

St David's with St Michael's and All Angels, Mount Dinham, Exeter

Newsletter for 20 December 2020 – The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Dear Friends,

Welcome to this fourth Sunday in Advent when we think of the Blessed Virgin Mary as she responded to God's call. We will be live streaming the 9.30am service from St David's Church on our Facebook page and it should appear later on our websites.

Today at 9.30am at St David's I will be celebrating and Ash Leighton Plom will be preaching.

At St Michael's at 11am I will be celebrating and Ash will be preaching

Today our Recorded **Carol Service** will also be available on Youtube at this link:

<https://youtu.be/yUbSIGIPw3I>

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to it and especially to Bill Pattinson who organised the readings and Nigel Walsh who masterminded the music and put it all together. Do find time to share in this beautiful service.

Thrive: The Advent Experience at St David's Church

Sundays at 4pm on Zoom

Do join us, if you can for Thrive this afternoon. There will be more fascinating and challenging questions to discuss and spirituality to explore.

On Zoom:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88685738289?pwd=WEh1dlNCY3NRQTlCcXFjK2ZlejR0UT09>

Meeting ID: 886 8573 8289

Passcode: 159821

Services in church this week

Wednesday 23 December

9.30am at St Michael's, Mattins followed by 10am Mass (live streamed)

Thursday 24 December

No 10.30 today BUT 4pm Outdoor Christingle Service with Carols

Sunday 27 December

9.30am Parish Communion at St David's (live streamed) with celebrant Belinda Speed-Andrews and preacher Bill Pattinson

11am Mass at St Michael's with Fr Robin Eastoe as celebrant and preacher

Advent and Christmas Services

We will be celebrating Christingle outdoors this year so that those who come can join in singing the carols. In addition to our regular weekday and Sunday services we are also planning to offer the following:

At St David's: a Youtube Carol Service of readings and Christmas music; an Outdoor Christingle on Christmas Eve at 4pm - wrap up warm! A Christmas Day Parish Communion (livestreamed) at 9.30am (but no midnight mass).

At St Michael's: Midnight Mass at 11.30pm on Christmas Eve (but no Christmas Day Mass); An evening Mass for Epiphany at 7.30pm on Wednesday 6 January.

Covid-19 Safe

These are the provisions we are making to keep worshippers as safe as possible. Please avoid touching door handles – Thank you.

Hand sanitizer must be used on entering and leaving church.

We should now wear face coverings in church. There are important exemptions which can be found at

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/COVID%2019%20advice%20on%20face%20coverings%20v3.0.pdf>

and which include those with a hearing impairment.

At St David's we are encouraging people to wear face coverings to come forward to receive Holy Communion and then to consume the host after moving away from the altar rail.

Seating will be distanced to approximately 2 metres. Please sit on the seats where service books are placed. Seating is also marked by white labels at St Michael's, with notices on the pews that should be kept clear.

Please observe appropriate distancing from others at all times.

Services should be 'no longer than necessary'; and congregational singing is still not permitted indoors.

Toilet facilities will be available and please follow the instructions for use.

Please do not attend church if you are feeling ill or are shielding. Although we will do all we can to make the church safe you attend at your own risk.

Online Daily Prayers

Why not join our virtual community of prayer? We will hold a Zoom Morning Prayer on Tuesday at 9.30am this week and the order of service will be based on that in the Common Worship Daily Prayer book or on the corresponding 'Daily Prayer' app of the Church of England.

Tuesday 22nd, 9.30am Morning Prayer by Zoom.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/6602261392?pwd=VzdOaU1XUFBjWk9jV0xvMDZWajZBQT09>

Meeting ID: 660 226 1392

Passcode: 196651

Wednesday 23rd 10am Mass on St Michael's page

Congratulations

Many congratulations to Ash Leighton Plom who has been awarded a First Class BA in Theology, Mission and Ministry by Durham University. And, keeping it in the family, Alfred Leighton Plom will be admitted to Holy Communion this morning at St David's Church.

Thank you

Thank you to all of you who have continued in your financial support for our churches during this difficult year. St David's, in particular, has lost a lot of letting income. But we have managed our money carefully at both churches and finish the year with much gratitude for your generosity in supporting our ministry and mission.

