

IN
A HELPLESS
BABY'S EYES
HEAVEN
TAKES US BY
SURPRISE

Reflections for
Advent and Christmas
2008

with contributions from the people of

Chorlton Central Church
(Baptist and United Reformed)
Chorlton Methodist Church
Manley Park Methodist Church
Wilbraham St Ninians
United Reformed Church

and of
the community of Chorlton
and beyond

Words © Alan Gaunt
Artwork © Steve Raw

Contents © the authors credited on each page

At the beginning of Advent, we invite you to join us in reading, reflecting, and praying: with prophets, poets, evangelists and apostles – through Biblical texts and through the eyes of people of Chorlton and beyond.

Many of the people who contributed discovered a fresh engagement with the Bible that was exciting and challenging.

For some, it was the first time they had worked with the Bible in this way; others returned to the Bible, seeking fresh understanding on familiar stories. For all, it became a journey of new insights and a deeper awareness of something greater than themselves.

And now you are joining them on that journey. As you read, reflect and pray, we hope that you will pour some of your own experience into these Bible passages – and vice versa, so that the Bible comes alive for you.

And as you step out on this journey, you might like to use these words of commitment :

God has given us a vision
for life transformed and restored
in church and in community
through prayer and action.

We open ourselves to receive the gifts of God;
to read the Bible, to offer prayer,
to share the stories of our faith.

We await in hope for a renewal of faith
as we celebrate that God is with us!

Sarah Brewerton
Ruth Dillon
Dave Gallimore

Lyn Gallimore
Sue Rowe

Ministers

30th November

Proverbs 8 : 11 – 31

The aspect of the passage which strikes me the most is the emphasis on how wisdom is the deepest, most ancient and precious of all attributes. For me, that sense of depth; depth of understanding, of insight and of compassion, encapsulates wisdom and the qualities I observe in those I think of as wise. After reading the passage, I wondered whether many people would see wisdom within young people as well as older? Is it possible to be young and wise? If we think about wisdom as the abilities that allow us to apply our knowledge and skills successfully, in a way that is sensitive, compassionate and intuitive, then I do know some wonderful young people who are certainly developing a 'wise' approach to some of the judgements they make in their lives.

However we know that it is not always easy to apply wisdom in our dealings with each other. The stresses and the demands of the roles we play, can affect our ability to use 'sound judgement'. For example; I sat in the dental hospital a few weeks ago and watched a dental nurse interacting with an anxious father and child who had come in off the street, for help. The nurse was perfunctory and directive. She got her points over but did not respond to this father's anxiety or the fact that English was not his first language. She failed to apply any sense of wisdom in her dealings with this man. She seemed pleased with herself for dispatching of him so efficiently, while I felt saddened that the chance for a sensitive, respectful interaction had been lost.

I believe that as we mature we become more skilled at using wisdom to guide us, not just our behaviour but also our thoughts and feelings. That is part of the challenge of wisdom. How easy it is to continue allowing ourselves to feel and think the same way about certain situations but not challenge our feelings and thoughts. How much harder to use our wisdom to help us challenge these and maybe find a new way forward. It strikes me that 'becoming wiser' is jolly hard work but as Proverbs 8 says "*Whoever looks for me can find me*".

Dear Lord,

In this time of Advent, when we look forward to the anniversary of the birth of your son and the light he brought into our world, please give us the motivation and the strength to reach deep within our souls to draw on our own treasure of wisdom.

May you guide us during this season and onwards, to use this wisdom in all our interactions with others, however small. Allow our compassion, insight and understanding to be the bedrock of our words and actions.

AMEN.

Susan Posada

Wilbraham St Ninians United Reformed Church

1st December

Hosea 14 : 4 – 8

Isn't this passage so full of promises?! So many in fact, that it's difficult to stay with one single image. If you're like me reading a passage like this, you're always looking slightly ahead of yourself – try reading it again, using a piece of paper or something to reveal only one line at a time. Read it out loud if you want – sometimes I find that makes poetry a bit more real.

So, what are these four little verses about?

First of all, I think this passage speaks directly to our broken humanity - the wild, outlandish promises are about things we spend our whole lives searching for. I don't know what your heart's desires are but something in this passage will resonate with you. Do you find yourself wanting to stop at one single verse, linger on it a little longer than the others? Does your heart yearn to be as beautiful as a lily; to be as grounded in the world as an ancient tree that has outlived generations; to be a place of security where others can shelter and find rest simply by being with you?

These dreams feel a long way from the reality of what I see when I look at myself; I guess that's probably true for you too. Can you imagine not only one, but all these gifts being given to one person? I have so much trouble getting my head around that idea, let alone the possibility that God is actually referring to me in that passage. It really highlights to me the contrast between God's fabulous abundance and my meagre expectations about which small matters I think He'll actually be willing or able to deliver on.

Having said that, I don't think my lack of imagination or faith stops me from seeing the other, simple message in this passage: God's promise to nourish me. Even if I can't visualise the finished product, something is happening to me.

Gently, gently, as I give a little more space, listen a bit more carefully in the silence, I can understand that He is there, changing me without me doing anything at all: feeding me, watering me, shining down on me.

And what I do know is that above all, I want to grow.

*God, thank you for giving us hearts that are good and holy.
Teach us to see the desires of our hearts as gifts from you.
May we learn to respect and nurture them from moment to moment because they are the signposts that will guide us home. AMEN.*

Rachel Waite

Chorlton Central Church

2nd December

Micah 6 : 6 – 8

Have you found that you have been encouraged recently to fill out petitions to send to government ministers or gathered at a protest to make a stand about issues related to poverty or human rights? I find one of the difficulties with this is sustaining our involvement in these activities as our time and energy are sapped by other things. We feel that the causes we champion do not get the support they need to make an impact and things don't change so quickly any more. In our hearts we want to act but, through struggling to sustain our responsibility to act, we contribute to the unjust nature of how systems which humans create oppress others.

Martin Luther King famously commented that in times of weariness, disappointment and despair the civil rights movement needed to keep on keeping on. Without this, they would not have achieved what they did in the same timescale.

I have been greatly influenced through living in L'Arche Edinburgh, a community for assistants and people with learning difficulties to live together. People with learning disabilities are often collectively thought of as weak and vulnerable but, from my experience, they seem to have a talent to show constant love and forgiveness to an extent that I don't think I will ever achieve.

In July 2008, a report was published by Mencap reporting that institutional discrimination in the NHS has resulted in the death of six people with learning disabilities. This is an injustice that has affected me greatly. I want people to see how their omissions to act have resulted in such a tragedy. I want things to change but it requires constant effort and I am weak and have a short attention span in the business of life. Well we have to keep on keeping on, whatever the injustice we want to tackle and the journey will be long. Through all this I hope that, as we walk humbly with our God and the community around us, we can change the world.

O Lord, you want us to act justly.

