

Before the service you may like to listen to Thorns in the Straw by Graham Kendrick:  
[https://youtu.be/QeZ2zl\\_QhT0](https://youtu.be/QeZ2zl_QhT0) (words at the end)

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church, coming to you today from Bridgwater Drive where there will be Communion. If you are watching at home you may partake of the elements if you wish.

**Call to worship** (based on Psalm 89:1-4)

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;  
I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.  
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,  
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.  
You, O God said, I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant,  
I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.

A Saviour shall come who will be of the house and lineage of David, and his name shall be Wonderful, Counsellor, the Prince of Peace.

Happy are we who hear the joyful call to worship, for we walk in the light of God's presence!  
Let's worship God together—  
For God is our strength and our protection, the One in whom we trust.

**Hymn** Who would think (R&S 178) sung by Margaret

1. Who would think that what was needed  
to transform and save the earth  
might not be a plan or army  
proud in purpose, proved in worth?  
Who would think, despite derision,  
that a child should lead the way?  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

2. Shepherds watch and wise men wonder,  
monarchs scorn and angels sing;  
such a place as none would reckon  
hosts a holy, helpless thing;  
stabled beasts and passing strangers  
watch a baby laid in hay;  
God surprises earth with heaven,  
coming here on Christmas Day.

3. Centuries of skill and science  
span the past from which we move,  
yet experience questions whether  
with such progress we improve.  
In our search for sense and meaning,  
lest our hopes and humour fray,  
God surprises earth with heaven.  
coming here on Christmas Day.

**Opening prayer**

Holy, sovereign God, for you nothing is impossible.  
Through a poor young woman in a small town, you gave birth to your realm of endless glory.  
By your Holy Spirit, fill us with new life and hope and overshadow us with your power and grace  
so that we, like Mary, might be your servants, bearing witness to the promise of your Word;  
through Jesus Christ, who is coming to reign. Amen

**Offertory**

God, whose giving knows no ending, we offer up the treasure that you have entrusted to us;  
we offer up the skills and time that you have graciously given to us;  
we offer up ourselves in service and praise. Receive our gifts by your grace.  
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit  
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

### **Advent candles**

Today we light all four Advent candles – the first for hope, the second for the prophets, the third for John the Baptist and the fourth for Mary who simply and gladly responded to the call of God. God of the humble, we thank you for choosing Mary and for her readiness and joy in answer to your call. Help us to understand the way of the lowly and to share in the humility through which Christ may be born even in a stable, even in our hearts. **Amen.**

**Hymn** The Candle Song (Like a candle flame) we listen to the Graham Kenrick version.

**Bible reading:**        **Luke 1:26-38**

### **Sermon**

I can't remember if I've told this story before or not, but I'm hoping that if I can't remember, none of you can either! I have in my possession an old suitcase full of my dad's sermons in chronological order. The one on the top starts with, 'what new is there to say about Christmas?' Which is both a truism on one hand, what can we possibly say about the Christmas story that is new, and a bit depressing for the person who has to prepare several services on the same old story! The same can be said for the more specific bit of the story – the angel Gabriel's visit to the young Mary. Who or what might be the angels in our lives and what message are they bringing us? Tick Mary's emphatic 'yes' and how might we do likewise? Tick (in fact I think I covered that one in last week's News and Chat!)

Was she really a virgin or not, or is that just a mis-translation, and does it really matter?

The inevitability of life – 'the power of the Most High will overshadow you...' so do we really have freewill or is everything pre-ordained? Well, I suppose Mary could have said 'no' but I don't think she would have been so "favoured if she had"!

*Greetings favoured one, the Lord is with you.* This assurance of the presence of God sets the tone for the message that is to come. Mary does not know her life is about to be both upended and established forever in the history of humankind. She does not know that her humble beginnings are not indicative of her calling as the mother of the Messiah. She does not know that the favour upon her will not translate to personal gain, or popularity, or privilege. We have the advantage of knowing what comes next, but Mary does not know why an angel would disrupt the normal course of her life with the simple words, "Greetings favoured one, the Lord is with you." It is no wonder that she was "perplexed". Mary's life circumstances would reasonably cause her to question—Am I favoured? Is God with me? What will this favour entail?