Food for vulnerable community housed at the Great Western Hotel

A huge thank you for the help and donations that have been given towards making our Tuesday packed suppers. The scheme is running well and we now have enough crisps and wrapped chocolate bars to see us over the Christmas period. But further donations would be welcome in the new year.

Work at St David's Church

Community Payback Volunteers are continuing to help with maintenance in St David's churchyard on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Their supervisor, Keith, is always happy for us to stop and chat (at a safe distance) with the group.

Traidcraft Stall & Bountiful Table

At our stalls please just approach one by one, keeping safely distanced, and do not touch products before buying. If at all possible please bring notes and coins that can be handed over without needing lots of change. Thank you for your support - and for taking care!

Greetings from Jane Woodman

Jane was a very long standing worshipper at St David's who cleaned the church for more than 60 years and raised huge sums for Christian Aid clean water projects by her indefatigable cake baking. She now lives in Malvern but wishes to send her greetings to all her friends in our parish community

Magazine

Our magazine for December and January is available, and it's a fabulous bumper edition to keep you interested and entertained. Paper copies are available in church and it is accessible through both our websites. A massive thank you to our contributors and editorial team for their creativity and hard work.

Phone Networks

Many of you have appreciated phone calls from other members of the church community. If you would like to be phoned by someone and haven't had any contact please let me know at nigel.guthrie1@gmail.com or by ringing me on 01392 660226 or Ash on 07855305519.

Your Prayers are asked for...

In the **Parish Cycle of Prayer** please for Bury Meadow and all adults and children who use this space; also give thanks for the council workers and volunteers from the Bury Meadow Community Association who maintain the park so beautifully.

Please also pray for:

Christian people everywhere preparing in strange circumstances to celebrate the festival of Christmas;

all refugees;

those people here, and around the world, suffering from Covid-19, and those who are feeling anxious or afraid;

our Government, local and national, in the difficult decisions they have to make and implement, our police service, those carrying out the vaccination programme;

those who have to implement new trade and travel arrangements with Europe;

those working in care homes and hospitals - giving thanks for their commitment and courage;

those who are facing unemployment or economic hardship;

May God bless you as you celebrate Christmas however that may be,

Nigel Guthrie

Prayers, Readings and Address for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 20th December Collect

God our redeemer, who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of your Son:

grant that, as she looked for his coming as our saviour,

so we may be ready to greet him when he comes again as our judge;

who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

First Reading – Romans 16: 25-end

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.

Gospel Reading – Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

An Address by Ash Leighton Plom, 20 December 2020 - 4th Sunday of Advent
Prophecy and free will, that's what I want to talk to you about today. God's foretold plan of salvation on the one hand: the prophesied birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as St. Paul puts it, "disclosed" or "revealed" "through the prophetic writings". And on the other hand, Mary's freely offered "let it be with me according to your word", what's called her "fiat" in Latin, her humble "yes" of availability to God's purposes.

Prophecy and free will. I want to start by saying there is an open debate between these two poles, and a range of views exist in the Church over the exact relationship between God's foretelling of events then bringing them to pass, and our free agency as human beings, our free will to make choices.

It's also fair to say there are comforts to be found in both emphases. For example, on the prophecy side, faith in God's sovereignty can be a comfort. If we trust that God has foreknowledge and brings things to pass, that his plan is good and will eventually be worked out, we don't need to worry too much about things like the decisions we make. Even if we make a wrong decision, all is not lost. God is able to set things back on the right course, and bring about his good purpose. I can think of a few misteps in my own life which I believe I've seen God straighten out after the event. Perhaps you know a few from your own experience?

This cosmic reality means we can go into life each day trusting that a loving God is faithfully working in everything for the good of those that love him. (Romans 8:28 says, "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." God works in all things for our good, even when we can't see it!)

Then there's comfort in the 'free will' position, as well: we are empowered, with free choice, like Mary. It's much commented on by bible scholars that, in the gospel reading we've just had, Mary was free to choose, and chose freely. So this means *people* – Mary, me, you – are not just robots following a pre-programmed path, slavishly trapped to obey the diktats of a tyrannical god. No, we are invited to choose, to make decisions, to exercise sovereignty in our own free will.

Somehow, in scripture and Christian belief, God's sovereignty over history on the one hand, and our free will to make choices on the other, coexist. Both ontologies, or realities, are ultimately true.

