****

**Sunday 20 December to Sunday 27 December**

****

Sunday 20 December 2020

# What kind of greeting?

by Marlene Cooper

**‘But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid Mary; you have found favour with God”’ (Luke 1:30).**

Read Luke 1:26–38

Sending Christmas cards is one of my Advent traditions. Every year I ask myself, what shall I write? What kind of greeting will be just right for my family and friends this year?

Today’s gospel tells us about a special greeting God sent with an angel to a young woman: ‘Greetings, dear Mary! You are highly favoured! The Lord is with you!’

Not surprisingly, she was greatly astonished, troubled and afraid. ‘What kind of greeting might this be?’ she wondered.

The angel continued: ‘Don’t be afraid, Mary, God has a message for you: you are to give birth to a son who is to be called Jesus, Saviour, Son of the Most High, the Son of God. In fact, he will be a great king, reigning in a kingdom that has no end!’

How can this be? Imagine the turmoil in Mary’s heart, and the effect of the angel’s words on this young virgin engaged to be married and with all her life before her.

‘No word from God will ever fail,’ the angel assured her. Scarcely knowing where all this will lead, Mary responded in lowly wonder, ‘Yes, let it be. I am the Lord’s servant. Let all this be fulfilled’.

We live more than two millennia since this first ‘Christmas greeting’ was delivered to the young mother-to-be of Jesus. As we hear it again, we too might wonder what kind of greeting this might be. In these Advent days, we are assured that it has become a greeting for the world – a greeting and a message that connects the world to God. It is good news! Again, this year, God wants the world to know that the Lord is with us and God’s favour rests upon us because what the Saviour promised long ago to Mary has come for us all.

What a greeting to share with friends and neighbours this Advent – a greeting and a message to warm hearts and lighten lives as we look forward to celebrating Christmas once again.

**Loving Father, thank you that Jesus has brought your favour to a broken and needy world; give us the words to greet others with the favour you have shown to us. Amen.**

Monday 21 December 2020

# Singing for joy!

by Marlene Cooper

**‘There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one beside you; there is no one like our God’ (1 Samuel 2:2).**

Read 1 Samuel 2:1–10

Hannah is singing for joy! God has filled her mouth and her heart with praise for the gift of a child! But her song soon turns to darker themes, contrasting starkly with her joy. She sings of a thundering from heaven, judgement to the ends of the earth, and the silencing of the wicked in a place of darkness. How can she keep singing, we wonder?

This joyful woman knows. Her anguish and despair have brought her to the depths and there she has come to know the God who is merciful beyond words but who does not allow evil and darkness to prevail.

Perhaps you have been deeply challenged by the difficulties of the past year. You may have contemplated the fragility of human life, the mystery of why, how, amid joy, a sudden visitation of fear can shake all that seemed secure. Life, death, security, doubt, faith, confusion – these exist together in our sin-broken world.

Hannah’s song encourages us not only to get ready to ‘sing out with joy, he is coming, hallelujah!’ but also to reflect on our confession, ‘he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead’. It urges us to prepare, yes, for gladness beyond words, but also the return of our righteous Judge. ‘No one is holy like the Lord … he is a God who knows; by him are deeds weighed’ (verses 2,3). Her song reveals a God who sees history as a whole, the fracture and ‘dis-grace’ of sin side by side with the reconciling grace and endless love of God revealed in Christ the Saviour.

Our world needs this Saviour now. Those of us who know the grace and love he brings have a treasure to share with all who long for security and hope. To know and embrace God’s faithful love and mercy is to have, like Hannah, a new song to sing, a song of joy for a Saviour like no other, who comes, sees, knows, loves and welcomes us all.

**Gracious God, you have filled our lives with joy through the coming of Jesus our Saviour. Make us messengers of hope to those who long for your peace, the welcome and comfort of your saving love. Amen.**

Tuesday 22 December 2020

# Preparing for wisdom

by Marlene Cooper

**‘Then I was constantly at his side … rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind’ (Proverbs 8:30,31).**

Read Proverbs 8:22–31

Is everything ready? The house, the gifts, the food – and, what else? The heart?

While we have been busy with our preparations, the Holy Spirit has been secretly at work in our hearts, preparing us for God’s work of wisdom. With the birth of Jesus, divine wisdom, which was there at the dawn of creation, has entered history in a new and wonderful way. Proverbs pictures wisdom as a co-worker with God in creation, a gracious and generous host, a mediator of divine favour. With the advent of Christ, wisdom is again at work, seeking hearts ready to receive and welcome this divine Guest. Wisdom seeks us out through the word and prepares us for worship.

Wisdom knows the truth about Jesus. The child we are preparing to welcome and worship again this Christmas is the true Word of God who, in wisdom, spoke the world and its creatures, its beauty and its goodness, into being. Now he comes to bring God’s saving wisdom into all creation, to a world dislocated by sin. St Paul writes to believers in Corinth: ‘You are in Christ Jesus who has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption’ (1 Corinthians 1:30).

