



Bromley
**United
Reformed
Church**



ADVENT 2025

Who is Jesus?

Monday 1st December

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth,
and he shall be the one of peace.

During this past year the global church has been recalling one of the great councils of the early church. In 325 AD, bishops from across the Roman Empire gathered in Nicaea to discuss one of the fundamental questions in the Christian faith: Who was Jesus? Was he just a man of God? Or was he more than that, possibly God Godself? Much of the debate revolved around Jesus as “Son” and what that relationship indicated about the identity of Jesus. What was decided formed a statement that, to this day, underpins the Christian belief of who Jesus was and is.

Over this season of Advent, as we prepare once again to proclaim Jesus’s birth and look towards Jesus’s return, we are going to explore who Jesus is. We will do this from the perspective of scripture, from the insight of theologians and historians, and how Jesus is met in the church and the world. The hope is that by the time Christmas arrives, our joyous proclamation of Jesus’s birth will have a different depth to

it: that we will not only sing with the angels but have the courage to say more—to tell the world who Jesus is!

As we begin our explorations, the prophet Micah provides us with a description of who, as Christians, we might say Jesus is. He was one whose ancestors were from the north of Israel. He was one who would be a king of Israel; one who was there at the begin of time; one who would be born; one who would be a shepherd; one who would always know security; one who would be great throughout the world; one who would be of peace; and one who would proclaim God. As descriptions of a person go, this is not simple, yet who of us is simple to describe. For Jesus, though, the complexity of his character as suggested by Micah's description is vast. Despite this, it does give us a good starting point, reminding us of the context where we meet Jesus in the gospels—as a citizen of Israel, a Jew, as one of a people who identify themselves as God's own.

Therefore, we begin Advent by recognising Jesus was born a Jew. The place of honour of Jesus in the Christian faith does not alter this fact. Jesus's teachings and disputes with Pharisees and Priests do not offer evidence to the contrary. As we will explore tomorrow, Jesus's mission was first and foremost to rebuild the people of Israel.

*Long ago, prophets knew
Christ would come, born a Jew,
come and make all things new;
bear his people's burden,
freely love and pardon.*

*Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring!
sing choirs, sing, sing, sing!
When he comes, when he comes,
who will make him welcome?*

Tuesday 2nd December

Luke 24:19-21a

He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

These words from the gospel of Luke come from the encounter of the two disciples with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. A bit like the words from the prophet Micah yesterday, they tell us several things about Jesus, or at least who the disciples thought he was. The disciples tell us where Jesus was from—important in a society whose ancestry of tribes was still of significant. They tell us of how Jesus’s words and actions suggested to them that Jesus was a prophet. They also tell us of what they believed Jesus was meant to have achieved and their disappointment that he did not!

Often, as we go through Advent, we hear the prophets in the Old Testament talk of the “Messiah” spoken of. The “Messiah” was the one who, as we will come on to see, was believed would come and save Israel. The one who, to coin a phrase, would “make Israel great again!” However, when we get into the gospels and see Jesus in action, “making Israel great again” did not come high on Jesus’s to-do-list. Jesus appeared to take little notice of the Romans who occupied the land of God’s people, suppressing them. Jesus’s real concern was the Jewish people themselves and their relationship with God.

In true Jewish theocracy, the Messiah is not one but two anointed individuals: the anointed King from the Davidic line and the anointed Priest from the line of Aaron and Zadok. In all the Old Testament texts we use to equate Jesus with the expected “Messiah,” we tend

not to observe a priestly link. There may be a good reason for this as Jesus's cousin John had priestly lineage and was an important part of opening people's eyes to who Jesus was. But in how we interpret the role of a "priest" today, Jesus's focus on the spiritual wellness of God's people was an important part of what he was to do. In saving Israel Jesus's purpose was as much, if not more, about saving them from themselves as saving them from the Romans.

*Into the longing of our souls,
into theses heavy hearts of stone,
shine on us now your piercing light,
order our lives and souls aright,
by grace and love unknown,
until in you our hearts unite—
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

*Come with your love to make us whole.
Come with your light to lead us on,
driving the darkness far from our souls:
O come, Lord Jesus, come.*

Wednesday 3rd December

Matthew 4:23

Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

In the three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—Jesus does not start his ministry and mission in the heart of the nation. Instead, he travelled around saving the souls of those who were of influence.