So, going too far on either side of the debate can result in unhelpful confusions. For example, a sensible, orthodox Christian belief in God's sovereignty is not the same as a resigned fatalism, that denies humans any free will at all. Even though St. Paul describes the gospel as "revealed" through the prophetic writings, Luke's gospel suggests Mary's yes was a free one. But equally, an orthodox Christian belief in free will does not mean God has abandoned us to the consequences of all our bad decisions. The scriptures say he is at work, fulfilling his will, bringing to pass good promises.

I think the scriptures we've heard this morning exhibit this tension, this balance: between Paul's sense that the coming of Christ fulfilled God's sovereignly foretold plan, and Mary's "let it be done", offered of her own free will.

Earlier this year, I listened to a homily by the Vatican's Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, in which he encouraged Christians to freely choose to mimic Mary's free choice to be available to do the will of God. Cardinal Parolin invites us to live "our love for the Lord in our daily lives", by putting into action *our* "yes" to do God's will.

Now, this is where what might seem like just a philosophical question, God's sovereignty vs our free will, impacts on your life, and the lives of those around you.

Cardinal Parolin commented that Mary's humble "yes" shows us that, "the history of salvation does not follow the golden paths of the sensational (*sensationa*), but is carried out through the... the ordinary rhythm of human life, in the demanding paths of reality."

The "mission of God is realised... through the generous availability" of his people, like Mary, and like me, and like you.

Mary's choice to say "yes" to God, changed the course of world history, her freely given "let it be so" fulfilled God's plan of salvation. A humble girl in an ordinary town changed the world with a simple "yes".

I think this shows that ordinary, day-to-day human life, my life, your life, is important to God. It is exactly where he chooses to act to work out his will, and even fulfil his plan of salvation. As Cardinal Parolin put it: "Jesus does not stand outside of human history: on the contrary, He enters into it."

We are now in the final march towards Christmas, when we will celebrate the birth of our saviour, in very humble circumstances, humanly speaking – a manger, a feeding trough, certainly not a "sensational" palace or the like.

So today, let's dwell on Mary's humble "let it be unto me", "let it be as you say", her choice to say "yes" to God's plan. St. Anselm captures the significance of Mary's "yes" in these words, from the 11th Century:

"Blessed Lady! Sky and stars, earth and rivers, day and night — everything — rejoice that through you they are restored and endowed with new grace. The world... was corrupted.

[But] Now all creation has been restored to life...

Lady, full and overflowing with grace, all creation receives new life from your abundance.

God, then, is the Father of the created world,
and Mary the mother of the recreated world.

God is the Father by whom all things were given life,
and Mary the mother through whom all things were given new life.

For God begot the Son, through whom all things were made,
and Mary gave birth to him as the Saviour of the world.”

If God can use Mary’s humble yes to enact his plan of salvation, I wonder what he can do with your “yes”, this Christmas, and into the New Year. I suppose my prayer is that we will each have faith like Mary's, to say yes to what God asks of us.

Like Anselm, St. Irenaeus tells us that through Mary’s choice to be available to do the will of God, the whole of creation throughout history, including each and every one of us, are offered reanimation.

Mary’s humble yes had extraordinary consequences, and I just wonder, what is God inviting you to say yes to, today? Can you like and share our Facebook page? Can you give time, money, or skills to a godly charity or cause? Can you bring a friend to church - safely distanced - at all? Or check in on someone who's lonely this Christmas?

I’ll finish with a poem from St Augustine of Hippo, which again echoes what God did through Mary’s yes:

“God so loved us that for our sakes he,
through whom time was made, was made in time;
older by eternity than the world itself,
he became younger in age than many of his servants in the world;
God, who made man, was made man;
he was given existence by a mother
whom he brought into existence;
he was carried in hands which he formed;
he was nursed at breasts which he filled;
he cried like a baby in the manger in speechless infancy—
this Word without which human eloquence is speechless.”

Amen.

Closing Prayers

Heavenly Father,
who chose the Blessed Virgin Mary
to be the mother of the promised saviour:
fill us your servants with your grace,
that in all things we may embrace your holy will
and with her rejoice in your salvation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Do join us next week for our services in church or on Facebook

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