A newborn baby bedded down in a manger doesn’t readily disclose this wonder! But wisdom knows and declares: here lies the creator of the universe. I was with him in the beginning, and I am with him now. He is creation’s redeemer, God’s wise way of making sinners righteous and holy. To worship him at this holy time is wisdom’s highest work. That’s why, as we prepare everything else to celebrate the Saviour’s birth, it is good to have hearts prepared for not just a birthday party but also for the one who makes worship possible for us. Worship is wisdom’s divine work in our hearts.

**Ah, dearest Jesus, holy child, make thee a bed, soft, undefiled, within my heart, that it may be a quiet chamber, kept for thee. Amen.**

Wednesday 23 December 2020

# God will restore

by Marlene Cooper

**‘I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt’ (Jeremiah 31:4).**

Read Jeremiah 31:1–6

Many centuries before the birth of Jesus, God’s chosen people were suffering cruelly under exile and captivity in a foreign land. It seemed to them that they had lost everything. In their misery, they wondered if they had finally reached the ‘tipping point’. Had God’s covenant favour been utterly withdrawn? Had God finally given up on them?

But God had not forgotten his people. Through all the long years of waiting, God had been doing his gracious work, planning for them, drawing them to himself with longing, moving them out of despair and preparing them to trust his promise. Jeremiah brought them God’s word of hope and a vision for their future. It was a message of restoration: ‘I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt’. Here was their God, speaking to them as of old, addressing them as his beloved.

God was calling them to his time (verse 1). First, the time of their return and restoration to their land and city but also to a future time of promise, the ‘fullness of time’ (Galatians 4:4), when God would unite them with all nations under a new covenant of grace and forgiveness through the coming of the Saviour, God’s own beloved Son. Jeremiah describes this time of God’s favour through the remainder of our reading – a time of rest and gathering, of joy and dancing, of planting of crops on their own land and beyond, and the enjoyment of harvest.  Best of all, their watchmen would again call them to worship from the city walls, ‘Come, let us go up to the Lord our God!’

We who have been making our pilgrim way through the season of Advent are living in this new time of God. The birth of Jesus ushers in a new era of hope, peace, faith and love. Now that same watchman’s call of old can be heard among us: ‘Let us go up to worship! The newborn King is with us, and God has come to restore his people!’ With singing and joy, we anticipate through worship the fullness of God’s time, when the restoration of Israel and all people together has been made known and appeared on earth when Christ was born in Bethlehem and God came down to live among us.

**Gracious God, you have loved us with an everlasting love and drawn us to yourself with unfailing kindness. As we approach the holy time of our Saviour’s birth, fill us with joy and hope to welcome him as our Redeemer promised long ago to Israel and the whole world. Amen.**

Thursday 24 December 2020

# Today – for you!

by Marlene Cooper

**‘I bring you good news that will cause great joy to all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you’ (Luke 2:10,11).**

Read Luke 2:1–20

On this holy night long ago, a child was born to Mary. It was ‘Mary’s child, … born in the night’, as the carol goes. But whose child was it? Out in the fields, shepherds heard the angelic messenger announce amid glorious heavenly light and song: ‘Today, in David’s town, a Saviour has been born to you!’ A Saviour! For them! But just for the shepherds? No, when they had seen him, lying in the manger as the angel had told them, ‘they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed’ (verses 17,18).

All who heard it! Down through the ages, the story of the birth of a Saviour in a lowly manger has been passed from one generation to another. A great crowd of witnesses has been gathering, those who by God’s grace have believed that ‘Mary’s child’ was born for everyone, and the angel’s message was for all who would hear it, good news drenching the whole earth with joy, Christmas after Christmas. ‘This child’, they say, ‘is for you too, for you a Saviour, for you the Child of promise, for you, the favour of God!’

We sing an old Polish carol: ‘Flocks were sleeping, shepherds keeping vigil till the morning new, saw the glory, heard the story, tidings of a gospel true. Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, praises voicing, greet the morrow: Christ the babe was born for you! Christ the babe was born for you!’ On Christmas Eve we hear it again, we tell it again, and we share it again with all who come. Swedish Pastor Bo Giertz once shared it in a Christmas sermon: ‘For all who wonder … if Christ is for them too, the word comes: the promise is for you – for you, you, you!’

It is good news, the best news, bringing great joy to the world – a Saviour is born for you, yes, for you too, God’s own Son, Christ the Lord.

**O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Fill our hearts with joy and hope as we hear again the good news that you were born for us, born to be our Saviour. Amen.**

Friday 25 December 2020

# The true light

by Marlene Cooper

**‘The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world’ (John 1:9).**

Read John 1:1–14

Lights on the Christmas tree, festooned over trees, across gardens, along the eaves and window frames of houses, candles on the Christmas table and more in churches: lights and Christmas just go together. How disappointed many people were this year to hear that popular light shows would be cancelled because of the pandemic.

Ages ago the prophet Isaiah spoke these words: ‘The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned’ (Isaiah 9:2). People longing for light, overshadowed by the threat of a powerful adversary and the collapse of their nation, must have heard those words with longing, hardly daring to hope or believe they could be meant for them.

