

## Study 4 – Celebration



Cornelis Massijs: Arrival of the Holy Family in Bethlehem 1543

*'Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!' (Luke 1:45)*

### a) He will be our Peace!

#### **Micah 5:2-5a**

Micah is speaking in the late 8th century BC, and with a familiar theme of God's people abandoning their covenant with God and switching to the pagan beliefs. There is injustice, the powerful exploiting the poor, and a corruption of worship that cannot be ignored by God.

As a result, both Samaria and Jerusalem will fall to the Assyrians and Babylonians. But as with other prophets, in amongst the darkness Micah brings a spark of hope, that God will save a remnant of the people and bring them back to their own land, to be ruled by a righteous king, at which point that spark will become a flame, as they become a light to the other nations.

The prophet names the birthplace of the king as Bethlehem Ephrathah, which distinguishes it as the town where David was born and is a connection between the messianic King and David.

In describing this King as having roots in ancient times (or eternity) he looks toward a supernatural figure, and only in the person of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd of his flock, can this prophecy find its fulfilment, born almost without notice in the small town of Bethlehem.

## b) Here I am

### Hebrews 10:5-10

Our readings through Advent have mentioned the issue of not taking worship and offering seriously enough, simply going through the motions, which may still be an issue for some today, albeit not with the animal sacrifices of Paul's day. Prior to this reading Paul tells his readers that the law, and its requirements for sacrifice, can never make perfect those drawing together in worship – or why was there need for endless repetition? They remind us of our sins, he says, but animal blood cannot take away sin.

Covenant was at the heart of the relationship between God and his people. Now there is to be a radically different

covenant, central to which is the sacrificial death of Jesus – one sacrifice for all. Here Paul quotes from Psalm 40:6-8, applying the words 'Here I am...' to Jesus and the willing offering of his life on the Cross. Christianity is almost certainly unique in speaking of one monumental event bringing salvation through both the centuries and the world.

When Jesus said, 'It is finished' (John 19:30) he used a banking term which would have announced that the final instalment, the ultimate payment, had been made.

## c) My soul glorifies the Lord

### Luke 1:39-55

So here is Mary, chosen and blessed in becoming the mother of the Son of God. And yet, as we read this wonderfully poetic passage from Luke, we need to bear in mind that in the future she would see her son hanging on a cross. Being chosen by God does not necessarily mean life henceforth will be comfort and joy, but it does mean that God knows you are the right person at the right time and has confidence in you.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, has become one of the greatest hymns of the church, its words immersed in the Old Testament, and particularly the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Both Mary and Elizabeth shared a dream, that one day all the words of the prophets would come true, and all nations would be blessed through the family of Abraham. But that would also mean upheaval for the world, as the proud and rich, and those who abuse their power were laid low, and the humble and poor elevated so all could be seen to be equal in God's eyes.

Mary and Elizabeth were living in the dark days of Herod the Great, a ruthless ruler backed up by the power of Rome. And like so many other Jews they searched the scriptures for



1485-1490  
Mary and Elizabeth in the garden of a country house, Huth Hours 1485 - 1490.

words of prophesy that might bring not only hope and comfort but point to God’s bigger picture and a fulfilment of his promise, to come to their rescue. All this is in Mary’s poem of praise as she and Elizabeth look to all God will accomplish through their sons, John the Messenger, and Jesus the Messiah.

## Traditions #4 Some local traditions

In Italy, among other Advent celebrations, is the entry into Rome in the last days of Advent of the Calabrian pifferari, or bagpipe players, who play before the shrines of Mary, the mother of Jesus: in Italian tradition, the shepherds played these pipes when they came to the manger at Bethlehem to pay homage to the infant Jesus.

In England, especially in the northern counties, there was a custom (now extinct) for poor women to carry around the “Advent images”, two dolls dressed to represent Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary. A halfpenny coin was expected from every one to whom these were exhibited and bad luck was thought to menace the household not visited by the doll-bearers before Christmas Eve at the latest.

In Normandy, farmers employed children under twelve to run through the fields and orchards armed with torches, setting fire to bundles of straw, and thus, it was believed, driving out such vermin as were likely to damage the crops.



Bruno, Giuseppe (1836-1904), bagpipe players from Calabria

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## They say...

*‘The whole life of Christ was a continual passion; others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr . . . His birth and his death were but one continual act, and his Christmas-day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of the one and the same day.’  
(John Donne, Sermon of Christmas-Day, 1626)*