

# worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2024  
The Revd Andy Braunston

## Call to Worship

We, living in gloom, gather to seek God's light and love, and to hear God say: **'Comfort, comfort now my people!'** We, burdened by heavy loads and news of wars and atrocities, gather to seek God's peace and grace, and to hear God say: **'Comfort, comfort now my people!'** We, caught up in the busyness of the season and the worries of the age, gather to seek God's joy and power, and to hear God say: **'Comfort, comfort now my people!'** And so as a people seeking light and love, peace and grace, and joy and power, we gather, not only to seek God's comfort, but to see the world as it really is and what it could be when, like Mary, we glimpse the coming Kingdom and hear God say: **'Comfort, comfort now my people!'**

with resonances from the hymn *Comfort, Comfort Now My People*

## Advent Candle Lighting

Table-turning God,  
You scatter the proud and bring down the powerful,  
You fill the hungry and send the rich away empty;  
help us to do Your will  
as we await our redemption which draws ever nearer. Amen

## Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

Our souls cry out in praise and thanksgiving to you O God,  
for all You have done and for all that You are.  
We magnify You as Your servant Mary did so long ago,  
for you have looked on us, in our lowliness,  
raised us up, and made us a little less than the angels.  
Through Your might, seen in weakness, You seek to change our world.  
Discounting the mighty, You lift up the lowly.  
Ignoring the proud, You delight in the humble.  
But more, O God, You want us to do the same -  
leaving behind the imagination of our hearts,  
You call us to join in Your work of turning the tables,  
feeding the hungry, and proclaiming that the world is about to turn.

Yet we so often ignore Your call and Your truth.  
We prefer the glory of the world to the weakness of the Cross,  
the company of the mighty rather than the presence of the lowly,  
pride rather than humility, power rather than passion.  
Forgive us, good God, and give us time to change. Amen.

Like a father who runs to welcome home the estranged,  
like a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wing,  
like a rock upon which we stand, God is loving and faithful,  
forgives our sins and urges us to forgive others.  
So, claim the forgiveness on offer, forgive and be forgiven  
so as to live as whole people. Amen!

## Introduction

We hear again today the story of Mary's great song of liberation; based in part on Hannah's song in the Old Testament. The words we know as the Magnificat are often denied of their power by being set to tunes which, despite being beautiful, don't convey the power of Mary's words – words which discomfort and disturb us. Words which are safer when sung to stuffy music rather than mulled over for our life now. Words which explain where Jesus got some of his political ideas from. Let's pray for light as we then hear again those ancient words.

## Prayer for Illumination

Speak to us, O God, as a voice in our ear, warmth in our heart,  
a sense of presence in our soul, a tingling in our being,  
that as we hear, we learn to follow, Amen.

## All Age Activity

There's a range of downloadable videos and some activities for Advent here  
[http://www.going4growth.com/growth\\_through\\_the\\_year/advent](http://www.going4growth.com/growth_through_the_year/advent)

## Reading

*St Luke 1: 49 – 55*

## Sermon Notes

We see two marginalised pregnant women meet up to console and comfort each other as they confirm things. Elizabeth is well beyond child-bearing years yet found herself pregnant and, just when it would be useful to have the help of her husband, he's been made mute for doubting an angel. Then as now women could become pregnant rather

later than expected but it's clear this isn't a surprise but a downright shock. Heaven knows what the village gossip would have been like; heaven knows what fears Elizabeth would have had bringing a child to term at her age and how long she'd have with the child before her own demise. Then we have teenage Mary pregnant out of wedlock – a precarious place for a woman in Palestine in that era – as now. Joseph could have broken off the engagement or could have had her stoned as an adulteress. Mary's 'yes' was both radical and dangerous. Calvin thought this passage was about Mary seeking confirmation from Elizabeth than she'd done the right thing in saying 'yes' to Gabriel, but maybe Mary's song was one that confirmed things to Elizabeth who must have been full of doubt about her pregnancy and all that would come next.

Here are two pregnant women, one far too old and the other probably far too young by our standards. One bears the messenger, the other the message. Both are in the story here without reference to men – Zechariah's off somewhere being silent, Joseph is out of the picture. Both women must have been battling with doubt and hurt, wondering what on earth they had got themselves into and what God had in mind. These two women – each isolated in their own ways - sought connection and community as their worlds were turned upside down.