In a world where the strongest people and countries show their power which often results in pain and suffering, grant that I may act justly in situations where I have the upper hand.

O Lord, you want us to show constant love.

In a world where love is often fickle, grant that I would have the ability to show constant love to those around me.

O Lord, you want us to live in fellowship with you.

In a world where people often give up because following you is too difficult, grant that I may have the strength to keep on keeping on. AMEN.

Johanna

Chorlton Central Church

3rd December

Isaiah 35 : 1 – 7

This passage is a prophecy of renewal; for both the earth and its people. Everything that is desolate and dry is going to be transformed into something beautiful and valuable.

When the older people first come to Chorlton Good Neighbours we can sense they are a bit anxious and fearful. Many have been on their own for months, even years, battling deteriorating health and a shrinking social network. Being alone, more than one wants to, can feel like a desolate and hopeless situation, sapping one's energy, confidence and joy for life.

Usually, (and it might take some time), we do see a 'blossoming' of those same people, brought about by the friendship and support of the volunteers, and through the sense of belonging to a group which nurtures and cherishes its people. For many, Good Neighbours is their oasis.

Often one feels a sort of renewal has taken place; we witness people who seem refreshed; a bit more alive and hopeful. The volunteers' practical help and interest transforms a bit of their fear and anxiety into confidence and positivity. It can now be a life of value and purpose, open perhaps to other small opportunities of renewal.

Throughout the year we might have many chances to renew and replenish our own and other people's hopes. We never know how one smile, conversation or act can lift another's spirits. This prophecy helps us to remember our responsibility to be the vessel of renewal for others and by so doing renew ourselves.

*Thank you Lord
for the renewal that comes day by day,
and for the chance to help others feel
valued and encouraged. AMEN.*

**Helen Hibberd
Co-ordinator
Chorlton Good Neighbours**

4th December

Zephaniah 3 : 14 – 19

Most people love the story of a dramatic rescue: the beleaguered group of defenders relieved by reinforcements at the last minute, the saving of the innocent from danger or certain death. We celebrate heroes who save others from jeopardy and we are awed by their selflessness and courage.

Sometimes people are rescued from situations in which they have put themselves at risk. Think of the warnings about using appropriate equipment and footwear when hill walking, and the rescues by brave volunteers of those in difficulty from not heeding those warnings. Sometimes the problem is not that we recognise our need of saving, but that we believe we are immune from all harm- “it could never happen to me”.

This passage from Zephaniah, towards the end of the Old Testament, is very much about the rescue of a nation who had believed themselves invincible and had paid the price, through subjection to the Assyrian empire. Yet God had not abandoned them- deliverance was at hand- and new reforms were to take place for Judah through the new king, Josiah.

We also need saving from ourselves. We cannot handle conflict, we are greedy, and we are complacent. The consequences of all this are visible all around us: climate change, degradation of the environment, seemingly never ending wars, apathy from those who have the power to act. Whether or not we believe we have any personal influence in many of these situations, we are implicated- our actions on a personal level may mirror those taking place on the world stage. We get involved in unnecessary arguments, fail to assert ourselves when we should, take what we do not need.

The good news is that we are not left to ourselves. God is with us, “The Lord is in your midst”. This Advent we remember that God is constantly waiting to rescue us from ourselves, and is in life with us in the most immediate way, being born into the world to share life with us, to encourage us and to challenge us to a more free and fuller way of living. So we “sing aloud!” too.

Loving God, we thank you that you are always with us, and that there is always the opportunity for change. Transform our hearts, rescue us from our weakness and failure, set us on our feet and walk beside us, give us the joy of fullness of life in you.

In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN.

Sue Rowe

Methodist minister

5th December

Zechariah 2 : 10 – 13

In 587 BC the Jews suffered a catastrophe. A Babylonian army captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and took the people into exile. It looked as if God had deserted his people. However, some fifty years later Babylon itself fell, and the Persian king Cyrus allowed the exiles to return and rebuild the Temple. No wonder that Zechariah saw these events as God returning to reclaim his property and to live among his people. He even envisaged other nations joining themselves to the Lord, converting to the faith of the Jews.

The reality didn't quite live up to those expectations. The Temple was rebuilt, but the Jews continued to live under foreign occupation and there was no mass conversion to Judaism. When they finally rebelled against Rome, the Temple was again destroyed, and the Jews became minorities in other countries, rarely fully accepted, often persecuted, sometimes expelled, resented if they prospered, and eventually sent to the gas chambers. No wonder that new secular prophets convinced them that they needed to re-establish their homeland.

As Christians reading Zechariah near Christmas, we are bound to think of the God who came to dwell among us in Jesus and of the people from many nations who have joined themselves to the Lord as his followers. Some of these are Palestinians, and our sympathies are understandably with them. Nevertheless there will be no peace in the Middle East unless Israelis and Palestinians try to understand each other's fears and aspirations, and would-be peacemakers listen to both sides.

*O God, may understanding grow in your holy land,
so that Israelis and Palestinians
may find a way to live at peace.
AMEN.*

Roger Tomes

Wilbraham St Ninians United Reformed Church

6th December

Isaiah 43 : 1 – 5

Among the many bodies discovered in the excavations of Pompeii was that of a woman, a woman caught in the act of trying to escape from the destruction being wreaked by Mount Vesuvius. As she fled, she thought to snatch something that was important to her, and archaeologists discovered a bag of pearls by her outstretched hands. Here was something that she wanted to save, something that was precious to her. Whether we think of precious in material terms or human terms, the underlying connection is that of value, something or someone held in high esteem.

Isaiah is telling us that this is how each one of us is regarded by God.
“You are precious and honoured.....and I love you.”

Amazing!

The Creator of all that is has a deep concern for his creatures and wants to be in a relationship with them. The Creator who walked in the garden with Adam and Eve; admonished Cain; ate supper with Abraham; wrestled with Jacob; spoke ‘mouth to mouth’ with Moses; called Samuel by name; shouted, wept and sang through the prophets; – yes, he wanted a personal relationship with his people, and his transcendent nature is not limited to Old Testament characters.

At this season of Advent, we are reminded that God came to earth in the human form of Jesus. God came in flesh so that he could be close to so many of his people, whether they recognised him or not! And through the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, God continues to be actively involved in many lives.

From childhood we are often led to believe that God is a remote being, floating somewhere in the sky, but Brian Wren puts paid to this fallacy:

“Not throned above, remotely high
untouched, unmoved by human pains,
but daily, in the midst of life.
our Saviour with the Father reigns.”

We are so precious and honoured that God wants to be an integral part of our lives. If we truly take that on board, how different our lives should be – living in the knowledge that God is always at our side.

Perhaps our faith is a system of beliefs, and relating to God on a daily basis is foreign to many of us. So the relationship becomes one-sided and that is not the way God wants it to be. We are *his* special treasure, and if we are to become all that we can be, we need to live in that reality.