Now, if one was going to lead an uprising, as maybe you would expect from a messiah who would be king, you need people. And as many a history on civil war and revolution shows, the people who

are needed are those who feel the most deprived and suppressed. Therefore, if Jesus were to have taken on the persona of the kingly messiah, then starting out in Galilee spreading his message was a wise move. Not only would he be more likely to be taken seriously when he finally arrived in Jerusalem with a band of supporters with him; he would find a more receptive ear among the Galileans because of their circumstances.

Yet is that what was happening in this one verse from gospel of Matthew? Did Jesus really go to those on the margins first so he could build an army? Or did Jesus go to them first because God's kingdom does not follow the same rules as worldly kingdoms?

*The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.*

*The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair.*

*God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
the heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
and all things cry 'Glory!' to God all in all.*

Thursday 4th December

Who was Jesus?

As the anticipated hour comes closer, who was this Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas?

He was a Jew. He was thought to be the one who would save Israel. But was he a prophet? A priest? A mighty king?

Who do you think Jesus was?

Note your thoughts in this box

Revelation 1:12-16

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire; his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

Friday 5th December

Luke 1:30-33

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

When a nation is oppressed and looking for liberation and revival of status and might, the natural hope and anticipation will be for a mighty leader to rise up. Therefore, it is probably no surprise the image of Messiah that the gospels draw us to for who Jesus was or was to be is that one of the Messiah being a king. It is, after all, how the world works.

In the words of the angel to Mary, Jesus being the one anointed of the Davidic line is reenforced. Words such as "throne," "reign" and "kingdom" are used. Yet, Jesus was more than just to be the King of Israel and great. He was to be called the Son of God. We will be looking at what Jesus being the Son of God might mean later in Advent. For now, though, in our exploration of who Jesus was and is, this distinction is important to note. Jesus was more than one who

would be anointed as king because of his tribe. His DNA put him into a realm outside the worldly. This, we alluded to earlier in the week, is significant. Not only because this redefines what it means for Israel's redemption but because it reformulates how we might understand kingdom and who is a part of that kingdom.

*People, look east to see at last
hopes fulfilled from ages past:
now in the promise of the morning,
see, a brighter day is dawning,
rich with the visions long foretold,
prophets' dreams from days of old.*

*Born of our race, a child so small—
hail the promised Lord of all!
Nailed to a cross for our salvation,
he shall rule God's new creation.
Lift us your eyes, and look again:
see, he comes in power to reign.*

Saturday 6th December

Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage."

The visit of the Magi is often interpreted in the story of the Nativity as the thing that makes Jesus's mission in the world about more than just the people of Israel. Yet the Magi do not come looking for a child who would be their king. They came specifically to find the one who would be the king of the Jews. When we consider these couple of verses along with what the disciples said about Jesus on the road to

Emmaus, we see that despite everything we have come to know and believe, Jesus's main focus was the people with whom he shared a common heritage.

As you read the gospel stories, Jesus does not ignore the rest of the world. He talked with the Samaritan woman at the well about changing her life. He healed the centurion's servant, and who knows who would have been in those crowds that listened to him on hillsides and the shores of the lake. Yet, Jesus's concern was not with how the world was living and being governed, it was with how the Jewish people were living and being governed.

It was on this point Jesus had difficulty with the religious leaders and pharisees and why his disciples thought Jesus had failed in his mission. Like all good leaders, Jesus dealt with internal affairs before the external. Those who controlled the internal affairs, however, did not want to give up that power, or do things Jesus's way. They wanted a king who would give them what they wanted. This led to Jesus being mocked.

*A sceptred reed, O patient Lord, they thrust into your hand,
and acted out their grim charade to its appointed end.*

*They could not know, as we do now, though empires rise and fall,
your kingdom shall not cease to grow till love embraces all.*

Sunday 7th December

Matthew 4:18-22

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus may not have acted quite as one might expect a king to act. However, through those he called to be his disciples and the wider community that gathered around him, Jesus remodelled Israel.