Set aside for the moment the weirdness of an angel, a divine entity, visiting you. I know some people get round the angel thing, by saying that there are angels all around us – anyone who helps us out, or supports us, we can think of as an angel – that's as may be, but set that aside for a moment too, and try to imagine that you haven't heard this story every Christmas your entire life, in fact you've never heard it before, imagine that you don't know how it ends, and imagine what you would do, how you would feel, if you got a message that your life was going to change completely. And, that change would involve embarrassment, social exclusion, threat of death by stoning for the assumption of adultery, probably abandonment by your partner and as we find out later, a long

journey, giving birth in a stable, and fleeing for your life as a refugee. Initially, it seems like a nice story, like the whole sugar-coated nativity we listen to every year, but if you really think about it, it is mind boggling that Mary said 'yes' and not only that she said yes, but that she said yes willingly, happily, and in fact went on to sing about her soul magnifying the Lord and her spirit rejoicing in God. I doubt many people these days would glorify God when given such a task to do. More likely they would curse God and sing 'woe is me' like Job, or they would try to run from God like Jonah. Most of the prophets give excuses before eventually submitting to God's will. In fact, I can't think of anyone other than Mary who after a few minutes of being perplexed, gives an emphatic and immediate 'yes' to God's plan for her.

I read a commentary that talked about God using "Gabriels" as holy interruptions that shift the course of life. This sounded to me like the opposite of a Jeremiad, a long mournful lament based on the lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah. And I wondered what might be the Gabriels of today? Might the pandemic be a Gabriel? Unexpected, sudden, unanticipated—Gabriels appear and alter what seem to be fixed and predictable paths. By that definition, the pandemic could be a Gabriel. We tend to think of angels as benign – nice fluffy things with wings, but the Angel of the Lord, and his message is scary. The angel has to tell Mary not to be afraid. The shepherds in the fields have to be told not to be afraid, for mighty dread had seized their troubled minds. Zechariah was terrified when he saw the angel of the Lord, and fear overwhelmed him and because he does not believe the angel's message, he is rendered literally speechless until after his son John is born. Gabriels don't bring easy messages, but they do bring messages of great change.

God's opening line of the message was 'The Lord is with you.' No matter what else I'm going to ask you to do, whatever trouble is coming your way, and trust me, trouble is coming, I will be with you. That is why Mary says yes to God's plan, because God will be with her, and help her and see her through it. This advent season, let us sit with the assurance that God is with us. As we reflect on a tumultuous year, may we receive the words of Gabriel to Mary as our own - God is with us. The Divine visits an unsuspecting young girl named Mary; and the Divine visits us. May the hardships of life be viewed through and conditioned by this conviction - God is with us. Even as a young girl by the name of Mary was impacted by the social realities of her day, we, too, are immersed in and squeezed by the societal challenges of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Britain. But Gabriels remind us, that while we may not like the hand we've been dealt, God is with us, for our God has known human frailty and suffering.

**Hymn** The Angel Gabriel sung by Margaret

1 The angel Gabriel from heaven came,  
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame:  
'From God, all hail,' the angel said to Mary,  
'most highly favoured lady!' Gloria!

2 'For known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,  
all generations laud and honour thee,  
thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold:  
most highly favoured lady!' Gloria!

3 Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head:  
'To me be as it pleases God,' she said,  
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy  
name.'  
Most highly favoured lady! Gloria!

4 Of her, Emmanuel - 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!'

**Lord's Supper - as you follow at home, please say the words in bold**

Come follow the light that shines for you and leads you to a stable with a manger and a child.  
**Lord, we have followed the light**

Come listen for the voice that calls you to find new life in the broken corners of the world.  
**Lord, we have heard the voice**

Come, rich and poor, neighbour or stranger, gather round and share a celebration with the Prince of Peace.  
**Lord, we have gathered to meet with you.**

Come, like wealthy kings with priceless gifts or poor shepherds with only themselves to bring, for the Spirit has led you to this place where you are offered the promise of new life.  
**Lord, fill us with new life.**

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

From being a child in a manger dependent on his mother's milk for food, Jesus grew to be the Living Word made Flesh offering everyone the bread of life. He travelled from the manger to the cross where his body was broken, his love poured out, but God held him like a mother and nursed him back to life. Lord, may we see the guiding light, May we find you in a stable  
May we follow you to the cross. May we find new life through you.  
As we gather round the table to celebrate the beginning of a journey from the manger to the cross and back to life again.