*Lord God, your love for us is far more than we deserve.
Help us to live lives that are worthy of that love. AMEN.*

Clyde Parkin

Chorlton Methodist Church

7th December

Isaiah 40 : 1 – 11

‘Comfort my people, bring comfort to them, says your God.’

Biblical Hebrew has no word for history. It uses a significantly different word: *Zakhor*, 'remember'. History is someone else's story. Memory is my story. Memory is about identity. It is the story of which I am a part.

The people of the covenant had been in exile in Babylon for a long time. The words of consolation which we find in Isaiah 40, would have been learned by heart, sung, secretly copied and passed from hand to hand, in the community of slaves, the exiles. So when their descendants came to look back, it wasn't history, it was their story. This exile story and these words of the prophet were real and relevant because in them the people found their identity; they discovered their own story in their own time. In freedom they looked back to the time in exile and gained a true perspective on life.

As Christians we are not very good at Advent. We do better with Lent, although even then we cannot wait to get to Easter. But 21st Century western Christmas is such that it begins well before Advent. The cards and the shopping become a focus for many as soon as the summer holidays are over. I haven't given up the battle for Advent and encourage you to mark and use this period of time. Advent is about waiting for the coming God. We can enter into the experience of those who waited for God, who knew a deep longing for the Messiah, the one who would come to reveal God. By making this story our story we have some hope of being ready to welcome the Word made flesh.

‘The Lord God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep’.

The God we await is like a shepherd who gathers straying lambs to himself and leads ewes to water. God bends towards us, embraces us. The victorious God is not like an Emperor or King, but like a shepherd. The shepherd God enfolds the helpless. In the shepherd's tender arms strength and gentleness are united.

*Gracious God, for ever coming to us in Jesus
come to us and for those we pray for today:
may we know your consolation and comfort,
may we know that we are held in the shepherd's arms
and gently led to the water of life. AMEN.*

Andrew Funnell Regional Minister
North Western Baptist Association

8th December

Isaiah 43 : 16 – 21

A couple went to buy a new three-piece suite, after some consideration they made their choice and went home to await the arrival of their new furniture. On the day of its arrival, the couple moved their old furniture out onto the drive so it could be collected by the council, the new three-piece stood proudly in their sitting room, un-creased and pristine. The couple first tried out the chairs and then the settee and felt very pleased with their purchase. Later that day, the wife, wondering where her husband might be, tracked him down to his workshop in the garden – sitting reading the newspaper in one of their old armchairs! On being asked why he wasn't using the new furniture in the sitting room, where he usually read his newspaper, he replied, "But this is so comfortable, I know it's old and worn but it's molded to my shape and the others are so....new! It will take me a while to get used to it, so meanwhile I thought I'd sit in my old chair."

It is so easy to want to keep hold of that which we are used to, the things that are comfortable. In the church, if something is done more than once it can become a tradition, and whilst tradition in itself isn't necessarily a bad thing, it can hold us back from moving on to try something new.

In this passage we are encouraged us not to hold onto the past, not to dwell on what happened long ago. Instead, we should watch out for the new thing God is doing, it's already happening, we are told. When we cling to the past, like it's an old well-used chair, then we may feel safe and comfortable, but we may miss that to which God is calling us to, today.

A minister, working in an inner city, was asked how he knew what to do in his ministry. "I look around," he replied, "I see what God is doing, and I join in." God wants us to join in too, but that will mean change and risk and not sitting comfortable in that old worn and well used arm chair.

*Risk taking God,
Thank you for the new ways in which you are working,
and for fresh expressions of being church.
Give us courage to take risks too,
and a willingness to look around,
see what you are doing,
and to join in.
AMEN..*

Lyn Gallimore

Methodist Minister

9th December

Micah 4 : 1 – 4

Like many Christians, my first contact with this passage came through the singing of that great hymn ‘Behold the mountain of the Lord’. It has continued to inspire me all my life with its promise of spears being transformed into pruning hooks, and that wonderful image of ‘hang the trumpet in the hall and study war no more’.

It is fascinating to discover that this oracle is also used by the prophet Isaiah in the same century but in different political circumstances. It tells us, I suppose, that scripture can speak to us in different contexts as well as in its original one.

The prophet looks forward to God’s people being a righteous, renewed example to all the nations. They would cease to fight amongst themselves and would no longer see war as a way of managing national and international affairs. This is surely a lesson for religious and secular people in any age and place.

Experience tells us that this ideal will never be achieved by human means. Ideals are not a Utopian hope but guiding principles as we make decisions about our conduct and attitudes. We know that the route to peace is dealing with the causes of injustice, fear and violence. This package of Kingdom values commits us to praying and working for systems and structures which are peacemaking, healing and loving. This is truly incarnational faith.

In Advent we hear again God’s promise that one day this will be totally true. Now we struggle to work for and look for all the signs of the presence of this Kingdom. We will search for and celebrate all those efforts to enable people to ‘sit each under their fig tree and their vine’.

As we daily live with scenes and stories of war we learn again its horrors, its folly and its breeding of more violence and injustice. Our Advent God calls us to his way which will be ‘for the healing of the nations’. The coming of Christ tells us that this is costly but ultimately victorious.

*Dear God, you keep calling us to receive your promise,
to share your hope, and to live your ways of peace.*

Help us to see your righteousness around us.

May we rejoice as anger, fear and pain are redeemed.

Guide us, as we help all find places of security.

Forgive our lack of courage and commitment to your Kingdom.

*Remind us of its joy and liberating power, and assure us of your love’s
victory, which even death cannot destroy. AMEN.*

Graham Kent

Ecumenical Development Officer

Greater Manchester Churches Together

10th December

Isaiah 11 : 1 – 9

These are wonderful words with which to start a working day – there is so much here that addresses the ups and downs of life.

Qualities that are described here such as being non-judgemental, understanding, a knowledge of need, equality of care for everyone, wisdom, faithfulness, consideration – these make up the job description of a nurse.

As I go through my day, I remind myself that we all have a purpose in life, and that I must remember that as I meet all sorts of people from all walks of life. I also have a real sense of God being in control, that I'm being protected and looked after – that the Lord is leading me in my life. My response to that is to acknowledge how other people feel, and if and when I need to make decisions or judgements, to act with wisdom and compassion. I hope that by this example that I am called to set, the nursing staff who I am responsible for may be inspired and guided to that path and that way of working.

By trusting in the Lord to give me strength, I try to discern and understand the purpose that he has for me. The image that I get from this passage of the peaceful Kingdom helps me to put into perspective both the bad and good things that can happen each day.

Lord, give me the strength to face the day ahead.

Give me peace in my heart.

By your grace, let light shine in my heart

and with your help and encouragement

may I light the light

in the lives of other people. AMEN.

Lorrie Wright

Ward Manager

Home Dialysis Unit, Manchester Royal Infirmary

11th December

Habakkuk 2 : 1 – 4

'Patience..... Patience!!'