It was no coincidence that Jesus’s core group was made up of twelve individuals. They might not have each come from one of the twelve tribes of Israel, but if Jesus’s mission was about Israel, then those who would act as “Elders” (or Apostles) had to number twelve! That the twelve disciples did not represent each of the tribes was significant. The renewal of Israel under Jesus had to break away from the old structures. It was not to be status that would give places of honour. Instead, it was service, the ability to be honest while at times completely clueless, and to trust Jesus entirely.

It was not just the twelve disciples that made up this new Israel. The reforging of who Israel was to be, came from the others who made up the large community of Jesus’s disciples: the women who saw more than some of the men did; the broken who found healing and purpose. Those who were unaccepted being accepted and included. And over this group of people Jesus ruled, through love not power.

*Christ's is the world in which we move;
Christ's are the folk we're summoned to love;
Christ's is the voice which calls us to care,
and Christ is the one who meets us here.*

*To the lost Christ shows his face,
to the unloved he gives his embrace,
to those who cry in pain and disgrace,
Christ makes, with his friends, a touching place.*

Monday 8th December

John 11:11, 17, 34-36

After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

Jesus had a mission and through the gospels we see how in every aspect of his life he lived that out. It was, after all, the only way to really change things—to be a living example. This, however, made him look like a pretty ordinary man at times. When he laughed at jokes over dinner; when he wept at the grave of one he called a friend.

The story of Lazarus raising from the dead shows us lots of different things about Jesus. The kingly nature of his leadership comes to the forefront—his dedication to the cause taking priority as he finished what he was doing before going to see Lazarus. There is prophecy in how Jesus speaks about what he does and in the location of the story in the gospel writer's chronology of events. Yet, despite

everything that describes Jesus as special, in the story there is also the ordinary. The point is made that Jesus was too just a man; a man who felt pain and grief, who even in all he did and achieved, was called a failure by his friends because he was not there when the worst happened.

Through our knowledge of who Jesus was and is, we might condemn others in the story for their actions. There was a purpose to letting Lazarus die which was about the world seeing or more importantly the Jews seeing who Jesus was. But in the moment, in the grief, no one was going to know that and why should they. In fact, for those of us who look to know Jesus better today, what is more important to us? That Jesus gave Lazarus life or that he felt the pain of blame and the anger of others because he was not there when others needed him?

*When people are cruel and words are malicious,
bless us with friends who will listen and care.
When tongue-lashings strip us, degrade us and whip us,
clothe us with friendships that show that you're there.
When gossip condemns us without a fair hearing,
bless us with friends who stay out of that game.
When lies are let loose just to linger and fester,
guard us with friends who, with truth, clear our name.
If false friends grow wary and keep to their distance,
bless us with friends who will feel what we feel,
who hold us with honesty tempered with kindness,
friends who've been hurt, yet who know that you heal.*

Tuesday 9th December

Luke 22:42

“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.”

The Council of Nicaea was not the only council of the global church that would wrestle with the identity of Jesus. In 451 AD, the Council of Chalcedon was gathered with the purpose to decide whether Jesus had two natures or was two people! The Council of Nicaea determined that Jesus was human but there was something of God inherent in his being which was more than what was in humankind as the creation of God in God’s image. The study of scripture, though, suggested that more need to be discussed and said: Jesus needed to be declared as fully human and fully God.

Later in Advent we will think a little more about Jesus as God, but why is it so important for us to know Jesus was fully human?

In the lead up to Christmas, the church finds itself in the hinterland between what was and what is to come. As we look for Jesus’s return, we prepare to remember when Jesus came. We get caught up in a mystery that makes very little sense in worldly terms. Understanding Jesus as fully human does not unlock this mystery. It does, however, make the mystery enticing and makes Jesus approachable. It causes us to think about how we are part of Jesus’s mission, although we might not see ourselves numbered among the people of Israel.