In this they are not that dissimilar to us; we need to find connection and community in a world which is often fragmented and where the hallmark of contemporary societies is loneliness even as we have countless online friends. We are bombarded with news yet really don't know what's going on. We long for authentic connection and true community where we can know and be known and where we won't be judged. Surely this was what Mary and Elizabeth found in each other and what we could build in the Church. I'm sure that many in the Church now think they are far too old to be doing the jobs and roles that they do; there again the few youngsters that are in our churches may wonder what they've got themselves into and, like Mary, feel they are far too inexperienced for the roles we often give them.

Our passage, however, gives us rather more. In the context of two marginalised women we hear Mary's great revolutionary cry. These are dangerous words and, evidently, they were banned in British India, in 1980s Guatemala and Argentina – all for being too revolutionary for the establishment's comfort. Oscar Romero, the murdered archbishop of San Salvador drew a comparison between Mary and the poor and powerless people in his country. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor murdered by the Nazis because he'd involved himself in a plot to topple and kill Hitler wrote that the Magnificat was "the most passionate, the wildest, one might say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung." And written long before the Internationale – the hymn of revolutionary Communism - was composed.

In the Church we silence Mary in other ways. Many Catholics and Orthodox by making her meek and submissive, denying her womanhood and sexuality, and then exalting her with heavenly glory forgetting her earthly revolutionary fervour. Saints are always safer once they are dead of course. In Protestantism, as a reaction to the Catholic treatment

of her, we tend to rather ignore her and, again, forget these words even as we sing them. Some modern sung versions of Mary's song even leave out the revolutionary bits!

When Mary sang her song 2-3 percent of the population were rich whilst the rest struggled to get by. These are not the words of a gentle girl preparing to have her child but one of anguish and anger in an unjust unfair world crying out for change. These are words longing for the order of the world to be reversed and the tables to be turned. I wonder if these words came back to Mary on Christmas eve; she and Joseph shelter in a stable whilst Herod is in a sumptuous palace. They must flee into exile because of the insecure murderous rage of a tyrant. Their lives are unsettled by the schemes of the powerful and unimaginably rich. In the face of these absurdities, Mary proclaims a different type of absurdity – a world where things are turned around, where the rich are sent away empty, the hungry fed and the powerful dislodged from their thrones.

In our contemporary age things aren't so different. The riches 10% of the world's population own 76% of the world's wealth whilst the poorest only own 2%. In the UK the bottom half of the population own less than 5% of the wealth whilst the top 10% own 57% and the top 1% own 23% of the wealth. The puzzle is how we react to this. The news we watch tells us to be suspicious of immigrants but not of millionaires yet it's the latter with the wealth. It's like the wealthy sit at the table stuffing themselves leaving the rest of us to argue over their crumbs. The clever know how to exploit all this. Mr Trump's victory in America seems to have been mainly about the economy where things have been hard over the last four years of Mr Biden's presidency. Mr Trump, a failed businessman who inherited, and squandered, much of his money has enlisted the richest people in America who will do very well indeed out of his policies yet convinced normal working people they'll be better off. We worry about the changes that new governments that bring in yet, normally, they tinker only around the edges of the systems we have rather than challenge and change the systems themselves. And, of course, we're asked to blame those with least responsibility for our contemporary problems not those who cause them. We look at the Magnificat and think it's absurd but we're immune to the absurdities of our world as we're taught they're normal. Maybe a greater familiarity with Mary's song will help us see the world as it is and how it should be.

Of course, all this is unsettling on the verge of Christmas. We don't want to think about global politics, most of us don't want to think of Mr Trump, and this isn't the season for thinking about how to overturn the political tables and systems of our age...yet as Bonhoeffer noted Mary's song is the oldest Advent hymn. He noted "This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

So, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we remember the words of his mother. Not sickly sweet words, not words just talking about spiritual themes but hard, earthly words, words of a world turned upside down. Absurd words for an absurd age. Words from a marginalised pregnant woman. Words so dangerous the Church distracts from

them by omission and dreary tunes. Yet these words go to the heart of Jesus' own message and of God's desire, in the coming Kingdom, to turn the world around.

Eternal One, we hear again Mary's words;  
not words from a dream,  
but words offering salvation for many and destruction for some.  
Words of victory and defeat, words of a victim and a victor.  
Help us, O God, to live these words, and to overturn the tables of our age,  
that we may sing Magnificat  
and see the world's absurdity turn into Your kingdom. Amen.