That is the theme of this reading from Habakkuk.

Habakkuk is a minor prophet found in the Old Testament. His book contains only 3 chapters, but it is unique. It is a conversation between him and God. Habakkuk is disgusted and ashamed of the world:- its violence, its lack of human rights and of oppression. He sees evil all around, where destruction and violence seems to conquer and justice has not got a look in. In frustration he addresses God. He longs to understand why all this is happening, why God allows such wickedness to continue.

In the first chapter in this book, the prophet Habakkuk decides to address God with these atrocities, and what is God's reply? God says:-

Listen, I will make it plain,

everything will be in my time....not yours!!

You must be patient !! Live your life in 'faith and hope',

in fact, so you don't forget it , write it down on some paper !!!

We live in a very impatient world, a fast world; our food is convenient and fast, our work is about targets and fast, our transport is furious and fast, and even in our prayer and spiritual life, we want to see immediate results and fast!!! But God also says to us:-

'Live by faith , live in the' light' that I bring ,

be patient, for things will change.

***The wicked people may think they have won,
but watch and see, justice will triumph'.***

Living in a world where we think 'the wicked' have 'won', where justice struggles to find a foothold, can be disheartening and demoralizing. Jesus also lived in a world where oppression was rife, inequality ruled the roost, and injustice thrived. But Jesus showed a way to address these issues, to challenge authorities, to open the eyes of people who were blind to the comings and goings in the world, to give a voice to the voiceless and release those who felt in bondage by society's restraints.

God had a plan: to adjust the scales of justice! But we must be patient .

He spoke to Habakkuk 2,500 years ago; he spoke through Jesus 2,000 yrs ago; he has spoken to many, many people through the ages, and he speaks to us now, through the mediating power of the Holy Spirit.

Gracious God,

When we feel frustrated, give us peace.

When we feel depressed, give us strength.

When we see oppression, give us courage.,

When we see injustice, give us hope.

Through your Spirit may we be your hands, feet, voice and heart,

and walk with you through your world,

leaving footprints for others to follow

and restore 'Shalom'. AMEN.

Ruth Dillon

United Reformed Church Minister

12th December

Jeremiah 31 : 31 – 33

The Old Testament has much to say about covenant. It speaks of covenants made by God with Noah, with Abraham, with David and in particular with the people of Israel through the agency of Moses on Mount Sinai. But only once does it actually use the phrase ‘new covenant’ – in Jeremiah 31:31. Perhaps the nearest parallel is in Hosea 2:16-20, where a new type of covenant is envisaged. (There is good reason to believe that Hosea may have influenced the thinking of Jeremiah.) Whether the phrase influenced the wording of the institution of the Eucharist as recorded in the New Testament is a matter of some debate. It seems likely that Luke (22:20) and Paul (1 Corinthians 11:25) did use the phrase ‘new covenant’, but Matthew (26:28) and Mark (14:24) did not do so originally. Our passage did influence the interpretation of the work of Jesus presented by Hebrews (8:8-13; 9:15-22; 10:16-17), and it has to be admitted that these verses in Hebrew do provide a basis for what Walter Brueggemann has described as “a Christian pre-emption of the promise” of Jeremiah 31. Sadly there has been a Christian misreading of the passage which sees the ‘new covenant’ as a reference to Christianity superseding the ‘old’, Judaism. What the passage actually envisages is that despite the people’s disobedience which caused the breakdown of the previous relationship between God and God’s people, God is willing to forgive and to “remember their sin no more”. This will make possible a new kind of relationship, based not on written legal documents, but on God’s laws being written “on their hearts”. (In Hebrew thought, the heart was not the seat of the emotions but of the intellect.) Commentators have debated whether these are actual words of Jeremiah, or whether they belong to the category of reflection on the prophet’s teaching. Certainly they come very close to one of Jeremiah’s profoundest insights. It is not simply that people are unwilling to obey God’s laws, they are *unable* by their very nature to do so.

“Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots?
Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.” (13:23)

There is no suggestion that the laws will change. Rather it is the people who will be changed. Knowledge of God will become part of human nature. Jeremiah has sometimes been dubbed as the great pessimist. Yet it is Jeremiah who holds out this remarkable utopian dream.

Gracious and loving God, you are willing to forgive us and you invite us to know you wholeheartedly. Help us to respond to your love so that our thoughts become your thoughts and our ways your ways. AMEN.

Adrian Curtis

Manley Park Methodist Church

13th December

Jeremiah 33 : 14 – 16

Soon there will be justice as I have promised, says God.

Perhaps the hardest part of that sentence is the first word – soon.

Small children have no concept of time. My three year-old daughter recently asked me “Is it tomorrow yet?”. If you tell children that something is going to happen, the question follows – when?, to be asked again, a short while later. Soon there will be justice. How soon? Are we nearly at the point of justice yet?

That’s something none of us can answer and so we have to look further on into the passage. Remember we are talking about justice. That is something that is worth waiting for. Justice is about ensuring all receive their due. All humans receive their human rights. It’s about homelessness, poverty, education, health care and much more.

Justice for all is a wonderful dream. Is it just a dream or can it be a reality?

The answer to that question depends on how we understand God’s promises.

If we view them as comforting but rather empty words, then justice for all is a dream. However if we trust in God’s love and care for the creation, then we know that one day justice for all will be a reality.

It will require change. God is not just going to zap down a thunderbolt that will transform the unjust to the just. God will work with us and through us.

That presents a major challenge. We have to ask ourselves whether we live governed by standards of justice. It’s more than ensuring the coffee we drink has been fairly traded (although that’s important, of course); it’s more than giving appropriate donations to causes which support the poor (also very important). It is about how we live; how we use our resources; how we treat other people; what our expectations are.

Advent is a good time to reflect on this amid the excitement and expectation and preparation for the celebration of Christmas.

Dear God, help me to be patient as I await the justice you have promised.

Help me to play my part in transforming injustice to justice.

Help me to encourage others to challenge injustice; respect their fellows and live in righteousness.

May my life and the life of our community be governed by kingdom values.

In the name of the one for whose coming we wait, Jesus, I pray. AMEN.

Stuart Wild

Superintendent Minister, Manchester Methodist Circuit

14th December

Isaiah 61 : 1 – 4 , 8 – 11

Until I was asked to write a few words about these verses from Isaiah I realised that I had never had to study a piece from the Bible in this way. I am fascinated by history and the fragments that we have of the past. At school we started history with Ur, part of Iraq now, and I remember the famous ruler of the Assyrians, Sennacherib and his battles with Judah. Isaiah lived during these times and would know of the defeat of Assyria. Lord Byron wrote in his famous poem :

“And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!”