*Holy Child within the manger, long ago yet ever near;
come as friend to every stranger, come as hope for every fear.
As you lived to heal the broken, greet the outcast, free the bound,
as you taught us love unspoken, teach us now where you are found.*

*Once again we tell the story—how your love for us was shown,
when the image of your glory wore an image like our own.
Come, enlighten with your wisdom, come and fill us with your grace.
May the fire of your compassion kindle every land and race.*

Wednesday 10th December

John 1:1-4

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

Yesterday we acknowledged that for all Jesus did and how he sought to bring about change in his community, he had to be fully human. Those personal relationships and knowledge of what it meant to be human in the lowest of ways was essential for the then and for what was/is to come. Yet, for Jesus to subvert the norms and challenge a way of life that was governed by rules perceived as given from God, Jesus had to be more than human. Jesus needed to have a knowledge of God that came from the beginning of time. Jesus had to be one with God and God one with Jesus.

Why? Because of the question often asked of Jesus, “with whose authority do you speak?”

As the Messiah—the anointed one of God—Jesus had a level of authority. But when one’s actions did not fully reflect the image of the Messiah which had been painted from the words of the prophets, that authority was brought into question. Also, what Jesus did, how he interacted with people, went beyond Jesus being a priest or a king. There was about Jesus something that was not worldly, and that was the manifestation of God in human form.

*Manifest at Jordon's stream,
Prophet, Priest, and King supreme;
and at Cana wedding guest
in thy Godhead manifest;
manifest in power divine,
changing water in to wine:
anthems be to thee address,
God in man made manifest.*

*Manifest in making whole
palsied limbs and fainting souls;
manifest in valiant fight,
quelling all the devil's might;
manifest in gracious will,
ever bringing good from ill:
anthems be to thee address,
God in man made manifest.*

Thursday 11th December **Who was Jesus?**

As the anticipated hour comes closer, who was this Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas?

Possibly a king whose purpose was to seek to reform Israel, attempting to rebuild a nation not with the leadership of the elite, but the hardworking labourers and marginalised. Yet, Jesus was more than this. He was fully human and fully divine. He was one who caused people to get angry, to question, to not be afraid to ask why.

But why? Why did Jesus need to be more? Why did he have to be God and not just of God?

What do think? Who do you think Jesus was?

Note your thoughts in this box

Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.

Friday 12th December

Luke 2:28-32

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

Much of the evidence about what Jesus was to do in the world is about a single nation. As said a few times over the past few days, Jesus was all about the sorting out the Jewish people. Yet, if Jesus is more than a human agent of God, then what Jesus does and is has to mean more than what he might have achieved among those whom he lived.

We glimpse this throughout the gospels, in Jesus’s interactions with those who were not Jewish, in Jesus’s instructions to the disciples and in the declarations made about who Jesus was and would be. In the arms of Simeon, Jesus was announced to be for all people. Yes, Israel would be elevated in world through Jesus’s actions, but it was not just Israel who would have the chance to know God’s saving grace through those actions.

To have such a narrative within the Christian scriptures is obviously essential—there has to be some sort of foundation as to why the Christian faith freely spread beyond the boundaries of land. But that is not all that this is about. If God was only concerned with one nation of people, then God is limited and not all powerful, which if we believe there is only one God makes no sense. Jesus as God in human form was limited—he could only go as far as a donkey and a boat might take him. Jesus as God, though, who is beginning and

end, is unlimited and so what Jesus does has to go beyond the limits of nation, time and space.

*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.*

Saturday 13th December

Matthew 4:24-25

So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, people possessed by demons or having epilepsy or afflicted with paralysis, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

On a very human level, one of the attributes the gospel writers assigned to Jesus was that he was a healer. At a time when medicine for the masses was not a thing, it is no surprise that someone who had “the healing touch” drew people to them. Jesus had that touch and it brought him quite a bit of fame for both the right and the wrong reasons.

From what the gospel writer of Matthew wrote, Jesus did not pick and chose who he would heal. Everyone who came to him—whatever their ailment, whatever their heritage—Jesus healed them. For someone whose mission was specifically to the people of Israel, we might wonder why. But as we explored yesterday, physicality has

its limits. It is also worth noting that these people came looking for Jesus. They wanted the healing Jesus offered.

