remember how he broke the bonds of human tradition,

to show all what the banquet of hope could be,

as he ate openly with the despised and the outcast of his world.

And we remember one special meal, foretaste of the banquet that is to come,

that he ate with his closest friends.
Gathering them together in an upper room to share the story of liberation.

And at the end of the meal he took bread, blessed and broke it,

then passed it to them saying: take and eat.

This bread is the body of life, broken by the world.

Eat it in remembrance and in hope.

After that he took the cup, blessed it, and passed it to them saying:
this cup is the sign of the new covenant. Whenever you drink it remember me.

Remembering the birth of the child in the stable,

we remember also his life, his death and his resurrection.
We remember how he poured his love out to all he met

And we look forward to his return and the coming reign of peace, love, and justice.

*The Great Thanksgiving*

Let us pray

God is with us - we are not alone.Christ is present here - the Spirit moves within us.
Let us give thanks to God - in memory and in hope.

Blessings be to you, Creator God,

who in the beginning brought light and life to the world

and who continues to bring it love and light everlasting.
Your song of wisdom echoes down the years,

Your ancient promise still brings us hope.

Over the ages you have called people to embrace your hope and share your love.

But even when they have closed their ears to the song, you did not stop singing.

You sent prophets and messengers to your people,

reminding them of the promised time of peace and justice

that would surround the world.
And then you came to a young woman named Mary

and laid out the promise in a new way:
promising her a son, who would be called Jesus
promising her that in her son the world would be changed
And now as we prepare for that child to be born,

we echo the ancient cry: O come, O come Emmanuel

Pour out your Spirit upon us

As we eat and drink may we know your presence.
As we eat and drink may we be opened to the possibilities of your hope and power
And may we be strengthened

in our time of waiting for peace and justice

so that we will have the courage to follow the Christ Child. Amen

*The Breaking and Pouring and Serving*

The Bread we break is the Bread of Life. (Break)

The Cup we Share is the Cup of Promise (Pour)

These are the gifts of God for the people of God. The banquet awaits, let us eat. (Share)

Prayer following Communion

God of pregnant expectations,

God of Christmas promise,

God of child-like hope,

we have eaten and drunk from your table.

May the eating and the drinking

Fill us with hope in a world of despair.

May we be beacons of hope

As we wait for the day when the world will be changed. **Amen**

**Sending out and Blessing**

*A Celtic Blessing (This can be used responsively or read by a leader.)*

Let us bless each other as we enter this last week of Advent,

 and as we prepare to receive again, the Gift of God – Immanuel:

 **THE LIGHT OF THE CHRISTMAS STAR TO YOU**

 **THE WARMTH OF HOME AND HEARTH TO YOU**

 **THE CHEER AND GOOD WILL OF FRIENDS TO YOU**

 **THE LOVE OF THE SON AND GOD’S PEACE TO YOU.**

 And the blessing of God, Creator, Child and Spirit

be with us all today, through this Christmas season, and always. Amen

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| MAKE WAY, MAKE WAY | 141 | 279 | 264 | 457 |
| COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS | 138 | 472 | 169 | 102 |
| IN THE BLEAK MID-WINTER | 162 | 305 | 204 | 337 |
| LAUDATE, OMNES GENTES (Martin suggests using this in the Communion prayer) | 403  |  |  |  |
| TELL OUT MY SOUL | 740 | 286 | 186 | 631 |

*RS – Rejoice & Sing* | *CH4 – Church Hymnary 4* | *StF – Singing the Faith* | *MP – Mission Praise*