After reading the Bible verses three or four times and typing them out to get the sense of them, my immediate thoughts were how modern they sounded in spite of the difficult language. As a politician I recognised first the confidence of style and conviction and the vivid descriptions in a world without visual imagery of how the wrongs of the world would be righted. Not by voting but by belief. I hope this does not seem blasphemous, but Isaiah in these verses is effectively putting God’s manifesto and the contract between Him and the people. He goes on to describe his view of why belief in Jehovah is the only way to salvation and why he, Isaiah, should be heard because he speaks in God’s name. It also connects very strongly with what came many hundreds of years later in the New Testament. It is believed that he foretold the coming of Jesus.

It is difficult today to see one path only to enlightenment, with our knowledge of other cultures and beliefs, and to speak with the conviction of Isaiah.

Give me the wisdom to see what matters and the courage to reject what doesn’t.

Give me the strength to let go of the transient and let it pass.

Give me the humility to seek help from others and recognise their gift.

Let me understand my place in the world and be content. AMEN.

Val Stevens

Chorlton Councillor

and Deputy Leader of Manchester City Council

15th December

Isaiah 52 : 7 – 9

I first read these words of Isaiah in the Authorised version of the Bible, and I turn to it now. The first thing that makes an impact is the image of feet that are 'beautiful' because they are carrying somebody who's bringing *good* news, who's thrilled with the message he's bringing, who can hardly wait to reach the people he's been sent to inform. How different things would be if the messenger were bringing *bad* news. No speed! No enthusiasm! But *this* messenger is bringing 'tidings of good'; and the more I read, the more I'm convinced.

So, what is this news?

In essence, it's this: my God 'reigns'; He has 'comforted' His people; and He has 'redeemed' them; this is breath-taking news of 'salvation'; and it's a message for *me*, not just for everybody else.

We Christians, living *after* events which we believe fulfilled what was a *prophecy* for Isaiah, know something about what that word 'redeemed' means: God's own Son was born human; He did good (and *only* good) to everyone He met; He showed He had qualities far beyond those of a human; He was at the receiving end of scorn, hate, hostility. He fell foul of the justice system.

When, as every year, a prisoner was due to be freed by public request, many people turned out be casual fans, rather than committed followers; they listened to mischief-makers in the crowd who said, 'Vote for Barabbas! Pass it on!' – and Barabbas was freed. The crowd then successfully begged for God's Son to be crucified.

But God's Son was *resurrected from* death, and kept His promise not to leave His followers 'comfortless'; God's Holy Spirit came to them..... and guides and comforts Christian followers generation after generation.

What a redemption! What a cost! What hope it offers to me, a humble follower who one day will face what humans call 'death!' And the offer is made to all who turn to God through Jesus. Good tidings indeed!

I always think that J.B. Dykes had this passage in mind when he wrote: '*Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.*'

I echo that. It would be wonderful to be such a messenger as Isaiah had in mind.

*Please, God, show me where you want me to serve you;
place the message in my mouth;
and let my feet take me to that place.
For Jesus' sake. AMEN.*

Margaret Edwards

Wilbraham St Ninian's United Reformed Church

16th December

Isaiah 7: 10 – 14

“ I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test.”

Fear of putting ‘to the test’, fear of placing our trust in something we can’t always physically see, can often lead us to close ourselves to people and to experiences.

Even when invited to, we find it difficult to put our trust in people, in communities and very often in faith.

To trust is one of the hardest things to do. We often believe it will leave us feeling exposed and vulnerable, yet by giving our trust we can feel empowered, strong and safe.

Today we see the suffering of people all over the world.

Illness, famine, poverty, war and disaster leave people feeling vulnerable and frightened. Let those people witness the strength to place their trust in their own resilience, their communities and their faith.

*Let us have the confidence and strength to place our trust in the Lord.
AMEN.*

**Kerril Casey
Parent, Tuesday Group**

17th December

Micah 5 : 2 – 4

It was all very well, God promising a ruler from Bethlehem. And it was all very well when, in answering an unspoken request for a sign, God says that the way that you will know that my Kingdom is near, is when a pregnant woman gives birth to a son.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that, yes, Jesus did come from Bethlehem – but only in the sense that that was where he was born while his parents were on a journey. It doesn't appear that there was any extended family there, no-one to stay with; they had to find accommodation wherever they could. Surely Mary would have gone anywhere in her condition rather than a animal shed at the back of a inn – even to the dreaded in-laws!

OK – so it was technically accurate to say that the one to bring in God's kingdom arose from Bethlehem, even if it did stretch the point a bit.

But to say that another clue was a pregnant woman giving birth to a son.... well, that was hardly precise. There would be many women having boy babies at any given time in Bethlehem. And could something so ordinary, so everyday, be a sign of the nearness of God's Kingdom? Could the extraordinary be embodied and discerned in the ordinary?

It was a sign that could easily go wrong, or be missed, go unnoticed.

Did God really mean to take such a risk?

Apparently so. God took the risk – on coming close to unpredictable humanity. Perhaps the real miracle of the incarnation was that it did not go by unnoticed – that women and men saw and believed and told others about it. And that is the challenge for us today – through words and actions to make God's love real again, and if that means taking a risk and moving out of our comfort zones well, so be it.

Risk-taking God

we give you thanks that you took a chance on the world.

Give us the courage and the tenderness to do the same

so that your love will be born again into the sad and dark places of the world and that all your people may live in safety and in peace. AMEN.

Sarah Brewerton

United Reformed Church Minister

18th December

Isaiah 42 : 1 – 9

This passage in my NIV Study Bible is headed “The Servant of the Lord” and I believe that these passages from Isaiah on the servant have been variously interpreted as referring to the Messiah or the nation of Israel but they can equally speak to us two thousand year or more later. The note on verse 1 says that servant here means something like “trusted envoy” or “confidential representative”. So how do I feel about that being applied to me?

What a challenge! To bring justice, to mend broken lives and not to falter or be discouraged! Fortunately there are equally great resources available since God promises to take hold of our hand and keeps us. We are also promised “new things” by a God whose greatness is unimaginable.

So, challenges, resources, and “new things” from God who holds our hand. How does that make me feel? I certainly need my hand holding. As Chorlton churches we need our hands holding as we embark on “new things” that are very scary. The question to ask is do we have enough confidence in our God to allow ourselves to be led? Do we really believe that the resources we need are available? Are we willing to let go and test out God’s promises. In Isaiah 43 is the promise that “when you pass through the waters I will be with you”.

What will that servant role of the churches in our community look like? How will we find the strength and the resources in both time and money? How will we know we are on the right track? I believe we have to ask these questions and find some answers as we seek to follow the Servant King and play out our servant role in 21st century Chorlton.

Lord, help us to be your servants in the world today. Give us willingness to face challenges and “new things” knowing that the resources we need also come from you. AMEN.