Today, wonder of wonders, we are privileged to see that great light dawning and shining among us, that ‘true light that gives light to everyone … coming into the world’. As we contemplate and worship the Christmas child and see him as a newborn in a lowly stable, perhaps we may be asking, can it be that he is the light longed for down the ages? Can he be the ‘great light’ of whom Isaiah spoke? The gospel assures us, ‘In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it’ (John 1:4,5).

As Christmas lights gleam from trees, windows, housetops, and churches, we are reminded that the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling with us, the one and only Son who came from the Father, is here. He triumphed over all the darkness of sin and death so that through him all should believe and receive the right to become children of God. Today we thank and praise God for Jesus our Saviour, Light of the World, full of grace and truth.

**Light of the World, Lord Jesus, on this holy day, dispel the world’s darkness and fill our hearts with your true light that cannot be overcome. May we share that light with others again this Christmas as we welcome your coming to live among us. Amen.**

Saturday 26 December 2020

# Let them praise!

by Marlene Cooper

**‘He has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart’ (Psalm 148:14).**

Read Psalm 148

Have you enjoyed your Christmas praise? You may have had many opportunities for praise in recent days, most wonderfully, praising God for the gift of a Saviour, but also praising others, perhaps for gifts, kindness, or their special contribution to the joy of Christmas. On this day after Christmas, Psalm 148 celebrates praise and calls us along with the whole universe to fill heaven and earth with our praise.

The first stanza of this mighty song calls all creatures above in the highest heavens, the angels, the sun, moon and shining stars, to join in the praise of God who so wondrously made them and set them forever in their place: ‘Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created!’ (verse 5).

The second stanza calls all who inhabit the earth below to join heaven’s praise. The whole human race is called to join the ocean depths, stormy winds, lightning, hail, trees, animals and birds, even the mountains and hills, in the great song of praise: ‘Let them praise the name of the Lord for his name alone is exalted, his splendour is above the heavens!’ (verse 13). Surely God’s holy name and all his good and glorious work are worthy of praise in heaven and on earth!

But now comes the wonderful climax, the pinnacle of the song: ‘He has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart’ (verse 14). The promised ‘horn’ of Israel is none other than the mighty Davidic king, God’s own chosen one, raised up for all his saints and his people, Israel. The psalm points forward to the coming of the very one whose birth we have been celebrating – Israel’s Saviour, the Saviour of the world.

The psalmist could hardly have imagined this Saviour as the child in a manger whom we have welcomed and worshipped again this Christmas. But by the Spirit, he called heaven and earth to praise the God who not only creates but also saves. ‘Let them praise!’ he calls again today. Let nothing get in the way of it, hinder or prevent it. Praise gives itself gladly in response to what has been given. So with the whole universe, we join again to sing out our praise, ‘Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!’ (2 Corinthians 9:15).

**All praise and thanks gracious God, Creator and Saviour, for the gift of joy, Jesus Christ. Join our praise to that of the whole universe as we give you glory for the immeasurable love that has come to earth for us in him. Amen.**

Sunday 27 December 2020

# Heartache and hope

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

**‘This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against’ (Luke 2:34b).**

Read Luke 2:22–40

It’s amazing how fast the joy of the Christmas can fade and the challenges of everyday life can crowd right back in on us. In a sense, it is back to the real world now.

I suppose it should not surprise us. If we look at the words to some Christmas carols, we find, among the warm images of the Saviour’s birth, the stark reality of his suffering and death. In the carol, Anna’s Song, we sing the words:

Place this child in the shade,  
hang this child ‘neath a tree;  
with his hand on the wood  
may this child set us free.

And then in What Child is This, we sing:

Nails, spear shall pierce him through  
the cross be borne for me, for you.

Soon after Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph travelled to Jerusalem to present him at the temple for the Jewish rites of purification. There Simeon told them of God’s plan for his people. Simeon knew that God was at work in this baby. In this child was God’s personal presence with and for his people. In his baby, God had come to live with us.

But Simeon also said to Mary that Jesus was ‘destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel … and a sword will pierce your own soul too’ (Luke 2:34,35).

These words of Simeon, and their fulfilment, are just as much a part of the Christmas story as those about the angels and the shepherds. The Christmas story is not a delightful fairytale; it is the celebration of the birth of Christ – Christ who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. His birth marks the beginning of a hard and bitter struggle for him, because of our sin.

But he was prepared to do this – for us. And he promises that as we endure suffering and pain, he will be at work in us and will give us what we need to be strong, faithful, and full of joy.

There is heartache on the other side of Christmas. But there is also hope. We have the cross – a symbol of the greatest pain that Jesus endured for us, but also a reminder of his sacrificial love, and the sure hope we have of eternal life.

**Loving Lord Jesus, you came as a baby in Bethlehem, but you also came to live, serve, suffer, die, and rise again for us. Help us remember and celebrate your whole life, and the certain hope that we have because of it. In your name, we pray. Amen.**