There is quite a bit to unpack in this because again on the human level who does not want illness and disease gone. If there is a miracle cure that cost nothing but a bit of travel, we know we would all be on our way. Yet, it was not just the size of the crowds that flocked to Jesus that brought him fame. It was what he said to people as he healed them. Jesus saw more than the physical ailment. He healed more than the physical ailment. And this is why although Jesus was a healer, he was more than a healer, and this ultimately led to his death.

*There goes the man whose eyes can scan
a crowd and tell their need.*

*There goes the one whose words we shun
when keen to frown or feed.*

*He walks from here while people peer
at his all-knowing face
which speaks of how each one who stares
has, in his heart, a place.*

Sunday 14th December

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

How can healing a few hundred people lead to death? The simple and logical answer is through contracting one of the diseases you come into contact with! Infection control was not really something Jesus worried about. There was no social spacing, hand sanitising or

the wearing of masks in the crowds. But this was not how Jesus died, despite, in part, being why he died.

Not in every case, but one thing Jesus said to a number of people he healed was “your sins are forgiven.” Now, as people not of that time, we can read much into what Jesus said on these occasions. Yet, we need to recognise that the human body was not understood as we understand it today. People did not know about bacteria, viruses and genetics. And although we can get sick because we forget to wash our hands or clean a cut, not every illness comes about because we have done something wrong in our lives. Jesus knew this, and that is why we need to acknowledge that Jesus did not say “your sins are forgiven” to every person he healed.

However, this does not mean we can discount the importance of this phrase, particularly in what it says about who Jesus was and is. In saying to people they were forgiven, Jesus spoke with an authority the Jews believed was only God’s. This tells us that Jesus was somehow directly related to God, because if he was just a mediator between humanity and God, he would have prayed for God to forgive. This phrase though was not only about heritage. In saying these words, Jesus made himself something else: a sacrifice.

*Oh, to see my name written in the wounds,
for through your suffering I am free.
Death is crushed to death, life is mine to live,
won through your selfless love.*

*This the power of the cross:
Son of God — slain for us.
What a love! What a cost!
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

Monday 15th December

1 Timothy 2:5-6

For there is one God;

there is also one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human,
who gave himself a ransom for all.

Jesus was a sacrifice to God. Not an image that is particularly comforting or probably a way of thinking about Jesus that is natural within the traditions of the United Reformed Church. This is not because for some reason our teachings and beliefs about Jesus skip over Jesus's death. They do not, in our statement of faith we declare our belief in Jesus dying on the cross for our sins (*The Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church*). Yet, much of our everyday language and ritual does not lead us to naturally conclude Jesus's death on the cross as a sacrifice to God.

Why? Well, it probably comes down to how we understand the word "sacrifice" and comfortable we are interpreting its meaning from scripture.

Sacrifice is the act of giving something up for the sake of something or someone. Yet, in religious terms, the apostle Paul's word of "ransom" rings a little more true with what is perceived in the offering of a sacrifice—something is being paid for. Truer still is the idea that in offering a sacrifice, God is appeased. But in the ritual and meaning of sacrifice in the Hebrew scriptures, although offering a sacrifice reconciles one with God, it does more than this.

We talk of Jesus's death atoning for the sins of the world: Jesus covering the cost of all that we do that does not honour the one who created us and loves us. But Jesus's death was not just some form of eternal payment, it was God upholding the promise that Godself would save humanity. Jesus's sacrifice was the ultimate form of what

was described in the book of Leviticus in the sacrifice of animals at the temple. Therefore, the symbolism of Jesus's broken body on the cross should cause us to want to shout "sorry" and simultaneously know we are loved more than we can image.

*On the mount of crucifixion
fountains opened deep and wide;
through the floodgates of God's mercy
flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
poured incessant from above,
and heaven's peace and perfect justice
kissed a guilty world in love.*

Tuesday 16th December

Acts 4:11-12

This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone."

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

As we look at who Jesus was and what his mission was in the world, there feels to be a tension between that mission and what he achieved. Reading the Bible as whole, the relationship between God and humanity comes to be played out in the narrative of one nation, Israel. Jesus as a Jew was meant to be the "happy ending" of the story, yet in the book of Acts we are reminded that the Jews rejected Jesus. This then appears to be followed by the idea that because they did that they also rejected God's promise of salvation!