Margaret Morris
Manley Park Methodist Church

19th December

Isaiah 9 : 2, 6&7

10 days before Christmas and the local churches plus the Salvation Army band arrived for the annual Saturday morning carol singing in the shopping centre. I overheard a harassed customer turn to the shop assistant – “That’s all we need, bloody carol singers”! Traditional tunes with their messages of hope, expectation and new life were not, it seemed, meeting her needs in the pressure of pre-Christmas shopping. These words from Isaiah 9 are traditional for Christians everywhere. They are familiar, reassuring, inspiring and part of Christmas. I cannot recall a time when I didn’t know the Christmas story and admit that whenever I hear the words “The people who walk in darkness”, I’ll mentally complete the rest and find knowing by heart the words that follow always touches a deep chord and connects me again with God’s story so intimately intertwined with mine. However, Christians often make assumptions about them which are wrong and maybe cause for concern. Isaiah is not talking about Jesus. He was a Jewish prophet of the 8th century B.C.E. encouraging people living in troubled times. Years later, as the early Church developed, Gentile interpreters imposed their western minds upon such Jewish texts to hijack them as words of revelation about Jesus with explanations that amount to little more than superstition. The gospel writers did not intend this. They turned to the words of Isaiah to interpret and understand Jesus as the one through whom such prophecies found their fulfilment. Christians today should not assume Isaiah’s words have relevance for people such as the stressed shopper I encountered. I empathise with those like her and search for ways to enable people to interpret and understand Jesus Christ today. I neither want nor expect cries of “Yippee, carol singers” but the names we ascribe to Jesus need to be ones that have meaning and resonance within the context of the society we inhabit and maybe terms such as ‘everlasting father’, ‘prince of peace’, do not. Those Christians for whom Advent and Christmas have a profound significance, and I do not presume this to be everyone or only those who sit in churches on Sundays, need both words and ways to be the birthers of Christ for all people now waiting in literal or metaphorical darkness for light, hope, something more than the dehumanising treadmill that the pressure of life can too often become.

*God who knows each one by name,
who cherishes every human life,
may we know and name you in helpful, loving ways.*

*In this present, giving season
may receiving Christ as Saviour give us visions to pursue;
for the gift of faith is precious and the truth is yours alone.*

Help us speak with words of welcome for each colour, creed and tongue.

Sally Thomas

URC Minister Inner Manchester Mission Network

20th December

2 Samuel 7 : 1 - 11, 16

A settled people with a homeless God

The king had been a shepherd, walking over the countryside with the flocks looking for places of pasture and protection. Now after many battles, David had come to Jerusalem and established his home there. He is struck by the disparity between his comfortable surroundings and the tent pitched to house the ark of God.

His prophetic adviser, Nathan, gives the green light to his desire to build a temple. However after a dream, Nathan explains that God will make a ‘house’ for David. The wordplay in the passage is between ‘house’ as David intends it – a physical temple in which the Ark signifying God’s presence might rest, and ‘house’ as God intends it : the promise of a spiritual inheritance which will be given to David and his family for Israel’s sake.

A political reading of this text suggests that by centralising the worship at Jerusalem, David could always control the nation. Yet his desire, from whatever motive, is frustrated. For the time being, God’s will is to be present to people in the tent.

It prompts me to reflect how difficult we find provisional structures and how much we prefer a solid building. Was it for God’s sake or David’s that the temple was to be built? If we do not go to ‘church’ to meet with God, how is the encounter to be regulated? What do we make of a holy God always and ever startling us in unexpected places and through unlikely people? Of course we cannot regulate God’s activity. The initiative is not with us, as the text makes clear: v.8 “I took you”; v.9 “I have been with you” v.9 “I will make for you a great name” v.10 “I will appoint a place for my people”. God takes the initiative in caring for the people by raising up a leader.

In this season we remember that the final culmination of the Davidic line was the cry of the baby in Bethlehem – another shepherd king who built a house not made with hands, but by giving up his body for us all.

Lord, help us to build community with you.

Forgive our settledness in the face of your readiness to be without a home.

Deliver us from the need to control and regulate you.

May Jesus who gave us the temple of his body,

give us the courage to share in his shepherding work. AMEN.

Richard Church

**Moderator of the North Western Synod
of the United Reformed Church**

21st December

Hebrews 10 : 1 – 7

I wonder if the reason people find it easier to celebrate Christmas rather than Easter, is because there is no perceived sacrifice or pain in Christmas – which is peculiar, as anyone who has ever given birth will testify!

Instead, like any birth there is joy in the embodiment of the love between two people and the celebration of the gift of life, talent and potential that a new person brings.

Additionally, there is the relief that two people have faced a great challenge and have survived safely.

With the birth of Christ, we have the euphoria of a longed-for promise blessed with life, like a barren woman becoming a mother.

However, as the above passage highlights, this life heralds change: the fulfilment of the Law in a way beyond the imagining of the people, and breathtaking in the sheer magnitude of love and sacrifice needed by Christ for his people, and the pain he faces as a result.

Why would anyone agree to leave heaven?

Would you?

If so, then – who for?

Why did Jesus leave heaven?

Because his Dad asked him to, because he couldn't be without you, because he couldn't just sit back and do nothing whilst his children were lost.

*Lord, at the start of this new spiritual year
may I embrace change because you ask me to,
because I can't be without you,
because I can't just sit back and do nothing
whilst our family is lost. AMEN.*

Janice Wood

Our Lady's Church and of Café Spirit

22nd December

Mark 1 : 1 – 8

Pondering on this particular passage of scripture enabled me to focus on the component "forgiveness".

Herein we can explore an aspect of forgiveness which leads onwards to a changed life.

God has chosen us, his creation, as vessels for the outpouring of divine love and to pave a way towards forgiveness. Jesus Christ has prepared the way for us to God – in this moment – to forgive our sins.

People from all aspects of life are ready to come to God for forgiveness. But as their voices are crying out in the wilderness, do we find ourselves in their midst to guide and direct, or are we too far away from their calling?

Are we ready to present the ways of the Lord? Are we prepared to exercise the spirit of forgiveness in our lives before God and towards one another?

Remember the fervour of John the Baptist. He was very much in the act of "doing". How much does our zeal burn towards God and what does our faith mean to us in our life of discipleship?

John committed his life to God by way of baptising people. Baptism in this context was a symbolic declaration of a change of life through confession to God and God forgiving their sins.

We can confess our wrong doings before God right now.

We come, just as we are, before God. I wonder if John was worried about Mark describing the way he looked.....

Jesus Christ promised us the Holy Spirit - and we do have it! Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as "The Comforter". We can be comforted knowing that God is with us, even when it is hard to learn to forgive.

The blessed hope that is ours through Jesus Christ, we gladly share with one another.

God who is ever present, ever eager, ever willing: lead us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us lead by the example of yourself.

Baptise us with your presence Gracious God and wash us afresh with the spirit of forgiveness. AMEN.

Irvin Michael

Chorlton Central Church

23rd December

Luke 1 : 26 – 38

It's been a busy day - no time to think of her betrothed, her marriage, their future. Sitting cross-legged on her bed, chin cupped in her hands, she looks out at the sky through the open shutter, waiting for the call to supper. Just emptying her mind. Jehovah is good.