## Affirmation of Faith

We sing to our Lord a new song; we sing in our world a sure hope: **Our God loves this world. The Ancient of Days called it into being, renews it through Jesus Christ, and governs it by the Holy Spirit. God is the world's true hope.** God saves the world through Jesus; **those who call on His name will have life.** Christ's hand reaches out beyond those who say "Lord" to the infants who live in the atmosphere of faith, **even to the farthest stars and planets of all creation.** The boundaries of God's love are not known; **the Spirit works at the ends of the world, before the Church has there spoken a word.** God will renew the world through Jesus, who will put all unrighteousness out, purify the works of human hands and perfect our fellowship in divine love. **Christ will wipe away every tear; death shall be no more. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and all creation will be filled with God's glory.** Come Lord Jesus, we are open to your Spirit. **We await your full presence, our world finds rest and hope in you alone. Amen.**

adapted from *Our Song of Hope* from the Reformed Church of America.

## Offertory

The season of giving is upon us; the joy and delight in another's eyes on receiving a gift is priceless. The joy in giving of our time to another, to offer a shoulder to cry on or a listening ear is priceless too. The gifts we give to support the charities and causes dear to us are priceless as is our giving to the Church – giving of time, talent and treasure. So, let's give thanks for all that's given and the love and care it represents:

God of all good gifts,  
we thank You for the gifts of time, talent, and treasure in this place.  
May we know the joy of giving, the gratitude of receiving,  
and the purpose that comes from following You. Amen.

## Intercessions

As we bring our prayers to God we use the song from Taizé to focus our minds and hearts. You may wish simply to listen or to sing along.

**Wait for the Lord whose day is near.  
Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.**

Eternal One we wait,  
we wait for the Christmas season to fully start,  
we wait to see loved ones and friends,  
we wait to celebrate;  
we might even just be waiting for it all to be over!  
We wait too for the world to turn,  
for the words of Your mother to come true,  
and for your Kingdom to come.

**Wait for the Lord whose day is near.  
Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.**

Lord Jesus we wait,  
we wait for justice to come to those who have long evaded it,  
we wait for transparency in our systems and organisations,  
we wait for the world to be fair to all instead of some,  
we wait for racism to be named, exposed, and banished from our structures,  
we wait for our politics to align with Yours  
where the hungry are fed and the lowly lifted up,  
and for the Kingdom to come.

**Wait for the Lord whose day is near.  
Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.**

Most Holy Spirit we wait,  
we wait for the work You have begun in us to come to fruition,  
we wait for Your guidance and the strength to follow,  
we wait for opportunities to share our faith in word and action,  
we wait for those who are ill in mind, body, and spirit to find wholeness,  
we wait for Your Church to model the integrity, prophetic witness and honesty You  
dream of, and for the Kingdom to come.

**Wait for the Lord whose day is near.  
Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.**

Eternal Trinity of love,  
Accept our prayers, inspire and motivate us to wait,  
Help us to keep watch and take heart.

**Wait for the Lord whose day is near.  
Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.**

And so, with Jesus we pray...Our Father...

*Wait for the Lord* from the Taizé Community OneLicence # A-734713

## Blessing

May the One who gave a vision to Mary of the world as it is,  
the One who was brought up by her to see the world as it should be,  
and the One who gives the energy to change the world,  
enable you not to forget, nor tone down God's preferential love  
for the poor, the lowly, and the abused,  
and to work to bring the values of the Kingdom  
into the absurdities of our society.  
And the blessing of our table turning God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be with you all now and always, Amen.

Hymn Suggestions				
	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Comfort, Comfort Now (needs to be sung like a dance, fast dance!)		274		
The Angel Gabriel	139	285	187	
No Wind At The Window		287		
When Out of Poverty is Born		291		
Tell Out My Soul	740	286	186	631
Long ago prophets knew			178	
Of the Father's Love Begotten	181	319	181	
Come Now O Prince of Peace		275		
Wait for the Lord		276		
The race that long in darkness pined	129			
Now Tell us Gentle Mary	142			
Canticle of the Turning This song from the Catholic tradition is, perhaps, the most fun version of the Magnificat. Music and lyrics found in the comments section of <a href="#">Chris Brunelle singing it.</a>				

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