On the night when our Lord Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Holy Spirit, come among us and bless this bread and wine as we remember how Christ's body was broken and God's love was poured out for us.

So draw near with faith. Be strengthened by the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in a stable to be the living bread and died on a cross having poured out his love so we may drink from God's cup of forgiveness. Eat and drink. Take Jesus into your hearts.

As you take the bread, hold it in prayer and remember how the body of Jesus was born, lived and was broken for you, and then we will eat together, united in the one body.

As you take the wine, hold it in prayer and remember how Jesus poured out his love for you and meets your needs when he lives in your heart.

**Post Communion Prayer**

Thank you for bread and wine through which we have remembered your life and love. Lord build a stable in our bodies, place a manger in our hearts and fill it with your love as if it were a new-born child.

### **Prayers of intercession**

In the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord, remind us that you are always with us. Let us be like Mary, emphatic in our 'yes' to your will.

Into our troubles and weaknesses,

Into the barren places of our souls, Come Lord,

**Come among us and make us whole.**

Into the war torn and the refugee,

Into those who live in conflict, Come Lord,

**Come among us and make us whole.**

Into the homeless and the unemployed,

Into those who feel abandoned, Come Lord,

**Come among us and make us whole.**

Into the sick and the disabled,

Into those undergoing treatment and those who are grieving, Come, Lord

**Come among us and make us whole.**

Into the poor and the starving,

Into those who are oppressed or abused, Come Lord

**Come among us and make us whole.**

Into the lives of loved ones,

Into those from whom we are estranged, Come Lord,

**Come among us and make us whole.**

Into our joys and celebrations,

Into our work and our achievements, Come, Lord

**Come among us and make us whole.**

In the last few days before Christmas help us to be patient with our loved ones, and the difficulties caused by the pandemic and restrictions on gathering together. In our time of joy and plenty, help us to pray for those who have no homes to celebrate in, no festive food to eat, no family or friends to share the holiday with. And guide us to be generous to those who have little or nothing this Christmas. In the name of your Son, who came to live among us, to bring light to the darkness, we pray. Amen

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn** Love came down at Christmas sung by Margaret

Love came down at

Christmas,

Love all lovely, Love Divine,

Love was born at

Christmas,

Star and Angels gave the

sign.

Worship we the Godhead,

Love Incarnate, Love

Divine,

Worship we our Jesus,

But wherewith for sacred

sign?

Love shall be our token,

Love be yours and love be

mine,

Love to God and all men,

Love for plea and gift and

sign.

### **Blessing**

Follow, where the Spirit of Hope leads you

Listen, as the child of Peace cries for you

Rejoice, as the Love of God embraces you

and go now, with Hope, Peace and Love in your hearts

and the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever with you. Amen

**Thorn in the straw © Graham Kendrick**

Since the day the angel came  
It seemed that everything had changed  
The only certain thing  
Was the child that moved within  
On the road that would not end  
Winding down to Bethlehem  
So far away from home

Just a blanket on the floor  
Of a vacant cattle-stall  
But there the child was born  
She held him in her arms  
And as she laid him down to sleep  
She wondered - will it always be  
So bitter and so sweet

And did she see there  
In the straw by his head a thorn  
And did she smell myrrh  
In the air on that starry night  
And did she hear angels sing  
Not so far away  
Till at last the sun rose blood-red  
In the morning sky

Then the words of ancient seers  
Tumbled down the centuries ...  
A virgin shall conceive...  
God with us... Prince of Peace  
Man of Sorrows - strangest name  
Oh Joseph there it comes again  
So bitter yet so sweet

And as she watched him through the years  
Her joy was mingled with her tears  
And she'd feel it all again  
The glory, and the shame  
And when the miracles began  
She wondered, who is this man  
And where will this all end

'Til against a darkening sky  
The son she loved was lifted high  
And with his dying breath  
She heard him say 'Father forgive'  
And to the criminal beside  
"Today-with me in Paradise"  
So bitter yet so sweet