The sky is blue-black, but still tinged with the burnished red of the setting sun. She watches.....stars sparkle, dazzle and dance into life. Shooting stars! Quick – make a wish!

A soft breeze reaches in, her face tilts up and her eyes close in greeting. A voice, a soft voice, drifts on the air..... 'Greetings....'
She rises 'Papa!?? Yes, I'm coming'
'Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you.'
Her movements falter and she listens.....

What was his message? Have a baby son, and soon? It can't be true. She crumbles onto her side, weeping, curled and dumb to the world. 'Do not be afraid' he said, but she is terrified. 'God, I know I said 'I am your servant' but if possible change your mind. I don't think I can bear it, the shame, the loneliness, an unmarried mother. How will I cope – will I be stoned? My heart is bursting and I despair!'

The sound of the angel hovers in the air. What did he say?
'Do not be afraid Mary, you found favour with God.' And what else? I'll be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. My son.... Jesus, will reign over a kingdom that will be everlasting... and Auntie is going to have a child!? I don't understand.
The air stirred and gently brushed her face, absorbing her tears with a kiss as soft as a loving mother, and enveloped her huddled body with the tender strength of an adoring father. Her mind stills and peace comes.

'Nothing is impossible with God.'

She thought of the path she had walked so far, smoothed at each step with unconditional love. Yes, Jehovah was very kind indeed.
Her faith and hope in God returned.
'Yes, Lord I am your servant, may it be with me as the Angel said!'
Other voices now : 'Mary! Supper is ready!' 'Yes, I'm coming.'
And she goes out from her room into a new world.

*Surprising God, refresh us, renew us .
Remind us again of the paths we must take, so that, by your grace and the guidance of the Holy Trinity we can each take action to bring fairness, joy and peace to the world.*

Michelle Haller

Chorlton Methodist Church

24th December

Luke 1 : 46 – 55

To be honest, this doesn't seem to me to be such an unusual story. Teenage pregnancy unmarried mother disbelief (I can't possibly be pregnant....can I?) it happens all the time!

But an immaculate conception – now that's the bit I struggle with. Who would have believed her, anyway? Surely Mary would have been snubbed – maybe even by her parents, who get no mention in this passage.

And why did God choose Mary? She may seem an unlikely choice to us, but maybe God saw in her a great potential of genuine maternal love, and the qualities of calm and tenacity that would be needed to bring up such a child.

Mary – once an unknown, unheard of, a nobody, now raised up with riches beyond compare. Not earthly riches, of course. They would only have got in the way.

Anyone with riches would be sorely disappointed. Mary could care for her child, Jesus, even better if she had nothing – nothing, that is, except love. That was worth far more than money.

It's a funny thing, money. If I haven't got much, then I make the most of what I've got. If I've got any to spare, then I might go along to my local pub, which is very ordinary, with ordinary people, and I'll have a great time. But if I've got a bit extra, I might go to a more up-market wine bar, and although I might enjoy it for a while, I won't feel as comfortable with the clientele there.

When I worked at Chorlton Workshop, I was dealing with ordinary people. I was happy; I was at ease. It was the right place to be. But I was very surprised when one day someone said "I wish I was like you. You're always so positive, so smiley, so confident." I didn't always feel like that, but maybe others could see those riches in me that money can't buy – and I feel privileged for that.

*As I think about Mary, the mother of Jesus,
I thank God for my own mother –
for the strength and support that she has given me
and I pray that, like Mary, she will be blessed with good things
just as I have been blessed and feel proud to be her daughter.
AMEN.*

Carol Saxon

Former member of staff at Chorlton Workshop

25th December

Luke 2 : 1 – 20

Let us consider Mary the mother of Jesus.

The good news which the angels told the shepherds and which the shepherds then brought to whoever was assembled or heard it, was talked about with amazement.

But Mary didn't join in with the talking. She treasured up in her heart all that was said about Jesus, and stayed silent.

Can I learn anything from Mary's example of this, her holiness, which was pleasing to God?

I know that the good example of holiness such as Mary exemplified causes men to turn to God by virtue of the very presence of the holy person – in this case, Mary.

I thought at one time that I had to pray to Mary, the mother of Jesus, but I recall that nowhere in the Bible does it say that we are to pray to a woman.

The shepherds went back to their sheep, renewed and converted. They had been in the presence of holiness. My own opinion is that the holiest example in this scene of the newborn baby Jesus, was Mary.

My hope and prayer is that we will be aware of the holiness of women and reverence them.

AMEN.

Richard Walsh

Chorlton Central Church

26th December

Matthew 2 : 1 – 12

As a child, I went to church every week – three times each Sunday! so I was brought up being very familiar with the Bible. Church was very important to me, especially when my mother died when I was only seven.

As an adult, I continued to go to church each Sunday, until I moved into McLaren Court, when it became difficult to travel. However, I attend the monthly church service in the lounge, which I enjoy.

This story of the wise men visiting Jesus is a very familiar one to me. The gifts that they brought to the baby Jesus were not ones we would really think of giving. The gold they brought showed that he was special, a king. Frankincense is like the incense that some churches use today – and means that Jesus would be holy. Myrrh is something that was used to get bodies ready for burial, and meant that Jesus would suffer.

This story reminds us that it is important for us to bring gifts to God, to the church, as a way of saying thank you to God for looking after us.

I have envelopes for the money I give, and I make sure that I bring these each month to the church service.

Loving God

*thank you for keeping me safe through each night
and for opening my eyes each morning.*

*Thank you for being with us
and help us to respond to you
by regular giving to the church. AMEN.*

Amy Bell

Resident

McLaren Court Sheltered Housing Scheme

27th December

1 John 1 : 1 – 7

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched.”

These opening words of 1 John refer to Jesus, ‘The Word of Life’. Jesus the one who was in the beginning, there with God at the dawn of creation, the one through whom God chose to bring creation to life (see John’s gospel chapter 1).

The same Jesus whom God entrusted to human parents, who was born of Mary and who experienced the ups and downs of life as we do, who was born in a cattle stall, to an unmarried mother, who became a refugee and had to flee with his parents into Egypt to be saved from death at the hands of Herod.

It is this same Jesus who some 33yrs later was put to death on the cross and who rose again.

Jesus came to bring life and light to all people. He was ‘The Word Of Life’ who lived amongst us full of grace and truth, He came that we might have life in all its fullness (John 10:10), that we might have eternal life (John 3:16) through him (John 14:6).

On us a light has dawned, Jesus The Light of The World (John 9:5). The one who came to shed light on God and show us by his example what God is like.

He came to encourage us to, as the song goes, ‘walk in the light of the Lord’.