Yes, these words from Acts 4 do come from a speech of Peter's when he was up before the High Priest's Council in Jerusalem but let us not read into these words something that is not there. These are not

words that make Christianity above the other Abrahamic faiths. These words are about what we talked about yesterday—sacrifice!

For the sacrifices made in the temple by High Priest for sins of the people, the animal chosen had to be a prize animal. The symbolism of value was critical in the ritual and the understanding of what was at stake and what God promised. In what he said, Peter was pointing out to the Jewish leaders that they had missed that Jesus was the “prize animal,” because Jesus did not appear and act as they expected. He also pointed out that it did not matter, because the sacrifice was still offered by the hand of the High Priest and God’s promise remains.

What does one do with that knowledge? Well, if you read on, the High Priest’s Council try to keep a lid on it and ask Peter to keep quiet. Yet, as the image of the crucifixion can take our breath away at times, in being told this by Peter, one has to wonder what it did to the High Priest every time he saw another man crucified by the Romans!

*This the power of the cross:
Son of God—slain for us.
What a love! What a cost!
We stand forgiven at the cross.*

Wednesday 17th December

Philippians 2:5-8

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

In these words of the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi regarding who Jesus was, we have many of the aspects we have explored so far about Jesus being brought together. Paul also weaves them together in a way that shows the complexity of who Jesus was and is. Jesus was God yet was not God. Jesus was human yet was not human. Jesus was a servant of God yet was more than a servant—God's own son. Jesus allowed himself to be a sacrifice while having the power to save. And Jesus is the one who we should emulate!

No wonder early in the life of the church a council was needed to unpack this! No wonder a description of who Jesus is was needed that was a little more logical or, at least, systematic in its approach. No wonder that time and again the church has revisited who Jesus is. No wonder there are library shelves full of books on who Jesus was and is and is to come, and no wonder those books and our repeated musing also concerns who the church should be in response to who Jesus was and is and is to come.

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by:
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

*O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King, goodwill and peace on earth.
For Christ is born of Mary; and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.*

*O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Immanuel.*

Thursday 18th December

Who was Jesus?

As the anticipated hour comes closer, who was this Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas?

Was he a simple healer, caring for the sick and curing those who were troubled in their minds? Or did that healing go much deeper, reminding us all that we have wounds from when we have not loved God as we should or honoured God in thought, word and action? Can we comprehend Jesus on the cross as a sacrifice that declares we are “sorry” and acknowledges God’s promise to love us whatever? Can we grasp that Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice because he was God’s son? As the angels encourage us to proclaim Jesus’s birth, what else are we ready to proclaim?

Who do you say Jesus was?

Note your thoughts in this box

Philippians 2:9-11

Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name that is above every other name,
so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Friday 19th December

John 11:25-27

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

In the image of Jesus as Saviour that has been brought into view so far in our reflections this Advent, it has been one which is encapsulated by death. Yet the Hebrew understanding of sacrifice is not death, it is life. Therefore, death is not where Jesus as Saviour should be found, instead in life. This is captured in the part of the conversation between Martha and Jesus near Lazarus's tomb, that we have just read.

Now, it has to be said, the conversation between Martha and Jesus is a little more complex than this. Martha, although pretty astute, in her acknowledgements of who Jesus is, she was not quite understanding what Jesus was saying. Her thoughts were still on her dead brother and whether Jesus might just be able to reverse that given his power to heal. Also, as Christians do in Advent in looking for Jesus's return, the Jews at this point in their history saw the coming of the Messiah as a mark of the End of Days and restoration of the world to what God intended it to be in the beginning. Yet, in these few words we have the foundation of the Christian faith. It is not that Christians just believe that Jesus was the Messiah who the prophets spoke of, or he is the Son of God. It is that through him there is life and that life goes beyond death. All that is needed is the capacity to believe.

In a culture that was controlled by a stringent set of religious laws, this was revolutionary. What Jesus says breaks away from the need

to ritually purify oneself and offer sacrifices to God. However, one does need to believe.

*From the breaking of the dawn to the setting of the sun,
I will stand on every promise of your word.
Words of power, strong to save, that will never pass away;
I will stand on every promise of your word.
For your covenant is sure, and on this I am secure:
I can stand on every promise of your word.*

Saturday 20th December

John 3:34-36

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God's wrath.