*As we walk the Advent road, may God light our path
and may we find in Jesus the fullness of life He offers. AMEN.*

Dave Gallimore

Methodist Minister

28th December

Matthew 2 : 13 – 18

On reading again the above passage, I wondered if I could possibly equate Joseph's flight from Egypt, with Mary and the infant Jesus, with the flight of a modern day asylum seeker.

Joseph, of course, received a warning from an angel of the Lord to flee Egypt in order to escape the menace of an evil Herod, to save Jesus, the prophesied Messiah. Then followed the massacre of the innocent children by order of Herod – to find and kill the baby Jesus.

Who knows what the asylum seeker of today must experience? They must feel the same dread and urgency to escape prosecution. They take great risks to flee evil men who wish to impose their will upon them – depriving them of their civil rights.

We still hear of the massacre of innocents and the practice of ethnic cleansing, showing no tolerance of people with differing creeds and cultures.

Herod feared the influence that the infant Jesus as the 'King of the Jews' might have on his, Herod's, power in the world.

Even today evil men cannot embrace others' beliefs and cultures, so seek to dominate and rule them.

It is sad that even today we cannot embrace and understand each other's beliefs, and live in harmony in God's grace.

Dear Lord

help us to be tolerant.

Help us to realise that we are all God's children

but with different needs in this life.

Give us strength to support the oppressed

and to fight injustice.

We ask this in Jesus' name. AMEN.

Hilda Crawford

Wilbraham St Ninians United Reformed Church

29th December

John 1 : 1 – 14

It was said of the poet and prophet William Blake that he was a man of “double vision”. He not only saw things and situations as most of us do, but he also possessed a deeper perception of the meaning and wonder of what he saw.

In this passage St. John speaks of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. On the one hand a normal birth is implied; such as graphically portrayed in paintings and Christmas cards. On the other hand the term Word speaks in a powerful way of God’s self-disclosure to the world in the Christ Child. There is both the obvious and the hidden meaning, which is only seen by the inner eye. “He was in the beginning with God”. Here is the astounding claim that the Christ Child is at one with the power which brought creation into being. An advent hymn puts this truth in a very telling way. “Lo within the manger lies He who built the starry skies”.

This child signifies the very life and light of God bursting into the world of human life and experience. “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people”. Jesus brings the life of heaven to earth and the eternal into time. As R. Crashaw expresses this “Great little one! Whose all embracing birth, lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth”

The word becoming flesh speaks not only of the God of creation but as one who comes to make life new, to give to humanity a new beginning – in other words to redeem us. “Trace we the babe who has retrieved our loss from the poor manger to the bitter cross”

It has often been implied that this passage takes ordinary people like you and me completely out of our depth. Indeed we find ourselves rather as those who did not receive him for what he was. We forget that we all have the gift of double vision. That is partly what the light that lighteth everyone is about. We all have this gift as part of our humanity – that which enables us to see the mystery and meaning which the outward eye misses. Let us not become so complacently familiar with the story and activities of Christmas that the whole season of Advent ceases to affect us deeply.

Eternal God, help us at this time to see with the inward eye something of the wonder and power of your coming to us in Jesus.
AMEN.

Richard Davison

Chorlton Methodist Church

30th December

1 John 4 : 7 – 14

We read this passage together from “The Message” translation of the bible. Ben found it difficult to relate to, not least because he says he doesn’t believe in God. By this he means that he doesn’t believe in a bearded old man sitting in the clouds handing out judgements, punishments and rewards.

So instead we thought about love. After all, the writer of the letter states that “God is love” and that everyone who loves is “born of God”. I like the inclusivity of this statement. To me it says that anyone who shows love, compassion or care is as God-like as those of us who are signed up to a religion – if not more! Ben therefore thought that Christians who express hate, or who act in an unloving way towards individuals or groups of people, are “defying the whole idea of God.”

Apart from romantic love, Ben equates “love” with “care”. He said he can’t *love* people who live in other countries, who he’s never met, but he can do things – such as campaigning or fundraising, out of his *care* for them. Similarly, when smiling at or having a hug with a person who has learning difficulties, at a recent L’Arche community lunch, he didn’t recognise this as a God-inspired act of love but rather a “passing on of happiness”. However it is interpreted, that new experience for him was a lovely opportunity for him to give and receive love.

Our conversation moved on to how we can love people who are difficult to love and how we need to look for goodness or the “divine spark” in everyone. We also recognised that forgiveness is a requirement of love.

We concluded that people outside of our churches probably don’t perceive us as a community of loving people. Perhaps, Ben said, we need to invite them in to find out for themselves

Finally, when asked “How do people show that they love *you*?” Ben responded, eyes half-closed “By letting me go to sleep now” !

Let us bask in the love that surrounds and holds us.

Let us be moved by that love to respond with love :

with a smile

a prayer

an act

a protest.

Let us talk to our children of Jesus and love

and thereby demystify “God”.

AMEN.

Ben Ferris and Sally Ferris
Chorlton Central Church

31st December

Revelation 21 : 1 – 4

A new beginning – how we would like the world to be: an inclusive world, full of peace and free from war and conflicts; everything new and perfect, just like a wedding day; a new long life with no evil or pain – like a wedding day for *all* God’s people, with nothing to spoil it: a life that shines with radiance just like a bride on her big day. All brides have a dream and a vision about how they would like their wedding to be. This is how I would like the world to be.

At first, when I reflected on this passage, I thought “What was wrong with the old heaven and old earth?” But then I thought about the job I do, teaching in the Nursery. There has to be “new beginnings” in the Nursery, when we settle in the new intake children every year. We teach the children their foundations for the future, and then they emerge independent and confident ready for their new beginnings in Reception. When the old class finishes for them, a new class begins. And this carries on throughout our lives – when one phase of our life ends, a new phase begins.

In the Nursery this year we looked after some baby caterpillars. The children watched them grow into big, hairy caterpillars, then change into cocoons. The cocoons then hatched into beautiful colourful butterflies. Each growing phase lasted 2 weeks, so we had looked after them for quite a while. We really wanted to keep the butterflies in our special net garden, but we knew that we would have to let them go so that they could live their lives as they were supposed to in their natural environment. Moving the cocoons into the net garden had felt like a midwife would feel delivering a baby – it was such a delicate procedure. Letting the butterflies go into their natural environment was like letting your own children go – but as my colleague and dear friend Adam said, it was time for them to spread their wings! – just like the children when they move on and upwards from the Nursery.

“When a butterfly rests in your hands,
do not close them”

*We pray for God’s heaven, the earth and the seas
the flowers, the butterflies, the birds and the trees.*

*We pray for God’s people, those living and those passed on
our friends and our family, those living and those gone.*

*We pray for God’s forgiveness, his love and his trust,
for God’s people and children, pray for peace on earth, we must.*

*We pray for the people who have showed us the way
the light and the life, and for God’s future, we pray. AMEN.*

Kathryn Whalley

member of staff, Oswald Road Primary School