As with many of the descriptions of who Jesus is in the gospels, these couple of verses from the gospel of John tell us who Jesus is and that Jesus is more than who we might think Jesus is from the description. To every answer we might give to the question "who is Jesus?" there is the eternal response: "and ..."

As Christmas fast approaches this is important for us to recognise, because that infant child who the Church will gaze upon with Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds, is more than a child. The celebration of Christmas can never just be a retelling of a story of a birth in out of the ordinary circumstances. It has to be the telling of an entire life plus. The Church has to proclaim what it believes AND...

What is the "and"?

When we thought about Jesus as a sacrifice a few days ago, we broke the idea that the offering of a sacrifice was to appease God. In saying this, though, we did not dismiss the evidence that God gets angry with humanity. In following the story of the Israelites through the Hebrew scriptures we see God angry, and we get a sense of what God's anger can do. But this is not the "and". The Church should be putting the "fear of God" into people! There is a choice, God has given us a choice. The Church is tasked to help the world with that choice.

*God, may our church reflect your grace
to all who enter here.*

*May we extend a wide embrace,
a welcome that's sincere.*

*May our inclusion be as broad
as your compassion's scope.*

*For we would be your people, God,
a home, a help, a hope!*

Sunday 21st December

Luke 3:16-17

John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Way back in the first few days of Advent, we had the reading from Revelation 1 which gave a description of Jesus in the end times. Much like John the Baptist's description, as recorded by the gospel writer of Luke, John the Divine's picture of Jesus had a lot of fire in it

and a sense that when Jesus comes or returns, there will be destruction!

When we think about fire, this is a natural reaction. When we think back to the summer and the wildfires, in watching them burn and seeing what was left after they were put out, our natural conclusion is that destruction and devastation comes with fire. Yet, when controlled, fire can do good things. It provides heat; it enables the cooking of food; it can even be used to stop wildfires! Fire is dangerous, but it can be used for good.

The image of Jesus as being one who is ablaze and in control of fire emphasises the power Jesus has as one sent by God and is part of God. The fear fire raises, however, reminds us that although Jesus was full of compassion, his teachings were not. He was about bringing change to and within a people—change that can be understood as both destructive and life-giving.

*Christ, eternal Sun of justice,
Christ, the rose of wisdom's seed,
come to bless with fire and fragrance
hours of yearning, hurt, and need.
In the lonely, in the stranger,
in the outcast, hid from view;
child who comes to grace the manger,
teach our hearts to welcome you.*

Monday 22nd December

Luke 22:70

All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am."

There are many encounters with Jesus in the gospels that are frustrating. To what would be questions that would solve or prevent many debates, the answers Jesus is recorded to have given are completely unhelpful. Now, of course, when we take verses out of context, we miss what led up to the question and what then happened after Jesus answered. We also have to remember that often what we read in the gospels was the pharisees and religious leaders trying to manipulate a situation so that Jesus might give a response that would incriminate him for the purpose of them discrediting him. Therefore, although today Jesus having answered "are you the Son of God?" directly would solve much, it would not have done at the time. It would have labelled Jesus as something he was truly not.

Therefore, the question remains, was Jesus the Son of God?

Well, as Christians we do believe this, partly because this is what is written in our scriptures! Jesus referred to God as Father. In the accounts of Jesus's baptism and transfiguration, in both the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we have God declaring Jesus as their son. Yet, this title that we assign to Jesus is about more than family relationship. It is a way for us grapple with the deeper identity of Jesus, the one that says that Jesus is not only the Son of God, but God Godself.

*God in time, God in man,
this is God's timeless plan:
he will come, as a man,
born himself of woman,
God divinely human.*

*Ring bells, ring, ring, ring!
Sing choirs, sing, sing, sing!
Jesus comes! Jesus comes!
We will make him welcome!*

Tuesday 23rd December

Matthew 8:27

They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

As we have explored who Jesus was and is over past twenty-two days, the picture that has developed is one that is not simple. However we try to describe who Jesus is, there is always more and always still a level of mystery to the identity of Jesus. This does not mean that at some point we give up; it is important to keep delving deeper into who Jesus was and is, because in knowing Jesus better, we know God better and our faith becomes more grounded.

So Jesus—a man of history—a man of God—God Godself—ever present—always a mystery—one whom we can know personally—one who draws us ever deeper into a relationship with God. Jesus is in the beginning, the end, and everywhere in between. Jesus died for us, Jesus rose for us, and as he once did, we hope Jesus will one day return in person and be known by the whole world.

The Everlasting Father
The Almighty
Bright & Morning Star
Savior
Immanuel
ADVOCATE
Carpenter
I Am
The Truth
ROCK
King of Kings
Only Begotten Son
Creator
The Mighty God
King of the Jews
Chief Corner Stone
Master
JUDGE
prophet
Counsellor
THE LIGHT
Jesus Christ
Lamb of God
Bread of Life
TEACHER
The Word
Good Shepherd
The Way
High Priest
Wonderful
Son of the Living God
Redeemer
Lord
King of Israel
Beloved Son
Holy One of Israel
The Prince of Peace
Alpha and Omega
Shiloh
Mediator

*How brightly beams the morning star!
What sudden radiance from afar
now cheers us with its shining!
Brightness of God, that breaks our night
and fills the darkened souls with light
who once for truth were pining!
Your word, Jesus, inly feeds us,
rightly leads us, life bestowing.
Praise, O praise such love overflowing!*

*Through you alone can we be blest;
then deep be on our hearts impressed
the love that you have borne us;
so make us ready to fulfil
with burning zeal your holy will,
though some may vex or scorn us.
Saviour, let us never lose you;
for we choose you, thirst to know you;
all we are and have we owe you!*

*All praise to him who came to save,
who conquered death and burst the grave;
each day new praise is sounding
to him the Lamb who once was slain,
the friend whom none shall trust in vain,
whose grace is still abounding;
sing, you people, tell the story
of his glory, till his praises
flood with light earth's darkest places!*

Wednesday 24th December

Isaiah 9:6-7b

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Great will be his authority,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.

And so, on this Christmas Eve we return to the words of the prophets and those we link to the foretelling of Jesus coming into the world, who Jesus would be and what he would do. Everything we have discovered about Jesus is there, as is everything that as his followers we should strive to make known and uphold. Therefore, as we prepare to proclaim Jesus's birth, let us sing of everything else Jesus has done and is for us and the world today.

*Sing to the world of Christ our sovereign Lord,
tell of his birth which brought new life to all.*

*Speak of his life, his love, his holy word;
let every nation hear and know his call.*

We sing to the world of Christ our sovereign Lord.

*Sing to the world of Christ the Prince of Peace,
showing to us the Father's loving care,
pleading the at love should reign and wars might cease,
teaching we need the love of God to share.*

We sing to the world of Christ the Prince of Peace.

*Sing to the world of Christ our steadfast friend,
offering himself to live the constant sign,
food for our souls until we meet life's end,
gives us his flesh for bread, his blood for wine.
We sing to the world of Christ our steadfast friend.*

*Sing to the world of Christ our Saviour King,
born that his death that world's release should win.
Hung on a cross, forgiveness he could bring;
buried, he rose to conquer death and sin.
We sing to the world of Christ our Saviour King.*

*Sing to the world of Christ at God's right hand,
praise to the Spirit both have sent from heaven.
Living in us till earth shall reach its span,
time be no more, and Christ shall come again.
We sing to the world of Christ at God's right hand.*

Thursday 25th December **Who is Jesus?**

We believe in one God,
the Father of the whole Universe,
maker of all things visible and invisible;
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the Son of God,
begotten from the Father, only-begotten,
that is, of one being with the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one being with the Father,
through whom all things came into being,

things in heaven and thing on earth,
who because of us human beings, and for
our salvation, came down,
and became incarnate
and became human,
and suffered,
and rose again on the third day,
and ascended to the heavens,
and will come to judge the living and dead,
and in the Holy Spirit.

Nicaean Creed (325 AD)
translated by Revd Dr Susan Durber

Matthew 16:13-16

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

As you gaze into the manger, today, who do you say the child is?



Carols/Hymns

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